

A TRACE OF MEMORY

KEITH LAUMER



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by KEITH LAUMER

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"Let's get out of here fast," I said. "We've probably set off an alarm already."
As if in answer, a low chime cut across our talk. Pearly light sprang up on a square panel. Foster and I stared at it.

"What do you make of it?" he said.

"I'm no expert on stone-age relics," I said. "But if that's not a radar screen, I'll eat it."

I sat down in the single chair before the dusty control console, and watched a red blip creep across the screen.

"That blip is either a mighty slow airplane—or it's at one hell of an altitude."
I sat upright, eyes on the screen. "Look at this, Foster," I snapped. A pattern of dots flashed across the screen, faded, flashed again....

"I don't like that thing blinking at us," I said. "It makes me feel conspicuous."
I looked at the big red button beside the screen. "Maybe if I pushed that...."
Without waiting to think it over, I jabbed at it.

"I'm not sure you should have done that," Foster said.

"There is room for doubt," I said in a strained voice. "It looks like I've launched a bomb from the ship overhead."

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A TRACE OF MEMORY

PROLOGUE

He awoke and lay for a moment looking up at a low ceiling, dimly visible in a faint red glow, feeling the hard mat under his back. He turned his head, saw a wall and a panel on which a red indicator light glared.

He swung his legs over the side of the narrow couch and sat up. The room was small, grey-painted, unadorned. Pain throbbed in his forearm. He shook back the loose sleeve of the strange purple garment, saw a pattern of tiny punctures in the skin. He recognized the mark of a feeding Hunter.... Who would have dared?

A dark shape on the floor caught his eye. He slid from the couch, knelt by the still body of a man in a purple tunic stained black with blood. Gently he rolled the body onto its back.

Ammaerln!

He seized the limp wrist. There was a faint pulse. He rose—and saw a second body and, near the door, two more. Quickly he went to each....

All three were dead, hideously slashed. Only Ammaerln still breathed, faintly.

He went to the door, shouted into the darkness. The ranged shelves of a library gave back a brief echo. He turned back to the grey-walled room, noticed a recording monitor against a wall. He fitted the neurodes to the dying man's temples. But for this gesture of recording Ammaerln's life's memories, there was nothing he could do. He must get him to a therapist—and quickly.

He crossed the library, found a great echoing hall beyond. This was not the Sapphire Palace beside the Shallow Sea. The lines were unmistakable: he

was aboard a ship, a far-voyager. Why? How? He stood uncertain. The silence was absolute.

He crossed the Great Hall and entered the observation lounge. Here lay another dead man, by his uniform a member of the crew. He touched a knob and the great screens glowed blue. A giant crescent swam into focus, locked; soft blue against the black of space. Beyond it a smaller companion hung, gray-blotched, airless. What worlds were these?

An hour later he had ranged the vast ship from end to end. In all, seven corpses, cruelly slashed, peopled the silent vessel. In the control sector the communicator lights glowed, but to his call there was no answer from the strange world below.

He turned to the recording room. Ammaerln still breathed weakly. The memory recording had been completed; all that the dying man remembered of his long life was imprinted now in the silver cylinder. It remained only to color-code the trace.

His eyes was caught by a small cylinder projecting from the aperture at the side of the high couch where he had awakened his own memory-trace! So he himself had undergone the Change. He took the color-banded cylinder, thrust it into a pocket—then whirled at a sound. A nest of Hunters, swarming globes of pale light, clustered at the door. Then they were on him. They pressed close, humming in their eagerness. Without the proper weapon he was helpless.

He caught up the limp body of Ammaerln. With the Hunters trailing in a luminous stream he ran with his burden to the shuttle-boat bay.

Three shuttles lay in their cradles. He groped to a switch, his head swimming with the sulphurous reek of the Hunters; light flooded the bay, driving them back. He entered the lifeboat, placed the dying man on a cushioned couch.

It had been long since he had manned the controls of a ship, but he had not forgotten.

Ammaerln was dead when the lifeboat reached the planetary surface. The vessel settled gently and the lock cycled. He looked out at a vista of ragged forest.

This was no civilized world. Only the landing ring and the clearing around it showed the presence of man.

There was a hollow in the earth by a square marker block at the eastern perimeter of the clearing. He hoisted the body of Ammaerln to his back and moved heavily down the access ladder. Working bare-handed, he deepened the hollow, placed the body in it, scraped earth over it. Then he rose and turned back toward the shuttle boat.

Forty feet away, a dozen men, squat, bearded, wrapped in the shaggy hides of beasts, stood between him and the access ladder. The tallest among them shouted, raised a bronze sword threateningly. Behind these, others clustered at the ladder. Motionless he watched as one scrambled up, reached the top, disappeared into the boat. In a moment the savage reappeared at the opening and hurled down handfuls of small bright objects. Shouting, others clambered up to share the loot. The first man again vanished within the boat. Before the foremost of the others had gained the entry, the port closed, shutting off a terrified cry from within.

Men dropped from the ladder as it swung up. The boat rose slowly, angling toward the west, dwindling. The savages shrank back, awed.

The man watched until the tiny blue light was lost against the sky.

CHAPTER I

The ad read: *Soldier of fortune seeks companion in arms to share unusual adventure. Foster, Box 19, Mayport.*

I crumpled the newspaper and tossed it in the general direction of the wire basket beside the park bench, pushed back a slightly frayed cuff, and took a look at my bare wrist. It was just habit; the watch was in a hock shop in Tupelo, Mississippi. It didn't matter. I didn't have to know what time it was.

Across the park most of the store windows were dark along the side street. There were no people in sight; they were all home now, having dinner. As I watched, the lights blinked off in the drug store with the bottles of colored water in the window; the left the candy and cigar emporium at the end of the line. I fidgeted on the hard bench and felt for a cigarette I didn't have. I wished the old boy back of the counter would call it a day and go home. As soon as it was dark enough, I was going to rob his store.

I wasn't a full-time stick-up artist. Maybe that's why that nervous feeling was playing around under my rib cage. There was really nothing to it. The wooden door with the hardware counter lock that would open almost as easily without a key as with one; the sardine-can metal box with the day's receipts in it. I'd be on my way to the depot with fare to Miami in my pocket ten minutes after I cracked the door. I'd learned a lot harder tricks than petty larceny back when I had a big future ahead with Army Intelligence. That was a long time ago, and I'd had a lot of breaks since then—none good.

I got up and took another turn around the park. It was a warm evening, and the mosquitoes were out. I caught a whiff of frying hamburger from the Elite Cafe down the street. It reminded me that I hadn't eaten lately. There were lights on at the Commercial Hotel and one in the ticket office at the station. The local police force was still sitting on a stool at the Rexall talking to the counter girl. I could see the .38 revolver hanging down in a worn leather

holster at his hip. All of a sudden, I was in a hurry to get it over with.

I took another look at the lights. All the stores were dark now. There was nothing to wait for. I crossed the street, sauntered past the cigar store. There were dusty boxes of stogies in the window and piles of homemade fudge stacked on plates with paper doilies under them. Behind them, the interior of the store looked grim and dead. I looked around, then turned down the side street toward the back door—

A black sedan eased around the corner and pulled in to the curb. A face leaned over to look at me through lenses like the bottoms of tabasco bottles. The hot evening air stirred, and I felt my damp shirt cold against my back.

"Looking for anything in particular, Mister?" the cop said.

I just looked at him.

"Passing through town, are you?" he asked.

For some reason I shook my head.

"I've got a job here," I said. "I'm going to work—for Mr. Foster."

"What Mr. Foster?" The cop's voice was wheezy, but relentless; a voice used to asking questions.

I remembered the ad—something about an adventure; Foster, Box 19. The cop was still staring at me.

"Box nineteen," I said.

He looked me over some more, then reached across and opened the door. "Better come on down to the station house with me, Mister," he said.

At Police Headquarters, the cop motioned me to a chair, sat down behind a desk, and pulled a phone to him. He dialed slowly, then swiveled his back to me to talk. Insects danced around the bare light bulb. There was an odor of leather and unwashed bedding. I sat and listened to a radio in the distance wailing a sad song.

It was half an hour before I heard a car pull up outside. The man who came through the door was wearing a light suit that was neither new nor freshly pressed, but had that look of perfect fit and taste that only the most expensive tailoring can achieve. He moved in a relaxed way, but gave an impression of

power held in reserve. At first glance I thought he was in his middle thirties, but when he looked my way I saw the fine lines around the blue eyes. I got to my feet. He came over to me.

"I'm Foster," he said, and held out his hand. I shook it.

"My name is Legion," I said.

The desk sergeant spoke up. "This fellow says he come here to Mayport to see you, Mr. Foster."

Foster looked at me steadily. "That's right, Sergeant. This gentleman is considering a proposition I've made."

"Well, I didn't know, Mr. Foster," the cop said.

"I quite understand, Sergeant," Foster said. "We all feel better, knowing you're on the job."

"Well, you know," the cop said.

"We may as well be on our way then," Foster said. "If you're ready, Mr. Legion."

"Sure, I'm ready," I said. Mr. Foster said goodnight to the cop and we went out. On the pavement in front of the building I stopped.

"Thanks, Mr. Foster," I said. "I'll comb myself out of your hair now."

Foster had his hand on the door of a deceptively modest-looking cabriolet. I could smell the solid leather upholstery from where I stood.

"Why not come along to my place, Legion," he said. "We might at least discuss my proposition."

I shook my head. "I'm not the man for the job, Mr. Foster," I said. "If you'd like to advance me a couple of bucks, I'll get myself a bite to eat and fade right out of your life."

"What makes you so sure you're not interested?"

"Your ad said something about adventure. I've had my adventures. Now I'm just looking for a hole to crawl into."

"I don't believe you, Legion." Foster smiled at me, a slow, calm smile. "I think your adventures have hardly begun."

I thought about it. If I went along, I'd at least get a meal—and maybe even a bed for the night. It was better than curling up under a tree.

"Well," I said, "a remark like that demands time for an explanation." I got into the car and sank back in a seat that seemed to fit me the way Foster's jacket fit him.

"I hope you won't mind if I drive fast," Foster said. "I want to be home before dark." We started up and wheeled away from the curb like a torpedo sliding out of the launching tube.

I got out of the car in the drive at Foster's house, and looked around at the wide clipped lawn, the flower beds that were vivid even by moonlight, the line of tall poplars and the big white house.

"I wish I hadn't come," I said. "This kind of place reminds me of all the things I haven't gotten out of life."

"Your life's still ahead of you," Foster said. He opened the slab of mahogany that was the front door, and I followed him inside. At the end of a short hall he flipped a switch that flooded the room before us with soft light. I stared at an expanse of pale grey carpet about the size of a tennis court, on which rested glowing Danish teak furniture upholstered in rich colors. The walls were a rough-textured grey; here and there were expensively framed abstractions. The air was cool with the heavy coolness of air conditioning. Foster crossed to a bar that looked modest in the setting, in spite of being bigger than those in most of the places I'd seen lately.

"Would you care for a drink?" he said.

I looked down at my limp, stained suit and grimy cuffs.

"Look, Mr. Foster," I said. "I just realized something. If you've got a stable, I'll go sleep in it—"

Foster laughed. "Come on; I'll show you the bath."

I came downstairs, clean, showered, and wearing a set of Foster's clothes. I found him sitting, sipping a drink and listening to music.

"The *Liebestodt*," I said. "A little gloomy, isn't it?"

"I read something else into it," Foster said. "Sit down and have a bite to eat and a drink."

I sat in one of the big soft chairs and tried not to let my hand shake as I reached for one of the sandwiches piled on the coffee table.

"Tell me something, Mr. Legion," Foster said. "Why did you come here, mention my name—if you didn't intend to see me?"

I shook my head. "It just worked out that way."

"Tell me something about yourself," Foster said.

"It's not much of a story."

"Still, I'd like to hear it."

"Well, I was born, grew up, went to school——"

"What school?"

"University of Illinois."

"What was your major?"

"Music."

Foster looked at me, frowning slightly.

"It's the truth," I said. "I wanted to be a conductor. The army had other ideas. I was in my last year when the draft got me. They discovered I had what they considered an aptitude for intelligence work. I didn't mind it. I had a pretty good time for a couple of years."

"Go on," Foster said. Well, I'd had a bath and a good meal. I owed him something. If he wanted to hear my troubles, why not tell him?

"I was putting on a demonstration. A defective timer set off a charge of H-E fifty seconds early on a one-minute setting. A student was killed; I got off easy with a busted eardrum and a pound or two of gravel imbedded in my back. When I got out of the hospital, the army felt real bad about letting me go—but they did. My terminal leave pay gave me a big weekend in San Francisco and set me up in business as a private investigator.

"I had enough left over after the bankruptcy proceedings a few months later to get me to Las Vegas. I lost what was left and took a job with a casino

operator named Gonino.

"I stayed with Gonino for nearly a year. Then one night a visiting bank clerk lost his head and shot him eight times with a .22 target pistol. I left town the same night.

"After that I sold used cars for a couple of months in Memphis; then I made like a life guard at Daytona; baited hooks on a thirty-foot tuna boat out of Key West; all the odd jobs with low pay and no future. I spent a couple of years in Cuba; all I got out of that was two bullet scars on the left leg, and a prominent position on a CIA blacklist.

"After that things got tough. A man in my trade can't really hope to succeed in a big way without the little blue card in the plastic cover to back his play. I was headed south for the winter, and I picked Mayport to run out of money."

I stood up. "I sure enjoyed the bath, Mr. Foster, and the meal, too—I'd like real well to get into that bed upstairs and have a night's sleep just to make it complete; but I'm not interested in the job." I turned away and started across the room.

"Legion," Foster said. I turned. A beer bottle was hanging in the air in front of my face. I put a hand up fast and the bottle slapped my palm.

"Not bad set of reflexes for a man whose adventures are all behind him," Foster said.

I tossed the bottle aside. "If I'd missed, that would have knocked my teeth out," I said angrily.

"You didn't miss—even though you're weaving a little from the beer. And a man who can feel a pint or so of beer isn't an alcoholic—so you're clean on that score."

"I didn't say I was ready for the rummy ward," I said. "I'm just not interested in your proposition—whatever it is."

"Legion," Foster said, "maybe you have the idea I put that ad in the paper last week on a whim. The fact is, I've been running it—in one form or another—for over eight years."

I looked at him and waited.

"Not only locally—I've run it in the big-city papers, and in some of the

national weekly and monthly publications. All together, I've had perhaps fifty responses."

Foster smiled wryly. "About three quarters of them were from women who thought I wanted a playmate. Several more were from men with the same idea. The few others were hopelessly unsuitable."

"That's surprising," I said. "I'd have thought you'd have brought half the nuts in the country out of the woodwork by now."

Foster looked at me, not smiling. I realized suddenly that behind the urbane façade there was a hint of tension, a trace of worry in the level blue eyes.

"I'd like very much to interest you in what I have to say, Legion. I think you lack only one thing—confidence in yourself."

I laughed shortly. "What are the qualifications you think I have? I'm a jack of no trades——"

"Legion, you're a man of considerable intelligence and more than a little culture; you've travelled widely and know how to handle yourself in difficult situations—or you wouldn't have survived. I'm sure your training includes techniques of entry and fact-gathering not known to the average man; and perhaps most important, although you're an honest man, you're capable of breaking the law—when necessary."

"So that's it," I said.

"No, I'm not forming a mob, Legion. As I said in the ad—this is an unusual adventure. It may—probably will—involve infringing various statutes and regulations of one sort or another. After you know the full story I'll leave you to judge whether it's justifiable."

If Foster was trying to arouse my curiosity, he was succeeding. He was dead serious about whatever it was he was planning. It sounded like something no one with good sense would want to get involved in—but on the other hand, Foster didn't look like the sort of man to do anything foolish....

"Why don't you tell me what this is all about?" I said. "Why would a man with all this—" I waved a hand at the luxurious room—"want to pick a hobo like me out of the gutter and talk him into taking a job?"

"Your ego has taken a severe beating, Legion—that's obvious. I think you're

afraid that I'll expect too much of you—or that I'll be shocked by some disclosure you may make. Perhaps if you'd forget yourself and your problems for the moment, we could reach an understanding——"

"Yeah," I said. "Just forget my problems...."

"Chiefly money problems, of course. Most of the problems of this society involve the abstraction of values that money represents."

"Okay," I said. "I've got my problems, you've got yours. Let's leave it at that."

"You feel that because I have material comfort, my problems must of necessity be trivial ones," Foster said. "Tell me, Mr. Legion: have you ever known a man who suffered from amnesia?"

Foster crossed the room to a small writing desk, took something from a drawer, then looked at me.

"I'd like you to examine this," he said.

I went over and took the object from his hand. It was a small book, with a cover of drab-colored plastic, unornamented except for an embossed design of two concentric rings. I opened the cover. The pages were as thin as tissue, but opaque, and covered with extremely fine writing in strange foreign characters. The last dozen pages were in English. I had to hold the book close to my eyes to read the minute script:

January 19, 1710. Having come nigh to calamity with the near losfs of the key, I will henceforth keep this journal in the English tongue....

"If this is an explanation of something, it's too subtle for me," I said.

"Legion, how old would you say I am?"

"That's a hard one," I said. "When I first saw you I would have said the late thirties, maybe. Now, frankly, you look closer to fifty."

"I can show you proof," Foster said, "that I spent the better part of a year in a military hospital in France. I awakened in a ward, bandaged to the eyes, and with no memories whatever of my life before that day. According to the records made at the time, I appeared to be about thirty years of age."

"Well," I said, "amnesia's not so unusual among war casualties, and you seem to have done pretty well since."

Foster shook his head impatiently. "There's nothing difficult about acquiring material wealth in this society, though the effort kept me well occupied for a number of years—and diverted my thoughts from the question of my past life. The time came, however, when I had the leisure to pursue the matter. The clues I had were meagre enough; the notebook I've shown you was found near me, and I had a ring on my finger." Foster held out his hand. On the middle finger was a massive signet, engraved with the same design of concentric circles I had seen on the cover of the notebook.

"I was badly burned; my clothing was charred. Oddly enough, the notebook was quite unharmed, though it was found among burned debris. It's made of very tough stuff."

"What did you find out?"

"In a word—nothing. No military unit claimed me. I spoke English, from which it was deduced that I was English or American——"

"They couldn't tell which, from your accent?"

"Apparently not; it appears I spoke a sort of hybrid dialect."

"Maybe you're lucky. I'd be happy to forget my first thirty years."

"I spent a considerable sum of money in my attempts to discover my past," Foster went on. "And several years of time. In the end I gave it up. And it wasn't until then that I found the first faint inkling."

"So you did find something," I said.

"Nothing I hadn't had all along. The notebook."

"I'd have thought you would have read that before you did anything else," I said. "Don't tell me you put it in the bureau drawer and forgot it."

"I read it, of course—what I could read of it. Only a relatively small section is in English. The rest is a cipher. And what I read seemed meaningless—quite unrelated to me. You've glanced through it; it's no more than a journal, irregularly kept, and so cryptic as to be little better than a code itself. And of course the dates; they range from the early eighteenth century through the early twentieth."

"A sort of family record, maybe," I said. "Carried on generation after

generation. Didn't it mention any names, or places?"

"Look at it again, Legion," Foster said. "See if you notice anything odd—other than what we've already discussed."

I thumbed through the book again. It was no more than an inch thick, but it was heavy—surprisingly heavy. There were a lot of pages—I shuffled through hundreds of closely written sheets, and yet the book was less than half used. I read bits here and there:

"May 4, 1746. The Voyage was not a Success. I must forsake this avenue of Enquiry...."

"October 23, 1790. Buildded the west Barrier a cubit higher. Now the fires burn every night. Is there no limit to their infernal persifstence?"

"January 19, 1831. I have great hopes for the Philadelphia enterprise. My greatest foe is impatience. All preparations for the Change are made, yet I confefs I am uneasy...."

"There are plenty of oddities," I said. "Aside from the entries themselves. This is supposed to be old—but the quality of the paper and binding beats anything I've seen. And that handwriting is pretty fancy for a quill pen——"

"There's a stylus clipped to the spine of the book," Foster said. "It was written with that."

I looked, pulled out a slim pen, then looked at Foster. "Speaking of odd," I said. "A genuine antique early colonial ball-point pen doesn't turn up every day——"

"Suspend your judgement until you've seen it all," Foster said.

"And two hundred years on one refill—that's not bad." I riffled through the pages, then I tossed the book onto the table. "Who's kidding who, Foster?" I said.

"The book was described in detail in the official record, of which I have copies. They mention the paper and binding, the stylus, even quote some of the entries. The authorities worked over it pretty closely, trying to identify me. They reached the same conclusion as you—that it was the work of a crackpot; but they saw the same book you're looking at now."

"So what? So it was faked up some time during the war—what does that

prove? I'm ready to concede it's forty years old——"

"You don't understand, Legion," Foster said. "I told you I woke up in a military hospital in France. But it was an AEF hospital and the year was 1918."

CHAPTER II

I glanced sideways at Foster. He didn't look like a nut....

"All I've got to say is," I said, "you're a hell of a spry-looking ninety."

"You find my appearance strangely youthful. What would be your reaction if I told you that I've aged greatly in the past few months? That a year ago I could have passed as no older than thirty without the slightest difficulty——"

"I don't think I'd believe you," I said. "And I'm sorry, Mr. Foster; but I don't believe the bit about the 1918 hospital either. How can I? It's——"

"I know. Fantastic. But let's go back a moment to the book itself. Look closely at the paper; it's been examined by experts. They're baffled by it. Attempts to analyze it chemically failed—they were unable to take a sample. It's impervious to solvents——"

"They couldn't get a sample?" I said. "Why not just tear off the corner of one of the sheets?"

"Try it," Foster said.

I picked up the book and plucked at the edge of one of the blank sheets, then pinched harder and pulled. The paper held. I got a better grip and pulled again. It was like fine, tough leather, except that it didn't even stretch.

"It's tough, all right," I said. I took out my pocket knife and opened it and worked on the edge of the paper. Nothing. I went over to the bureau and put the paper flat against the top and sawed at it, putting my weight on the knife. I raised the knife and brought it down hard. I didn't so much as mark the sheet. I put the knife away.

"That's some paper, Mr. Foster," I said.

"Try to tear the binding," Foster said. "Put a match to it. Shoot at it if you like. Nothing will make an impression on that material. Now, you're a logical man, Legion. Is there something here outside ordinary experience or is there

not?"

I sat down, feeling for a cigarette. I still didn't have.

"What does it prove?" I said.

"Only that the book is not a simple fraud. You're facing something which can't be dismissed as fancy. The book exists. That is our basic point of departure."

"Where do we go from there?"

"There is a second factor to be considered," Foster went on. "At some time in the past I seem to have made an enemy. Someone, or something, is systematically hunting me."

I tried a laugh, but it felt out of place. "Why not sit still and let it catch up with you? Maybe it could tell you what the whole thing is about."

Foster shook his head. "It started almost thirty years ago," he said. "I was driving south from Albany, New York, at night. It was a long straight stretch of road, no houses. I noticed lights following me. Not headlights—something that bobbed along, off in the fields along the road. But they kept pace, gradually moving alongside. Then they closed in ahead, keeping out of range of my headlights. I stopped the car. I wasn't seriously alarmed, just curious. I wanted a better look, so I switched on my spotlight and played it on the lights. They disappeared as the light touched them. After half a dozen were gone, the rest began closing in. I kept picking them off. There was a sound, too, a sort of high-pitched humming. I caught a whiff of sulphur then, and suddenly I was afraid—deathly afraid. I caught the last one in the beam no more than ten feet from the car. I can't describe the horror of the moment _____"

"It sounds pretty weird," I said. "But what was there to be afraid of? It must have been some kind of heat lightning."

"There is always the pat explanation," Foster said. "But no explanation can rationalize the instinctive dread I felt. I started up the car and drove on—right through the night and the next day. I sensed that I must put distance between myself and whatever it was I had met. I bought a home in California and tried to put the incident out of my mind—with limited success. Then it happened again."

"The same thing? Lights?"

"It was more sophisticated the next time. It started with interference—static—on my radio. Then it affected the wiring in the house. All the lights began to glow weakly, even though they were switched off. I could feel it—feel it in my bones—moving closer, hemming me in. I tried the car; it wouldn't start. Fortunately, I kept a few horses at that time. I mounted and rode into town—and at a fair gallop, you may be sure. I saw the lights, but outdistanced them. I caught a train and kept going."

"I don't see——"

"It happened again; four times in all. I thought perhaps I had succeeded in eluding it at last. I was mistaken. I have had definite indications that my time here is drawing to a close. I would have been gone before now, but there were certain arrangements to be made."

"Look," I said. "This is all wrong. You need a psychiatrist, not an ex-tough guy. Delusions of persecution——"

"It seemed obvious that the explanation was to be found somewhere in my past life," Foster went on. "I turned to the notebook, my only link. I copied it out, including the encrypted portion. I had photostatic enlargements made of the initial section—the part written in unfamiliar characters. None of the experts who have examined the script have been able to identify it.

"I necessarily, therefore, concentrated my attention on the last section—the only part written in English. I was immediately struck by a curious fact I had ignored before. The writer made references to an Enemy, a mysterious 'they', against which defensive measures had to be taken."

"Maybe that's where you got the idea," I said. "When you first read the book _____"

"The writer of the log," Foster said, "was dogged by the same nemesis that now follows me."

"It doesn't make any sense," I said.

"For the moment," Foster said, "stop looking for logic in the situation. Look for a pattern instead."

"There's a pattern, all right," I said.

"The next thing that struck me," Foster went on, "was a reference to a loss of memory—a second point of some familiarity to me. The writer expresses frustration at the inability to remember certain facts which would have been useful to him in his pursuit."

"What kind of pursuit?"

"Some sort of scientific project, as nearly as I can gather. The journal bristles with tantalizing references to matters that are never explained."

"And you think the man that wrote it had amnesia?"

"Not exactly amnesia, perhaps," Foster said. "But there were things he was unable to remember."

"If that's amnesia, we've all got it," I said. "Nobody's got a perfect memory."

"But these were matters of importance; not the kinds of thing that simply slip one's mind."

"I can see how you'd want to believe the book had something to do with your past, Mr. Foster," I said. "It must be a hard thing, not knowing your own life story. But you're on the wrong track. Maybe the book is a story you started to write—in code, so nobody would accidentally read the stuff and kid you about it."

"Legion, what was it you planned to do when you got to Miami?"

The question caught me a little off-guard. "Well, I don't know," I hedged. "I wanted to get south, where it's warm. I used to know a few people——"

"In other words, nothing," Foster said. "Legion, I'll pay you well to stay with me and see this thing through."

I shook my head. "Not me, Mr. Foster. The whole thing sounds—well, the kindest word I can think of is 'nutty.'"

"Legion," Foster said, "do you really believe I'm insane?"

"Let's just say this all seems a little screwy to me, Mr. Foster."

"I'm not asking you just to work for me," Foster said. "I'm asking for your help."

"You might as well look for your fortune in tea leaves," I said, irritated.

"There's nothing in what you've told me."

"There's more, Legion. Much more. I've recently made an important discovery. When I know you're with me, I'll tell you. You know enough now to accept the fact that this isn't entirely a figment of my imagination."

"I don't know anything," I said. "So far it's all talk."

"If you're concerned about payment——"

"No, damn it," I barked. "Where are the papers you keep talking about? I ought to have my head examined for sitting here humoring you. I've got troubles enough——" I stopped talking and rubbed my hands over my scalp. "I'm sorry, Mr. Foster," I said. "I guess what's really griping me is that you've got everything I think I want—and you're not content with it. It bothers me to see you off chasing fairies. If a man with his health and plenty of money can't enjoy life, what the hell is there for anybody?"

Foster looked at me thoughtfully. "Legion, if you could have anything in life you wanted, what would you ask for?"

"Anything? I've wanted a lot of different things. Once I wanted to be a hero. Later, I wanted to be smart, know all the answers. Then I had the idea that a chance to do an honest job, one that needed doing, was the big thing. I never found that job. I never got smart either, or figured out how to tell a hero from a coward, without a program."

"In other words," Foster said, "you were looking for an abstraction to believe in—in this case, Justice. But you won't find justice in nature. It's a thing that only man expects or acknowledges."

"There are some good things in life; I'd like to get a piece of them."

"Don't lose your capacity for dreaming, in the process."

"Dreams?" I said. "Oh, I've got those. I want an island somewhere in the sun, where I can spend my time fishing and watching the sea."

"You're speaking cynically—but you're still attempting to concretize an abstraction," Foster said. "But no matter—materialism is simply another form of idealism."

I looked at Foster. "But I know I'll never have those things—or that Justice you were talking about, either. Once you really know you'll never make it...."

"Perhaps unattainability is an essential element of any dream," Foster said. "But hold onto your dream, whatever it is—don't ever give it up."

"So much for philosophy," I said. "Where is it getting us?"

"You'd like to see the papers," Foster said. He fished a key ring from an inner pocket. "If you don't mind going out to the car," he said, "and perhaps getting your hands dirty, there's a strong-box welded to the frame. I keep photostats of everything there, along with my passport, emergency funds and so on. I've learned to be ready to travel on very short notice. Lift the floorboards; you'll see the box."

"It's not all that urgent," I said. "I'll take a look in the morning—after I've caught up on some sleep. But don't get the wrong idea—it's just my knot-headed curiosity."

"Very well," Foster said. He lay back, sighed. "I'm tired, Legion," he said. "My mind is tired."

"Yeah," I said, "so is mine—not to mention other portions of my anatomy."

"Get some sleep," Foster said. "We'll talk again in the morning."

I pushed back the light blanket and slid out of bed. Underfoot, the rug was as thick and soft as a working girl's mink. I went across to the closet and pushed the button that made the door slide aside. My old clothes were still lying on the floor where I had left them, but I had the clean ones Foster had lent me. He wouldn't mind if I borrowed them for a while longer—it would be cheaper for him in the long run. Foster was as looney as a six-day bike racer, but there was no point in my waiting around to tell him so.

The borrowed outfit didn't include a coat. I thought of putting my old jacket on but it was warm outside and a grey pin-stripe with grease spots wouldn't help the picture any. I transferred my personal belongings from the grimy clothes on the floor, and eased the door open.

Downstairs, the curtains were drawn in the living room. I could vaguely make out the outline of the bar. It wouldn't hurt to take along a bite to eat. I groped my way behind the bar, felt along the shelves, found a stack of small cans that rattled softly. Nuts, probably. I reached to put a can on the bar and it clattered against something I couldn't see. I swore silently, felt over the