

A Third Hand

by Dean Ray Koontz, 1945-

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There seem to be two factions within the science fiction firmament these days, one which argues that the "traditional" sf story is the best that a writer can produce, the other saying the "traditional" form is a waste and that we must all advance into the avante-garde areas which "mainstream" fiction adopted years ago. It is an interesting battle to watch among science fiction fans, but for someone who sits on the fence post (like me) it is exasperating. Those who would condemn all advancement of style in the field are unrealistic—as are those who refuse to acknowledge the very fine *storytelling* qualities of "traditional" sf. Most often, I attempt to mix the two, and I think "A Third Hand" is a prime example of this. The hero, Ti, is a "new wave" hero as far as we can type a "new wave" hero. He is not a strong, brave, galaxy-cruising, square-jawed WASP, but a crippled, hung-up little guy with problems outside of his plot. But the story follows traditional patterns, a linear form. Except, perhaps, for the very end. Read the last sentence twice. Think about Timothy, and see what the story becomes for you...

TIMOTHY was not human. Not wholly. If one included arms and legs in a definition of the human body, then Timothy did not pass the criteria necessary for admission to the club. If one counted two eyes in that definition, Timothy was also ruled out, for he had but one eye, after all, and even that was placed in an unusual position: somewhat closer to his left ear than a human eye should be and definitely an inch lower in his overlarge skull than was the norm. Then there was his nose. It totally lacked cartilage. The only evidence of its presence was two holes, the ragged nostrils, punctuating the relative center of his bony, misshapen head. There was his skin: waxy yellow like some artificial fruit and coarse with large, irregular pores that showed like dark pinpricks bottomed with dried blood. There were his ears: very flat against his head and somewhat pointed like the ears of a wolf. There were other things that would show up on a closer, more intimate examination, things like his hair (which was of an altogether different texture than any racial variant among the normal human strains), his nipples (which were ever so slightly concave instead of convex), and his genitals (which were male, but which were contained in a pouch just below his navel and not between his truncated limbs). There was only one way in which Timothy was remotely human, and that was his brain. But even here, he was not entirely normal, for his IQ was slightly above 250.

He had been a product of the Artificial Wombs, a strictly military project which intended to produce beings usable as weapons of war, beings with psionic abilities that could bring the Chinese to their knees. But when such gnarled results as Timothy rolled from the Wombs, the scientists and generals connected with the project threw up their hands and resigned themselves to more public condemnation.

Timothy was placed in a special home for subhuman productions of the Wombs where he was expected to die within five years. But it was in his third year there that they came to realize that Timothy (he was the "T" birth in the fifth alphabetical series, thus his name) was more than a mindless vegetable. Much more. It happened at feeding time. The nurse had been dutifully spooning predigested pabulum into his mouth, cleaning his lips and chin as he dribbled, when one of the other "children" in the ward entered its death throes. She hurried off to assist the doctor who was injecting some sedative into the mutant hulk, leaving Timothy hungry. Due to the training of a new staff nurse that afternoon, he had inadvertently been skipped in the previous feeding. As a result, he was ravenous. But the nurse did not return in response to his caterwauling. He tossed and pitched on his foam mattress, but legless and armless as he was, there was nothing he could do to reach the bowl of food that rested on the table next to his crib, painfully within sight of his one, misplaced eye. He blinked that eye, squinted it, and lifted the spoon without touching it! He levitated the instrument to his mouth, licked the pabulum from it, and sent it back to the bowl for more. It was during his sixth spoonful that the nurse returned, saw what was happening and fainted dead away.

The same night, Timothy was moved from the ward.

Quietly.

He did not know where they were taking him. Indeed, having lacked most of the sensory stimulation afforded normal three-year-olds, he did not even care. Without proper stimulation, he had never developed rational, logical thought processes. He understood nothing beyond his own basic desires, the desires of his body: hunger, air, water, excretion. It never occurred to him to wonder where he was going—if he even knew he was going anywhere.

But he wasn't ignorant for long. The military was hungry for another success (they had had only two others) and hurried his development along. They tested his IQ as best they could and found it was slightly above normal. That was a good sign. There had been fears that they would have to work with a psionically gifted moron. Next, the computers devised an educational program suited to his unique history. The program was initiated.

He was expected to be talking in seven months.

He was talking in five weeks.

He was expected to be able to read in a year and a half.

He was reading on a college level in three months.

Not surprisingly, they found his IQ was rising. An IQ is based on what an individual has learned as well as what he innately knows. When Timothy had first been tested, he had learned absolutely nothing. His slightly above normal score had been garnered solely on what he innately knew. Excitement at the project grew until Timothy had reached an IQ of 250 plus. It was now eighteen months since he had lifted his spoon without hands. He devoured books. But he switched from topic to topic, from two weeks of advanced physics texts to a month of 19th Century British Literature. But the military didn't care. They did not expect him to be a specialist. They only wanted him to be educated and conversant. At the end of eighteen months, they felt he was both these things. So they turned to other plans...

They coached his psionic abilities, trying to develop them. There were many dreams in military minds. There were dreams of Timothy destroying the entire Chinese Army with one burst of psionic power. But dreams are only dreams. The sad fact was soon evident that Timothy's psi powers were severely limited. The heaviest thing he could lift was a spoon full of applesauce. And his radius of ability was only one hundred feet. As a superweapon, it was something of a washout.

The reaction among the generals was more than disappointment. After the immediate paralysis wore off, there was a strong desire for revenge. They opted to dissect him to discover what they could of his ability.

Luckily for him, the war ended that week.

The Bio-Chem people had come up with the weapon that had ended it. At last turn, the Artificial Wombs had proved useless. The final weapon was a virus released on the Chinese mainland at roughly the same time the generals were discovering Timothy's limitations. Before they could dissect him, the speedy killer had wiped out approximately one half the Chinese male population—as it was structured to affect only certain chromosome combinations in only the Mongoloid race—and had induced the enemy into a reluctant surrender.

Plans for dissection went astray. The Wombs were put under the administration of the Bio-Chem people, and they dissolved the project. The Bio-Chems were fascinated by Timothy. For three weeks, he was exhaustively tested and retested. He gave so many spoon-lifting demonstrations that he saw floating spoons in his sleep. And he heard their discussions about "what his brain might look like." It was a rugged three weeks.

But in the end they didn't saw him up to satisfy their curiosity. Somewhere along the line, a leak had reached the press, and the story of the horribly crippled mutant who could lift spoons without touching them was a Three Day Sensation. During the excitement of those three days, the largest bureau of the now peace-oriented government, the Veteran's Bureau, stepped in and took control of him. Senator Kilroy announced that the Veteran's Bureau was going to rehabilitate the young man, provide him with grav plate servo-hands and a grav plate system for mobility. He was a Three Day Sensation again. And so was the politically wise senator who took credit for the project...

Timothy (or "Ti" as he went by now, having never assumed a surname after gaining his freedom) stood on the patio that jutted beyond the cliff and watched the birds settling noisily into the big green pines that spread thickly down the mountainside. Behind him was the house that had been built from the money acquired from his book advances—*Autobiography of a Reject* and *A Case For Artificial Birth*—a proud monument of a structure erected over the ruins of a Revolutionary War pro-British secret supplies cellar. He cherished the house and what it contained, for it was ninety percent of his world. The other ten percent was his business. He was shrewd, and his business paid off. He used the receipts chiefly to maintain the house and to buy his books and the films for his private projection room. He had organized and launched, with his writing monies, the first stat newspaper designed solely for entertainment. No news. Just eossip and gossip and more gossip. It was a ten-page scandal sheet that stated out of the wall printers in eleven million homes promptly at eight in the morning and four thirty in the afternoon. But now his business was not with him in his thoughts, and he focused his attention on the birds that fluttered below. He directed his left servo-hand to pull apart the branches obscuring his view of a particularly fine specimen. The six-fingered prosth swept away from him on the grav plates that cored its palm, shot forty feet down the embankment to the offending branch and gently pulled it aside so as not to disturb the birds.

But the birds were too aware: they flew. Using his limited psi power, Ti reached into the two hundred miniature switches of the control module buried in the globe of the grav plate system that capped his truncated legs. The switches, operated by his psi power, in turn maneuvered his hands and moved him about on his grav plate sphere as he wished. He recalled his left servo-hand now that the bird had gone. It rushed back to him and floated at his left side, directly out from his shoulder, just as the right hand floated on the other side.

He looked at his watch and was surprised to find it was past time for his usual morning chat with Taguster. He flipped the mini-switches, floated around and through the patio doors into the plush living room. He moved across the fur carpet and glided into the special cup-chair of his Mindlink set. He raised a servo-hand

and pulled down the glittering helmet, fitting it securely to his bony cranium (it too had been specially crafted), reached out with the other servo and threw the proper toggles to shift his mind into the receiver in Taguster's living room. There was a moment of blurring when intense blacks and grays swarmed formlessly about him. His mind flashed on the Mindlink Company beam past thousands of other minds going to other receivers, covered the forty miles to the city and Taguster's house. The blacks and grays swirled dizzily, then cleared and turned into colors. The first thing he saw through the receiver camera was Taguster lying dead against the wall

No. Not dead. There was blood, surely, pooling about the concert guitarist's head, but that same head was also moving, nodding in near unconsciousness, but nodding nonetheless. Ti settled his mind into the comfortable interior of the receiver and operated the voice box. "Lenny!"

It was almost impossible for him to believe the musician was hurt—maybe mortally hurt. A good friend never dies. Never! The shock of the situation echoed back his trace pathway on the Mindlink beam and jolted through his body, trying to make that dumb hulk of flesh understand the horror of the situation.

"Lenny, what happened?"

Taguster raised his head a little, enough for Ti to see the thin dart buried half in his throat. Taguster tried to say something, but he could manage only a thick gurgle, like syrup splattering against the bottom of a galvanized bucket.

Darts? Who would want to kill Leonard Taguster? And why hadn't they finished the job?

The musician was gurgling frantically as if he desperately needed to communicate something. Ti's mind swam inside the receiver, as if it were trying to break free and dissipate its charge. He was fighting off panic, and he knew it. Taguster wanted to say something. But how could that be accomplished with his pale throat violated? He could not talk. And from the looks of it, the dart had been tipped with something that made it impossible for him to walk, something that had partially paralyzed him. He scabbled a limp hand against the wall as if writing without implement, and Ti got the idea. He turned the head of the receiver around so that the cameras showed him most of the room. There was a desk with various writing tools lying on it, and it was only twenty feet away, against the far wall. But a receiver was not mobile—and Taguster could not move. Ti thought of retreating from the receiver and returning to his body, calling the police from his house. But from the looks of him, Taguster could not last that much longer, and the man's desire to communicate was too intense to ignore.

Ti had never thought to experiment to see if his psi power traveled with his mind when he entered a receiver, but this was as good a time as any to find out! He squinted eyes that he didn't have (the cameras could not rightfully be called eyes, and his own orb was at home, lying lopsided in his irregular head) and forced his psi energies to coalesce in the vicinity of the desk. He reached out and toyed with the pencil. It flipped over and almost rolled onto the floor! He doubled his effort, lifted it, and floated it across the room to where Taguster lay dying. He imagined he was sweating.

Taguster picked the instrument up and held it as if he were not exactly sure what to do with it. He coughed up blood and stared at that a moment.

"Lenny," the mutant urged. "Write it. Write... it."

Taguster looked blearily up at the receiver screen, seemed to nod. He raised his hand and wrote on the wall: MARGLE. The letters were shaky and uneven, but they were readable,

"What does that mean?"

Taguster seemed to sigh, dropped the pencil.

"Lenny!"

Taguster looked at the screen again, fumbled with the pencil, lifted it and scribbled under the word "Margle": NAME.

So Margie was a name. And now that the connection had been made for him, Ti seemed to have remembered hearing it somewhere, though he could not place the source or context. Well, anyway, the musician had named his would-be killer, and the mutant felt justified in leaving the scene long enough to notify the police. But then, someone screamed.

It was a woman's scream, high and piercing. It started full strength, turned to a gurgle much like Taguster's, and trailed away. It had come from the direction of the bedroom. There was another receiver in there, an extension of the living room box, and Ti vacated his present perch for the bedroom set.

It was a woman. She had been trying to get out of the window, but her flimsy nightdress had caught on the window latch, delaying her just a moment too long. There were three darts in her back, and the yellow negligee was running with red, red blood. Ti looked to the right, hunting the killer. He had assumed the man had left, but he had only disabled Taguster, then had gone quickly on to the woman to kill her before she could escape. The blood had now soaked her negligee and was dripping onto the floor from the frilly lace edging. He shifted the camera to the left, and he saw his killer. And it wasn't a man...

It was a Police Hound. Its dark metal body floated toward the doorway, its two servo-hands flying ahead of it, their fingers tensed as if they were ready to latch onto something and strangle it to death. The dart tube on its burnished belly was protruding, prepared for action. This was the killer, thirty-odd pounds of ball-shaped computer that could track a man by smell, sight, touch, and sound. And only the police should have one!

But why would the police want to kill Leonard Taguster? And why should they use such a roundabout method of obtaining his destruction? Why not simply haul him in on some phony charge replete with carefully prepared evidence and do away with him legally?

The Hound disappeared through the doorway into the hall, and Ti suddenly remembered Taguster lying back there in the living room. The Hound was going back to finish the job! The darts were evidently tipped with poison, though Police Hounds should carry only defense-and-capture narcotics. Now that Taguster's lover had been kept from spreading the news, it was time to take care of the guitarist in proper fashion.

Ti retreated from the bedroom connection and shifted his mind back to the main receiver. Taguster was still lying against the wall in the same position, still not

unconscious, still gurgling, trying to tell Ti who Margie was. But the Hound was on its way! Ti searched the room frantically for a weapon.

The Hound came through the doorway and drifted toward Taguster.

Ti found a curio, a small brass peasant leading a small brass mule, a hand-crafted trinket Taguster had brought back from his tour of Mexico. He lifted it with his psi power and threw it at the Hound. The toy bounced off the dully gleaming hide of the machine, fell harmlessly to the floor. The Hound drifted at Taguster, its dart tube thrusting farther out of its underside, its servos spreading to either side to give it a clear line of fire.

Ti found an ashtray, tried lifting it, could not.

Panic threatened to tip him into irrationality. But that, he cautioned himself, would do the musician no good at all. He was the man's only hope! There were only seconds left. Then he remembered the gun on the desktop. It had been lying at the opposite end from the pencils, heavy and ugly, a deterrent to burglars. He touched the pistol psionically, but he could not nudge it. He pressed harder, eventually moved it slightly until the barrel was pointing toward the Hound. Pulling the light wire of the automatic trigger was easy. The gun spat a narco-needle that bounced off the beast. That was no good!

And then the Hound shot Taguster. Four times in the chest: *thud, thud, thud, thud!* The guitarist gurgled thickly, sighed, and dropped his head, quite dead now. Ti felt as if all the energy he had possessed had been sucked out of him by an electric vampire, yet he could not let the Hound escape. He sent his cameras swiveling about, looking for things small enough to be handled by his limited talents. He found various trinkets and figurines and rained them uselessly upon the killer machine. It surveyed the room, perplexed, firing darts in the direction from which the souvenir hail came, unable to discover its assailant. Then it turned a spatter of darts on the receiver head and floated out of the room—out of the house and away...

For a time, Ti remained in the living room receiver, looking at Taguster's corpse. He was too weakened to do anything else. His mind filled with remembrances of their friendship, scene after scene flicking after one another like dried leaves blown by a cold autumn wind. Finally, when there were no more memories, there was nothing to do but return to his own set, to his own house. He broke with Taguster's receiver and allowed his mind to flow back into the Mindlink beam, mixing with the blacks and the grays and the almost subaudible murmuring of the thousands of other Mindlink customers. Colors appeared, and he was abruptly back in his own body. He sat for a moment, regaining lost energy, then used a servo to lift the helmet from his head and shut off the machine.

What now?

Ordinarily, he would not have had to consider that question, for he would have wasted no time in summoning the police. But it had been a Police Hound that had killed Leonard Taguster! If the legal authorities had conspired to take the musician's life, as unlikely as that seemed, then it was madness to contact them about investigating the crime! No, he had to know more before he took any action. But what did he have to go on? Margie! He had the name. He lifted out of the cup-chair and crossed the living room, moved through a painting-lined corridor, and came into the library. He stopped at the wall where the direct com-screen to

Enterstat, his newspaper, lay like a cataracted eyeball. He punched a button, the third yellow one in an alternating series of green and yellow. A panel slid away beside the screen, revealing a computer keyboard, the direct line to the *Enterstat* computer. He punched out the letters M-A-R-G-L-E and depressed the bar marked FULL DATA REPORT.

Thirty seconds later, a printed stat sheet popped out of the info receival slot and into the plastic tray, glistening wetly. He waited a moment for it to dry, then reached with a servo and picked it up. He held it up to his eye, read it, blinking. Klaus Margie was connected with the Dark Brethren, the underworld organization that had been encroaching on the territory once sacrosanct to the Mafia, and it was rumored that he was the number one man, though this information could not be checked for authenticity. He was six feet tall and weighed two hundred and one pounds. His hair was dark, but his eyes were "baby blue. He had a three-inch scar along his right jaw line. He was missing a thumb on his right hand. He believed in taking a hand in the common dangerous chores of the mob. He would not send one of his boys to do something he had never done himself. He was a man of action, not a desk-chained gangster executive. He dated Polly London, the rising young starlet. That was why *Enterstat* had his biography. End of information.

Ti dropped the paper back into the receival tray and stared thoughtfully at the computer keyboard. That explained the Police Hound. The underworld could lay hands on anything it wanted by bribing the proper officials. And somewhere it had secured a Hound. Well, he could just go and dial the police now, report the murder, for they were not involved. Or could he? His intuition (a thing he had long ago learned to respect) told him he should know more about Klaus Margie before he put his nonexistent foot into a nasty patch of briars. He punched out the *Enterstat* main phone number on the com-screen and waited while the two-dimension media (almost entirely a business service now that three-dimensional Mindlink had taken over in the private communications area) rang the number. The blank screen suddenly popped into light, and the face of *Enterstat's* editor, George Creol, swam into view, settled, held still, staring out at him with large, melancholy eyes. "Oh, hello, Chief. What is it?"

"I want some information on a story prospect."

"You writing again, Chief? You always did do great articles."

"Uh, well, just something that interested me. I thought it might make a good feature."

"Who is it?"

"Klaus Margie. He may be the top boy of the Dark Brethren. He dates Polly London. Missing a thumb on his right hand, scarred on his face. That's about all I know, and I got that from our computer. Think you could put a researcher on it?"

"Sure thing, Chief. When do you want the Stuff? Tomorrow?"

"I want it in an hour."

"But, Chief—"

"It doesn't have to be complex. I don't need a psychological profile or anything like that. Just the basics. Put a dozen researchers on it if you have to, but have it in an hour!"

"Sounds big."

"It is."

"I'll get on it right away. Call you back in an hour."

Creol signed off, and the screen went blank again.

Ti mixed himself a strong whiskey sour and waited.

An hour later, the com-screen bleeped. He flipped it to reception and watched Creol's face fade in. "Got it, Chief," Creol said. "Hey, he's quite a fellow!"

"Stat it."

"Sure thing."

Creol placed the documents under his recorder scope, one sheet at a time, then punched the transmit button. Moments later, the wet copies dropped into the tray in Ti's wall. He didn't rush to pick them up, though his nerves screamed for action. Creol was already too interested. He didn't want to blow any of this until he knew what he was doing. When all the papers had dropped, he thanked the editor and rang off. He sent a servo to retrieve the data and carried it back into the living room. He slid into a cup-chair beneath a reading globe and shut off the grav plates.

When he had finished reading everything the researchers had found on Klaus Margle, he knew, beyond doubt, that the man was head of the Dark Brethren. The list of other gangsters liquidated under his auspices was awesome. By studying the killings tentatively credited to Klaus Margle, Ti could see the story of an industrious criminal assassinating his way up the ranks and right into the top roost. The information told him one other thing: he had been wise not to contact the police. Klaus Margle had been arrested nine different times. And he had beaten every rap. Whether he had clever lawyers or whether he spread money around where it would do him the most good was of little consequence. What counted was that if the police investigated this, Margle would eventually go free as he had before. Then he would come hunting for a reject named Timothy. No, this was not something he could turn over to the police. Not until he had conclusive evidence against Margle, evidence the crook could not buy his way out of. He was going to have to handle this thing himself...

Ti slid into his Mindlink cup-chair, cut his grav plates, and breathed deeply. As he lowered the helmet and fitted it, his mind raced through the alleyways of the situation. Why should Klaus Margle want to kill a concert guitarist? And how had Taguster come to know the gangster in the first place? It was not his usual type of acquaintance. They were questions that would need answering if he wanted to sew up this case before reporting it to the authorities. But Taguster was dead, and Margle would certainly not talk, so where did that leave Ti? Nowhere. He flipped the toggles, leaped into the beam, and settled into the receiver in Taguster's living room. The body was still there, of course, twisted grotesquely in its death agonies.

Ti swung the cameras from left to right and found the closet door he wanted. He hoped the thing was where Taguster usually kept it. He palmed open the closet door with his power. Multicolored warning lights flashed amber and crimson and green. He shut off the alarm and looked at the simulacrum. It was a perfect likeness of the musician— except that it wasn't now full of poisoned pins.

Taguster had had the simulacrum made to help him avoid the adulation of his fans. When he was on tour, it was always the android that entered the hotels through the front door, while Taguster sneaked in a service entrance. The

simulacrum could walk, talk, think, do almost everything Taguster could do. Its complex, brain was cored with his memory tapes and his psychological reaction patterns, so that it could pass for him even in the company of casual friends, though someone as close to him as Ti could not really be fooled.

Ti reached psionically under the flowered sports coat the machine wore, brought it to active status, its eyes opened, cloudy at first, then clearing until its gaze was penetrating. "You," Ti said. "Sim, come here."

It walked out of the closet and stopped before the receiver. For a moment, Ti had the eerie sensation that Taguster had returned from the dead. It was suddenly distasteful to, be ordering this image of his friend about like a peasant before a monarch—but it was also essential to the half-conceived plan still taking shape in his mind.

"Sim," he said again.

It raised its eyes and stared directly at the cameras.

"Sim, there is a young woman at the window in the bedroom. She is—dead. I want you to bring her into the utility room. Be careful and don't spill her blood on the carpet. Go."

"Right," the Sim said, turning toward the bedroom. A moment later, he returned, the body cradled in his arms. The blood had ceased to flow and was drying on her lacy garment. The simulacrum stalked across the living room and out of sight.

Ti shifted into the kitchen receiver, watched the android march through and into the utility area. He could only see part of that room through the door, for there was no receiver in it. "Empty the freezer," he directed the android. It complied, piling the hams and roasts and vegetables on the floor.

"Now put her body in it."

It did this thing too.

He ordered it to retrieve Taguster's corpse and do the same with it. If it took a day or so for this plan to be worked out and put into operation, if it required a couple of days to trap Margle, he wanted to be certain the bodies were well preserved for a future autopsy. This was gruesome, but it was the only thing he could do. When both bodies were in the freezer and the food that had been there was dumped into the incinerator chute, he sent the android about cleaning up all traces of the murder, scrubbing the blood from the floor and carpet, washing the wall down where the musician had scribbled upon it. When the machine-man had finished, the house looked perfectly normal, completely serene.

"Sit down and wait for me," he directed it.

It complied.

He dropped into the Mindlink beam and returned home. He went into the library, sat down at his typer, and used his nimble servos to compose a new headline story for the four thirty edition. Polly London would surely read *Enterstat* to see if she were mentioned, and it was quite possible that she would pass along the story to Klaus Margle. If Margle didn't subscribe to *Enterstat* himself... When he had finished the eight hundred words to the piece, he rang Creol. The man's melancholy eyes resolved first, then the rest of his face. "Chief. Wasn't the info complete enough?"

"Fine, George, fine. Look, I have another story that goes in the four thirty edition. I want you to tear out the lead story, no matter what it is, and put this one in with two-inch caps."

"Bu—"

"I know you have the paper ready, but this is what I want."

"Stat it, Chief."

He did. Seconds later, he saw it drop into Creol's desk tray. The editor picked it up, read over it. "What's the headline?" he asked, picking up a pencil.

"Ah—CONCERT GUITARIST VICTIM OF WOULD-BE KILLER."

"But he wasn't killed?"

"Right."

"Then this doesn't make such a sensational headline, Chief. The one we have is—"

"I know. But I want this as the lead anyhow."

"It means resetting page one—"

"Do it."

"You're the boss."

"Right you are."

He rang off. His heart was beating unreasonably fast. He could feel his pulse throbbing in his neck. He moved back to the Mindlink set and shifted into Taguster's house again. The simulacrum waited, hands folded on its lap. He thought a moment, then gave it orders. "I want you to phone Harvard Detective Agency, Incorporated, and contract an investigator—one of their best. Tell him an attempt was made on your life and you want to find who it was. Tell him you want to see him tomorrow after you have compiled what information you can on your own. Tell him—four o'clock tomorrow."

The android stood, found the number of the agency and dialed it on the com-screen system. He made the transaction, even bargaining over the going rate per diem for a Class I agent, hung up, and returned to his chair. "It's all fixed," he said in the very tones Leonard Taguster would have used. "Anything else?"

"Not yet. You might as well go inactive." He sent his psi power under the sportscoat again, flipped off the android. It seemed to sag in its chair. Its eyes clouded again, then slipped shut as if it were sleeping.

Ti settled in the Mindlink receiver to wait. At four thirty, *Enterstat* would report that an unsuccessful attempt had been made on Taguster's life. It would also report that he had hired Harvard Detective Agency to investigate the attempt for him. If Margle read or heard of the article, he would call Harvard—perhaps offering to pay for Taguster's use of the firm, saying he was a close and concerned friend. The firm would agree, for they really would believe they were representing the musician. And Margle would think his man was still alive. What he would do then was a toss up. It was unlikely, however, that he would send the Hound to try again at a job it had bungled. Margle was too thorough a man for that. And given his propensity for personal involvement, he might just show up himself. That's what Ti was counting on. But there was nothing to do but wait...

He had everything ready. The movie camera was positioned back in his own house, right next to the Mindlink set, ready to be jacked in and record on film

whatever transpired in the house of Leonard Taguster. If only Margle would show...

At six ten, the com-screen burred.

Quickly, he activated the android. Its eyes blinked, unclouded, and it stood erect, striding off to the com-screen just as naturally as if it had been awakened from a sound nap. It punched to receive the call, and the screen lighted, although no image appeared on it. The android, though, was transmitting, and Klaus Margle—for who else would not want his face seen on the com-screen?—was getting a full-face view of the man he had ordered destroyed. "Who is this?" the android asked.

There was no reply.

"Who is this?"

The com screen went dead. The other party had run off without saying a single word.

The android returned to his chair and looked at the Mindlink receiver. "Did I act correctly under the circumstances?"

"Yes. Yes, you did."

"Then perhaps you could tell me just what those circumstances are. I should know more about the situation."

Ti filled the machine-man in on the death of its owner and all that Ti had learned about the prospective killer. When he had finished talking, he was worn out, and he fancied the receiver talkbox was smoking. They sat, waiting. Darkness came, and they turned on the low lights that flushed the room with a soft orange-red glow. At ten o'clock, Ti realized that he had not eaten anything all day—and that he was thirsty as well. But he dared not leave the receiver lest his suspect arrive while he was gone. At a quarter after eleven, then, they heard the first noise of an intruder . . .

There was a splintering of wood and a sharp thudding, the sound a door or window sill might make as it was wrenched out of its frame. The simulacrum came to its feet and stood looking about the room. "The kitchen," he said.

Ti shifted into the kitchen. The door was indeed bowed out of its frame, shivering as something struck it heavily again. A shoulder? Klaus Margle's shoulder, battering a way into the house? The door gave, the latch ripped loose, and the portal swung inward. Beyond floated the Hound. But that didn't fit Margle at all! If they thought the Hound had failed— Then he understood. If the Hound had failed, Margle would send it again to try to determine why. There would be men waiting outside in the event the Hound was again unsuccessful. And the confrontation between Hound and android was near. The simulacrum came into the kitchen. The Hound detected him, lurched, whined almost like a real dog. It surged through into the gloomy kitchen and fired half a dozen darts. The pins stuck in the pseudo-flesh of the android, but the poison could do nothing to his unhuman system of wires and tubes—and he did not even bleed. The Hound swung to the left, shot six more darts up the simulacrum's side. Again, the weapon failed to kill.

The android advanced on the Hound.

The Hound ordered its servos ahead and latched one of them around the android's neck, thinking to strangle it. The other servo came up and battered at

the artificial face. The machine-man's nose bent into an odd angle, but it didn't break. The android reached up and grabbed the servos, ripped them off himself. He turned, rammed the ends of the metal hands against the wall, snapping some of the fingers. Again. And again, until they were all broken. The hands floated where he left them, grav plates still operational, but unable to heed the commands of their master, the Hound.

"Capture it and destroy it," Ti ordered.

The simulacrum moved forward and grabbed the ball. It strained to move away from him, but could not. It shot darts into his chest, uselessly. He dragged it across the room, thrust it against the wall. It struck with a sharp crack, struggled, but was no match for the superhuman electronic and metal muscles of the simulacrum. He smashed it again and again, just as he had the hands, until the housing on the grav plates buckled and the plates loosened. He ripped the housing off, pulled the plates out of their connections and tossed them across the room where they floated above the sink.

"Now toss it back outside," Ti ordered.

The android did so, walking onto the platform of the rear patio and heaving the beast over the edge to fall on the driveway below. It struck with a resounding crash and shattered into a dozen or more large pieces. The android came back inside and crossed to the receiver. It was time for more waiting...

Minutes passed. A half an hour. Ti began to worry that they had been too drastic with the Hound and had scared off their killer. But just when he was ready to speak to the machine-man, he heard the squeak of shoes on the patio stairs leading from the rear lawn. "They're coming," he whispered fiercely.

The simulacrum nodded.

He dropped into Mindlink beam and returned home, set a servo hand to connect the camera to the impulses registering on this connection, and began filming the kitchen. When he returned, the gangsters had not yet arrived.

They came two seconds later, preceded by tear gas grenades. The kitchen filled with thick, acrid, blue-green fumes that roiled farther into the house, blanketing every room. Moments later, three dark figures came through the doorway wearing breathers and waving pin guns around like small boys with toys. Ti focused the camera on them, was elated when he discovered Margle's face—blue eyes, black hair, and a scarred cheek. He got a good, clear shot of him. Then he filmed the two accomplices, determined to convict them all. He did not take the camera off their faces. The intruders were oblivious to him, however. They spotted the android and decided it was Taguster in a breather of his own and that they had better fire while they still had a chance. Their dart guns burst with staccato tapping that echoed about the gas-filled kitchen.

The darts sank in but had no effect. The simulacrum advanced on the trio. One of them found the light switch, palmed it. In the ensuing brilliance, they saw all the darts puncturing the pseudo-flesh and knew the simulacrum for what it was. They holstered their weapons and moved in on it. It started backing away from them, but they cornered it, pinned the machine's arms, and reached under its flowered coat, deactivating it. It blinked its eyes, clouded them, closed them, and slumped against the wall, sliding to the floor like a drunk finally reaching his limit.

"Spread out and search the place," Margle ordered.

The two men moved through the rest of the house. Margle checked the utility room (though not the freezer) and the kitchen closet. A minute or two after he had finished, the others returned. "Nothing anywhere," one of them said, shaking his head. Then he seemed to become aware of the soft light of the Mindlink receiver cameras. "Boss!"

They came at the receiver like madmen, leering, enraged, snorting, faces flushed and lips twisted. One of the men raised a gun butt to smash in the lens, but Margle grabbed his arm. "No!"

"But, Boss—"

"You!" Margle snapped, directing his leer straight into the camera. "We're going to find you. We're going to trace you from the call records." He grinned, pressed his fingertips against the lens. Then he drew his pistol, moved his fingers, swung the butt, and smashed in the glass...

He settled into the Mindlink receiver in his own house, shaken, raised the helmet, and flipped off the machine. Margle had broken the lens—but not soon enough. The camera had been grinding away the entire time. It was only now, after the confrontation had come and passed, that he realized how tense he was. He tried to relax, recalling some relaxing yoga contemplation patterns that he had picked up somewhere. It worked a little. Yes, Margle could trace the call if he brought in a Mindlink expert, and there was no doubt the mob could have access to such a person, for the mob had access to everything. But even with an expert, that would take several hours. And Margle just didn't have that much time left.

Ti disconnected the movie camera from the set and took it into the library, to the film corner. He slipped the loaded spool into the automatic processor, waited eight minutes, removed it completely developed. He stretched out a length of the film and held it between himself and the ceiling light. There was the face of Klaus Margle, as ugly as in real life, scar and all. Ti had won.

He moved to the corn-screen and punched the number One. A moment later, the screen brightened, and a desk sergeant's face popped into view. "Police," he said, a pencil in his hands, ready to record any pertinent information, even though the call—like all calls to the police—was being recorded.

"I would like to report a murder," he said, then abruptly wished he had been more circumspect.

The desk officer's face slipped away and was replaced by another hung above shoulders that were covered in plain brown business suit. "Homicide, here," the new face said. "Go on."

"I—have a murder to report."

"Go on."

"I—"

"Well?"

"I want to report it in person. I have evidence."

"The com-screen is fine. We handle all our homicides over the com—"

"In person," Ti persisted. He knew the sort of run-around he could get by phone. His own editor, Creol, gave the run-around to almost everyone who called *Enterstat* to speak to Ti.

"Look, Mr.— You haven't reported your name. The informer's name should always be the first statement. What's your name?"

"Timothy of *Enterstat*."

The detectives eyebrows went up. "And you won't report over the com-screen?"

"No."

"We'll send a man around. Your address is in central files?"

"Yes."

"Be there in fifteen minutes."

When the police dealt with the wealthy, the treatment was somewhat different than when they dealt with the comfortable or the poor. Ti knew it, did not like it, but was nevertheless glad of it now. If he wanted to be sure this case got solved, he was convinced that he must launch it himself. And since it was easier for them to come to him,—he had had to make them do just that.

Fifteen minutes later, almost to the second, the doorbell rang. He sent a servo to turn the latch knob and pull the portal wide. A thin man with a pencil mustache stepped through into the living room. The servo closed the door behind him. He looked at Ti a moment, tried to conceal his shock—shock though he was certain to know the mutant's nature—and took off his fur hat. "Detective Modigliani," he said in tight, compressed words, each syllable like the quick crack of a rifle shot.

"Glad to meet you, Detective. Come in. Sit down."

The thin man crossed the room and took a seat while Ti drifted into one of his own special cup-chairs and shut down his grav plates. "This is most unusual," Modigliani said.

"It's an unusual case."

"Perhaps you could explain it?"

Ti hesitated only a moment, then launched into his story. When he had finished, the detective sat with his hands folded in his lap and twisted his mouth as if trying to get at his mustache and nibble on it. "Quite extraordinary. And you say you have film?"

"Yes."

The detective scowled. "You have invaded privacy, you know"

"What?"

Modigliani stood and paced to the wall, turned dramatically. "Privacy, sir. It's an invasion of privacy to photograph someone through the Mindlink impressions."

"But I was corraling evidence!"

"That's the job of the police, don't you think?"

"I happen to know," Ti said, flipping on his systems and rising from his chair, "that Klaus Margle was arrested nine times and yet never served a prison sentence."

"What are you suggesting?"

He almost spat out the accusations that were most assuredly true, but he held his tongue just long enough to calm himself. "Nothing. Nothing. But—well, have a look at the films, why don't you?"

"Yes. I would like to see those,"

Ti led the way into the library where he set up the projector and pulled down the wall screen. "Hit the lights, will you?"

Modigliani hit the lights. There was darkness.

The projector hummed, and suddenly the screen was filled with images. Roiling smoke clouds, to begin with. Then, coming through these were three men with breathers' clamped in their teeth, with plugs in their nostrils. The picture zoomed in on the lead man, and there was Klaus Margle, larger than life!

But just his face. As the picture progressed, Ti discovered his error: he had been so anxious to get good shots of Margie's face that he had missed most of the other action. He had trained the cameras on the heads of the invaders, missing nearly everything else that they did. There was no sound, either. The threatening face of Klaus Margle leaning into the camera at the end lacked force when his words were nonexistent.

The film stuttered, slipped, and was gone.

"It's not much," Modigliani said.

Ti started to protest.

The detective interrupted. "It's not really much. Faces. You could have filmed Klaus Margie almost anywhere."

"But the tear gas—"

"And I didn't see him killing anyone. It still looks to me like we should chiefly be concerned with an invasion-of-privacy charge against you, sir, not with some charge against Mr. Margle."

Ti must have seen the futility of argument, but he wouldn't allow himself to give in that easily. He argued, pleaded, lost his temper and called names. All names, of course, being sucked up by the detective's personal recorder for future use. In the end, he could only suggest calling Taguster's home. Either the receivers would all be broken, or they would meet Klaus Margle and his henchmen.

"Or," Modigliani pointed out, "there may be no answer, which isn't enough to warrant an investigation either."

But there was an answer. Taguster's face popped onto the corn-screen, smiling. "Yes?"

Modigliani turned and gave Ti an I-told-you-so look.

"The android," Ti hissed.

Modigliani identified himself to Taguster's simulacrum. "We've had a report," he said, "that you've been murdered."

Taguster laughed. It was very hard to believe he was an android. "As you can see—" he didn't bother to finish.

"Would you mind," Modigliani asked, "if I moved into Mindlink and inspected your rooms at close range?"

"Go ahead," Taguster's android said confidently.

"Thank you," Modigliani flipped off the corn-screen and returned to the living room and the Mindlink set there. He popped into Mindlink beam and entered the living room receiver at Taguster's. He flipped to the bedrooms, game-rooms, library, theater, and finally the kitchen. He thanked Taguster for the permission to investigate and expressed his apologies at the intrusion. He returned to Ti's set and removed the helmet that didn't quite properly fit his head. "Nothing," he said.

"The kitchen receiver—"

"Was in fine working order. I don't know what you were trying to prove, sir, but—"

"They could have used a mob expert to restore the receiver."

"And Taguster?"

"That was his android!"

"Androids, you must know, don't generally do anything that is detrimental to their owners. If the real Leonard Taguster were murdered, his android would not willingly assist the murderers."

"They could have tinkered with him."

"That takes a *real* expert."

"You know as well as I that Klaus Margle can afford such experts and keeps them on hand!"

Modigliani's seeming stupidity was beginning to annoy Timothy to the point where he wasn't able to suppress his rage. His twisted face flushed, and he could not make his servos stay still. They flitted back and forth like frightened animals looking for a place to hide. But then Modigliani gave away the name of his game: "Sir," he said, "I must caution you to refrain from slander. Mr. Klaus Margle, the Klaus Margle to which you refer, is nothing more than the owner of a large number of restaurants and garages. He is a respectable businessman, and he should not be open to such slanderous comment—"

"Detective Modigliani," Ti said, his voice level, but threatening to escalate into hilarity, "you know damned well—"

"This is being recorded. I must inform you of that." He parted the halves of his round-necked coat to reveal the chest-strapped mini-recorder.

Ti stopped. It was obvious now why he had had such a hard time with Modigliani. The man was bought. When he had learned the accused was Klaus Margle, he had seen where his duty lay—and it wasn't with the Truth. He wasn't interested in investigating the crime. He was only concerned with making a case against Ti as an unreliable witness. He was doing a good job. And Ti realized his own rage would be interpreted as inane prattling if he didn't manage to control himself. "Perhaps you had better go," he said, clamping imaginary hands on his boiling fury.

"The film," Modigliani said, returning to the library.

Ti floated quickly after him, but was too late. When he came through the library doors, the detective had removed the film from the projector and was returning. "You can't have that!" Ti snapped.

"On the contrary. We'll have to study it to see if it was faked. I don't know what you have against Mr. Margle that would lead you to the construction of such a plan to discredit him, but if falsification of film intended as evidence has taken place, we will be in contact with you."

And he was gone. Ti stood at the window watching him go, knowing full well that the film would be destroyed between here and the police headquarters and that Detective Modigliani would get a bonus from the Dark Brethren this month.

He returned to Mindlink and called Taguster's house. The android was there, reading a book, apparently. It spoke to him as if he didn't know it was the android, asked him how he had been getting along. He didn't bother to answer. He went from room to room, but he could find nothing. He slipped out of the Taguster house and into his own set, removing the helmet.

It was two o'clock in the morning. And Margle was on his way...

There were preparations to be made. The police were not going to be any good. There was no hope that they would help. He knew without need of further corroboration, that any further calls he made to the police would be automatically routed to Modigliani, who would see that he was given the brush-off. So he had to defend himself. He had a collection of pin and dart weapons with which he amused himself in the basement shooting range. He collected three of these and brought them upstairs. He carried books into the kitchen and braced one of the weapons between them so that it covered the door at waist height. *That* he could trigger with his psionic talents if necessary. He took the other two and grasped one firmly in each servo. There was nothing more but waiting...

He heard them in the courtyard behind the house. They were not attempting to be quiet. Their aide Modigliani had probably assured them that the police would stay out of it and that Ti was helpless. He stood at the doorway between kitchen and dining area, both gun-laden servos aimed at the door, his psi ready to trigger the book-propped weapon too. The door rattled. Then something struck it hard. It crashed inward, the lock ripped lose, and a Hound floated into the room.

But the Hound was smashed, broken back at Taguster's!

Which meant they had more than one Hound. With contacts like Modigliani, that was not surprising.

But his guns were no good! The pins would bounce harmlessly off the Hound's "hide," and the beast would sweep in for a swift and sure kill. Ti turned into the dining area, dropping the guns and calling his servos after him. He had expected men, not machines. Now what? He heard the Hound in the kitchen, but it didn't remain there for long. When he reached the living room, it was humming into the dining area, following him.

He felt panic welling in him as he remembered the pin-punctured throat of the musician, the bloody body of his lover as she had tried to crawl out of the window to avoid the alloy demon. The same alloy demon that now stalked him. But he fought the panic, knowing only death lay with it.

The Hound entered the living room and sensed his presence, swept him with its tiny cameras and radar grids, ascertaining if he were the quarry...

His mind raced to find an escape. The house, the great house that was almost a womb for him was highly equipped to contain him in complete luxury, but it wasn't equipped to afford him escape from death. The house would be surrounded by Margle and his men; therefore, the doors were useless. Then he remembered the cellars upon which the house had been built, the dozen rooms that had served as a Revolutionary War Tory supplies depot. If he could get into those, there were any number of outlets onto other places on the mountain.

The Hound fired a series of three pins.

Ti slammed down on his speed controls imbedded in the floating ball and streaked into the hallway, found the cellar door, and swept down the stairs without even touching them, stairs there for the convenience of guests. He crossed the Tri-D room with its three wall-sized white screens and moved into the shooting range, slamming the door behind. It was a heavy door, an antique resurrected from the Tory cellars before the house had been constructed over them. It would take the Hound a few moments to break it down.

He floated along the left wall where he knew the cellars lay. They stretched back into the mountain, a rough series of fortified caves, after you passed through the first four or five of them. From those caves, there were a number of exits on the mountainside. He reached the end of the room and used his servos to rip loose the half-round that filled in the corner of the plasti-wood paneling. Then, gripping metal fingers around the paneling, he carefully pried the last section away from the wall beams and was looking through into cool darkness: the Tory cellars.

Behind, the Hound struck the door, hard.

Ti could not crouch to squeeze through the cross-beams, but he shifted the grav plates so that he was turned onto his side, then moved ball first through the gap and into the cellar. Once inside, he shifted the grav plates back to normal position and righted himself. He sent his servos back to pull the wood paneling back into place from the inside. It might confuse the demon machine for a few minutes, but it could not be a completely successful ruse. It would be after him, no question there.

Through the partition, he heard the door to the shooting range give, crash inward to admit the Hound.

He drifted off slowly through the old cellar, letting his eye adjust to the intense dark. After a few minutes, he could distinguish the vague outlines of fallen beams and broken tables, rotted, shattered chairs, and a few stretches of shelving that had once held ammunition but were now bowed and warped away from the walls, covered with ugly lumps of fungus. He moved from the first cellar into the second.

The panel he had removed was wrenched away from the wall in the first cellar, and light from the shooting range flooded in to dispel the gloom. The Hound came quickly after.

He turned toward the third cellar and moved as fast as he could. He slammed his stump shoulder into a half fallen beam but kept on moving.

The Hound came faster.

When he got to the entranceway of the fifth cellar, he found that there had been a cave-in, and the beams and rock of the ceiling had collapsed to effectively bar his escape. If he had a half an hour, maybe an hour, he could move enough of the rubble to get through. But the Hound was literally breathing down his neck—though the breath was the warmth of laboring machinery.

He turned on his pursuer. It was coming in from the third cellar, moving around a pile of ruin there. It fired three pins. *Fita-fita-fita...*

He moved aside when he saw its intent. The darts studded the rubble wall behind him. He sent his servo-hands to a beam lying in the Hound's pathway, had them worry its tenuous connections with the ceiling. Just as the Hound passed beneath, the beam snapped loose and crashed onto the ball of the hunter. But it only deflected the demon machine's advance. The Hound swerved, bobbed, but recovered and swept closer, firing three pins.

All three missed.

Ti was surprised, for he had not had time to take evasive action, and Hounds were not known to be sloppy marksmen.

The Hound fired three more.

All three missed.

And Ti realized why. He was turning them aside with his psi power! The second time, he had been more conscious of it. He stood, back to the closed door to chamber five, and waited for the Hound to fire again. It did. And, again, the darts shot to either side, deflected suddenly from their target. Over the next several minutes, he deflected another two dozen of the slender spines, until the Hound was convinced that its nasty little weapons system was of no use in the situation. It stopped, bobbling gently a dozen feet away, and regarded him with all its measuring devices. A moment later, it sent its two servos toward his neck...

He reacted quickly, or he might have been strangled. He called his own servos to him. Four feet from his face, the enemy hands and his own met and locked, metal fingers laced metal fingers. He flushed full power into the hands and set them the task of breaking the Hound's fingers.

But the Hound seemed to have similar ideas. Its own servos wrenched at Ti's so that the four members swayed back and forth in the air, now gaining an inch or two for their master, now losing the same amount of distance. Finally, with both sets at full power and firmly clenched, they did not move at all but merely strained in frozen tableau against one another. When the grav plates and their connections erupted in sparks and smoke, they did so on all four hands. The servos dropped to the floor as if they were a single creature, a metal bird with shot pellets in its wings. Now both hunter and hunted were handless.

Hunter and hunted. Ti suddenly realized the nomenclature was no longer adequate. Both deprived of hands and Ti able to stop the Hound's pins, neither was the hunter. He moved by the Hound toward the shooting range. He had discovered another application of his power this night. He mused that necessity always brought out his abilities. It had been necessary to feed himself that day long ago, and he had lifted the spoon. And now it had been a necessity to control the pins. Now he knew he could influence small objects even in high-velocity transit, just as he could lift the spoon.

He moved into the shooting range. The Hound had ceased to follow but bumped purposelessly against the cross-beams as if its mind had been in its hands and as if a loss of ability had led to a loss of purpose. Ti floated up the stairs and into the hallway of the house again. He could hear footsteps in the kitchen: Margle and his men coming to see what had taken the robot so long. Well, he was ready for them. Or he thought he was. He concentrated on his psi until his mind was alive with the power of it. He drifted into the living room just as the Dark Brethren moved in with guns drawn.

"Your Hound is finished," he said, drawing their attention.

The man on Margle's left swung and fired. Ti deflected the pins, all but one. That one he redirected to the man who had shot. The pin sunk in his chest, its poison shooting through him. He gagged, doubled over, and dropped.

"Turn yourself in, Margle," Ti said wearily. "I won't kill you if you'll turn yourself in."

But Margle and the remaining man were crouched behind the sofa. They were not ready to give up just because their target had gotten in a lucky shot. In the dark it had appeared to be a lucky shot and nothing more. They couldn't see that his hands were gone.

"You're crazy," Margle said. "You were crazy for getting into this in the first place."

"Why did you kill Taguster?"

"Why should I tell you?"

Apparently, they could not see him in the dark. Only the dead man had spotted him, and now the others were waiting to zero in on his voice, or waiting for him to move and give himself away,

"You're going to kill me, aren't you—or I will kill you. Either way, telling me won't make a difference, will it?"

"He was on PBT."

"Drugs?"

"We supplied."

"What excuse is that to kill him?"

Margle chuckled as if he were going lax and unwatchful. But Ti knew, if he moved, Margle would fire a murderous barrage—all of which would miss, of course. "It was getting too expensive for him. So he decided to gather information on us. He hoped to turn the information over to the government in return for licensing as a legal addict. Then he could get his drugs free. But he got too nosy, and our boy became suspicious. We ransacked his house when he was out, and we found his file on us. Almost complete enough to turn over to the proper Federal authorities."

"That shouldn't have bothered you. You bribe authorities."

"Local, not Federal. Did you ever try to bribe a U.N. delegate officer? The kind they have with the narcotic bureau? Can't be done."

"So you killed him."

"So I did. Or, rather, a Hound killed him. You were pretty clever about that, by the way. Had us worried for a while. But calling the local constabulary—now that was a stroke of pure idiocy. It made finding you a great deal easier."

He knew enough now. He knew why Taguster, the man with the gentle, lightning fingers that teased the strings of an ancient instrument, had died. It was "the last piece to the puzzle that had begun in the morning and ended, now, not even twenty-four hours later.

"Why didn't the Hound get you?" Margle asked, anxious to satisfy his own curiosity now.

"I had more hands than it," he answered. "I had an extra hand."

"Huh?"

It was time. He moved toward the couch.

They saw him and fired.

He deflected all the pins.

Then he was behind the couch, almost on top of them. They leaped erect, both firing. He deflected all pins save two which he turned back on them. Margle took his in the right cheek. The other man was struck in the neck. Both gagged as the first Brethren had, clutched their chests as their hearts abruptly ceased action, and folded up in neat piles on the carpet.

He turned from them, not wanting to look at the corpses he had made. He floated through the dark room into the library. There he found a pencil and spent

some time lifting it and carrying it to the com-screen with his psi power. He punched out the number of Creol's home.

A few minutes passed before the screen lighted and showed Creol's sleep-drawn features. "Chief!"

"I have a story, George."

Creol consulted his watch. "At three thirty in the morning?"

"Yeah. I want you to get a crew over here, photographer and three reporters who will work different slants on it."

"Your placer—"

"My place."

"Now."

"Yes."

"What's the story, Chief?"

"You can headline it: ENTERSTAT CHIEF VICTIM OF WOULD-BE KILLER."

"Don't you think you ought to call the police first?"

"They can wait, George, boy. I guess I ought to get a story out of this, anyway." He hung up and returned to the Mindlink set. He went to Taguster's home and turned off the android. It was reading a book when he deactivated it. Leonard Taguster was dead.
