

Supermind
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Version 1.0

Prologue

Take a sentient being—

Even Steve Hanardy could fit that description. He was a short, stocky man, with the look about him of someone who had lived too close to the animal stage. His eyes were perpetually narrowed, as if he were peering against a bright light. His face was broad and fleshy. But he was human. He could think and act, and he was a giver and not a taker.

—Put this sentient person in a solar system surrounded by a two billion light-year ocean of virtual nothingness beyond which, apparently, is more nothingness—

Hanardy, a product of the Earth's migration to the moon and to the planets of the solar system, was born on Europa, one of the moons of Jupiter, before the educational system caught up to the colonists. He grew up an incoherent roustabout and a spacehand on the freighters and passenger liners that sped about among the immense amount of debris—from moons to habitable meteorites—that surrounded the massive Jupiter. It was a rich and ever-growing trade area, and so presently even the stolid, unimaginative Hanardy had a freighter of his own. Almost from the beginning, his most fruitful journeys were occasional trips to the meteorite where a scientist, Professor Ungarn, lived with his daughter, Patricia. For years, it was a lucrative, routine voyage, without incident.

—Confront this sentient individual with the enigma of being—

I

Indecision was dark in the man's thoughts as he walked across the spaceship control room to the cot where the woman lay so taut and so still. He bent over her. He said in his deep voice:

"We're slowing down, Merla."

No answer, no movement, not a quiver in her delicate, abnormally blanched cheeks. Her fine nostrils dilated ever so slightly with each measured breath. That was all.

The Dreegh lifted her arm, then let it go. It dropped to her lap like a piece of lifeless wood and her body remained rigid and unnatural. Carefully, he put his fingers to one eye, raised the lid, peered into it. It stared back at him, a clouded, sightless blue. He straightened. As he stood there in the silence of the hurtling ship, he seemed the embodiment of grim, icy calculation. He thought grayly: "If I revived her now, she'd have more time to attack me, and more strength. If I waited, she'd be weaker."

Slowly, he relaxed. Some of the weariness of the years he and this woman had spent together in the dark vastness of space came to shatter his abnormal logic. Bleak sympathy

touched him, and he made his decision. He prepared an injection, and fed it into her arm. His gray eyes held a steely brightness as he put his lips near the woman's ear. In a ringing resonant voice he said, "We're near a star system. There'll be blood, Merla! And life!"

The woman stirred. Momentarily, she seemed like a golden-haired doll come alive. No color touched her perfectly formed cheeks, but her eyes grew alert. She stared up at him with a hardening hostility, half questioning.

"I've been chemical," she said. Abruptly, she was no longer doll-like. Her gaze tightened on him, and some of the prettiness vanished from her face. She said, "It's damned funny, Jeel, that you're still O.K. If I thought—"

He was cold, watchful. "Forget it," he said curtly. "You're an energy waster, and you know it. Anyway, we're going to land."

The flamelike tenseness of her faded. She sat up painfully, but there was a thoughtful look on her face as she said, "I'm interested in the risks. This is not a Galactic planet, is it?"

"There are no Galactics out here. But there is an Observer. I've been catching the secret ultra signals for the last two hours"—a sardonic note entered his voice—"warning all ships to stay clear because the system isn't ready for any kind of contact with Galactic planets."

Some of the diabolic glee that was in his thoughts must have communicated through his tone. The woman stared at him, and slowly her eyes widened. She half whispered, "You mean—"

He shrugged. "The signals ought to be registering full blast now. We'll see what degree system this is. But you can start hoping hard right now."

At the control board, he cautiously manipulated the room into darkness and set the automatics. A picture took form on a screen on the opposite wall. At first there was only a point of light in the middle of a starry sky, then a planet floating brightly in the dark space, continents and oceans plainly visible. A voice came out of the screen:

"This star system contains one inhabited planet, the third from the Sun, called Earth by its dominant race. It was colonized by Galactics about seven thousand years ago in the usual manner. It is now in the third degree of development, having attained a limited form of space travel little more than a hundred years ago."

With a swift movement, the man cut off the picture and turned on the light, then looked across at the woman triumphantly. "Third degree!" he said softly, and there was an almost incredulous note in his voice. "Only third degree. Merla, do you realize what this means? This is the opportunity of the ages. I'm going to call the Dreegh tribe. If we can't get away with several tankers of blood and a whole battery of 'life,' we don't deserve to be immortal."

He turned toward the communicator; and for that exultant moment caution was dun in the back of his mind. From the corner of his eye, he saw the woman leap from the edge of the cot. Too late, he twisted aside. The movement saved him only partially. It was their cheeks not their lips that met.

Blue flame flashed from him to her. The burning energy seared his cheek to instant, bleeding rawness. He half fell to the floor. And then, furious with the intense agony, he fought free. "I'll break your bones!" he raged.

Her laughter, unlovely with her own suppressed fury, floated up at him from the floor where he had flung her. She said, "So you did have a secret supply of 'life' for yourself. You damned double-crosser!"

His mortification yielded to the realization that anger was useless. Tense with the weakness that was already a weight on his muscles, he whirled toward the control board, and began feverishly to make the adjustments that would pull the ship back into normal space and time.

The body urge grew in him swiftly, a dark, remorseless need. Twice, he reeled to the cot in a fit of nausea. But each time he fought back to the control board. He sat there finally at the controls, head drooping, conscious of the numbing tautness that crept deeper, deeper. He drove the ship too fast. It turned a blazing white when at last it struck the atmosphere of the third planet. But those hard metals held their shape; and the terrible speeds yielded to the fury of the reversers and to the pressure of air that thickened with every mile.

It was the woman who helped his faltering form into the tiny lifeboat. He lay there, gathering strength, staring eagerly down at the blazing sea of lights that was the first city he had seen on the night side of this strange world. Dully, he watched as the woman eased the small ship into the darkness behind a shed in a little back alley. And, because succor seemed suddenly near, he was able to walk beside her to the dimly lighted residential street near by.

He would have walked on blankly into the street, but the woman's fingers held him back into the shadows of the alley. "Are you mad?" she whispered. "Lie down. We'll stay here until someone comes."

The concrete was hard beneath his body, but after a moment of the painful rest it brought, he felt a fault surge of energy, and he was able to voice his bitter thought. "If you hadn't stolen most of my carefully saved 'life,' we wouldn't be in this desperate position. You well know that it's more important that I remain at full power."

In the dark beside him, the woman lay quiet for a while. Then her defiant whisper came. "We both need a change of blood, and a new charge of 'life.' Perhaps I did take a little too much out of you, but that was because I had to steal it. You wouldn't have given it to me of your own free

will, and you know it."

For a time, the futility of argument held him silent, but as the minutes dragged, that dreadful physical urgency once more tainted his thought. He said heavily:

"You realize, of course, that we've revealed our presence. We should have waited for the others to come. There's no doubt at all that our ship was spotted by the Galactic Observer in this system before we reached the outer planets. They'll have tracers on us wherever we go, and no matter where we bury our machine, they'll know its exact location. It's impossible to hide the interstellar drive energies; and since they wouldn't make the mistake of bringing such energies to a third-degree planet, we can't hope to locate them in that fashion. But we must expect an attack of some kind. I only hope one of the great Galactics doesn't take part in it."

"One of them!" Her whisper was a gasp. She controlled herself, and snapped irritably, "Don't try to scare me. You've told me time and again that—"

"All right, all right!" He spoke grudgingly, wearily.

"Time has proved that they consider us beneath their personal attention. And"—in spite of his appalling weakness, scorn came—"let any of the kind of agents they have in these lower category planets try to stop us."

"Hush!" Her whisper was tense. "Footsteps! Quick, get to your feet!"

He was aware of the shadowed form of her rising. Then her hands were tugging at him. Dizzily, he stood up.

"I don't think," he began wanly, "that I can—"

"Jeel!" Her whisper beat at him; her hands shook him. "It's a man and a woman. They're 'life,' Jeel, 'life!'"

Life!

He straightened. A spark of the unquenchable will to live that had brought him across the black miles and the blacker years burst into flame inside him. Lightly, swiftly, he fell into step beside Merla, and strode into the open. He saw the shapes of the man and the woman. In the half-night under the trees of that street, the couple came towards them, drawing aside to let them pass. First the woman came, then the man—and it was as simple as if all his strength had been there in his muscles.

He saw Merla launch herself at the man; and then he was grabbing the woman, his head bending instantly for that abnormal kiss.

Afterwards—after they had taken the blood, too—grimness came to the man, a hard fabric of thought and counter-thought, that slowly formed into purpose. He said, "We'll leave the bodies here."

Her startled whisper rose in objection, but he cut her short, harshly. "Let me handle this. These dead bodies will draw to this city news gatherers, news reporters, or whatever their breed are called on this planet. And we need such a person now. Somewhere in the reservoir of facts possessed by a person of this type must be clues, meaningless to him but by which we can discover the secret base of the Galactic Observer in this system. We must find that base, discover its strength, and destroy it if necessary when the tribe comes."

His voice took on a steely note. "And now, we've got to explore this city, find a much frequented building under which we can bury our ship, learn the language, replenish our own vital supplies, and capture that reporter."

"After I'm through with him"—his tone became silken-smooth—"he will undoubtedly provide you with that physical diversion which you apparently crave when you have been particularly chemical."

He laughed gently, as her fingers gripped his arm in the darkness, a convulsive gesture. She said, "Thank you, Jeel. You do understand, don't you?"

II

BEGIN I.Q. REHABILITATION

Behind Leigh, a door opened. Instantly the clatter of voices in the room faded to a murmur. He turned alertly, tossing his cigarette onto the marble floor and stepping on it, all in one motion.

Overhead, the lights brightened to daylight intensity. In that blaze he saw what the other eyes were already staring at: the two bodies, the man's and the woman's, as they were wheeled in. The dead couple lay side by side on the flat, gleaming top of the carrier. Their bodies were rigid, their eyes closed. They looked as dead as they were, and not at all, Leigh thought, as if they were sleeping.

He caught himself making a mental note of that fact, and felt shocked at himself. The first murders on the North American continent in twenty-seven years. And it was only another job. He was tougher than he'd ever believed.

Around him, the voices had stopped. The only sound was the hoarse breathing of the man nearest him, the scrape of his own shoes as he went forward. His movement acted like a signal on that tense group of men. There was a general pressing forward. Leigh had a moment of anxiety. And then his bigger, harder muscles brought him where he wanted to be, opposite the two heads. He leaned forward, absorbed. His fingers probed gingerly where the incisions showed on the neck of the woman. He did not look up at the attendant as he said softly:

"This is where the blood was drained?"

"Yes."

Before he could speak again, another reporter interjected,

"Any special comment from the police scientists? The murders are more than a day old now. There ought to be something."

Leigh scarcely heard. The woman's body, electrically warmed for embalming, felt eerily lifelike to his touch. It was only after a long moment that he noticed her lips were badly, almost brutally, bruised.

His gaze flicked to the man. And there were the same neck cuts, the same torn lips. He looked up. Questions quivered on his tongue. They remained unspoken as the calm-voiced attendant said:

"Normally, when the electric embalmers are applied, there is resistance from the static electricity of the body. Curiously, that resistance was not present in either body."

Somebody said, "Just what does that mean?"

"This static force is actually a form of life force, which usually trickles out of a corpse over a period of a month. We know of no way to hasten the process, but the bruises on the lips show distinct burns, which are suggestive."

There was a craning of necks, a crowding forward. Leigh allowed himself to be pushed aside. He stopped attentively as the attendant said, "Presumably, a pervert could have kissed with such violence."

"I thought," Leigh said distinctly, "there were no more perverts since Professor Ungarn persuaded the government to institute Ms brand of mechanical psychology in all schools, thus ending murder, theft, war, and all unsocial perversions." The black frock-coated attendant hesitated, then said, "A very bad one seems to have been missed." He finished, "That's all, gentlemen. No clues, no promise of an early capture, and only this final fact: We've radioed Professor Ungarn and, by great good fortune, we caught him on his way to Earth from his meteor retreat near Jupiter. He'll be landing shortly after dark, a few hours from now."

The lights dimmed. As Leigh stood frowning, watching the bodies being wheeled out, a phrase floated out of the gathering chorus of voices:

"—The kiss of death—"

"I tell you," another voice said, "the captain of this space liner swears it happened—the spaceship came past him at millions of miles an hour, and it was slowing down, get that, slowing down—two days ago."

"—The vampire easel That's what I'm going to call it—"

That's what Leigh called it, too, as he talked briefly into his wrist communicator. He finished, "I'm going to supper now, Jim."

"O.K., Bill." The local editor's voice sounded metallic. "And say, I'm supposed to commend you. Nine thousand papers took the Planetarian Service on this story, as com-

pared with about forty-seven hundred who bought from Universal, who had the second largest coverage. And I think you've got the right angle for today, too. Husband and wife, ordinary young couple, taking an evening walk. Some devil hauls up alongside of them, drains their blood into a tank, their life energy onto a wire or something—people will believe that, I guess. Anyway, you suggest it could happen to anybody; so be careful, folks. And you warn that, in these days of supra atmosphere speeds, he could be anywhere tonight for his next murder. As I said before, good stuff. That'll keep the yarn alive for tonight. Oh, by the way—"

"Shoot!"

"A kid called half an hour ago to see you. Said you expected him."

"A kid?" Leigh frowned to himself.

"Name of Patrick. High school age, about sixteen. No, come to think of it, that was only my first impression. Eighteen, maybe twenty, very bright, confident, proud."

"I remember now," said Leigh. "College student Inter-

view for a college paper. Called me up this afternoon. One of those damned persuasive talkers. Before I knew it, I was signed up for supper at Constantine's."

"That's right. I was supposed to remind you. O.K.?"

Leigh shrugged. "I promised," he said.

Actually, as he went out into the blaze of the late afternoon sunlit street, there was not an important thought in his head. Nor a premonition.

Around him, the swarm of humankind began to thicken. Vast buildings discharged the first surge of the five o'clock tidal wave. Twice, Leigh felt the tug at his arm before it struck him that someone was not just bumping into him.

He turned and stared down at a pair of dark, eager eyes set in a brown, wizened face. The little man waved a sheaf of papers at him. Leigh caught a glimpse of writing in longhand on the papers. Then the fellow was babbling. "Mr. Leigh, a hundred dollars for these . . . biggest story—"

"Oh," said Leigh. His interest collapsed. He said politely, "Take it up to the Planetarian office. Jim Brian will pay you what the story is worth."

He walked on, a vague conviction in his mind that the matter was settled. Then, abruptly, there was the tugging at his arm again. "Scoop!" the little man said. "Professor Ungarn's log, all about a spaceship that came from the stars. Devils in it who drink blood and kiss people to death!"

"See here!" Leigh began, irritated; then stopped. An ugly chill wind swept through him. He stood, swaying a little from the shock of the thought that was frozen in his brain: The newspapers with those details of "blood" and "kiss" were not on the street yet, wouldn't be for fifteen or twenty

minutes.

The man said, "Look, it's got Professor Ungarn's name printed in gold on the top of each sheet, and it's all about how he first spotted the ship eighteen light years out, and how it came all that distance in a few hours . . . and he knows where it is now and—"

Leigh's reporter's brain, that special, highly developed department, was whirling with a little swarm of thoughts that suddenly straightened into a hard, bright pattern. In that tightly built design, there was no room for any such coincidence as this man coming to him here in this crowded street.

He said, "Let me see those!" and reached as he spoke.

The papers came free from the other's fingers into his hands, but Leigh did not even glance at them. His brain was

crystal clear, his eyes cold. He snapped, "I don't know what your game is. I want to know three things, and make your answers damned fast! One: How did you pick me out, name and job and all, on a busy street that I just happened to be on accidentally?"

The little man stammered incomprehensible words. Leigh paid no attention. Remorselessly, he pounded on, "Two: Professor Ungarn is arriving from Jupiter in three hours. How do you explain your possession of papers he must have written less than two days ago?"

"Look, boss," the man chattered, "you've got me all wrong—"

"My third question," Leigh said grimly, "is how are you going to explain to the police your pre-knowledge of the details of murder?"

"Huh!" The little man's eyes were glassy, and for the first time pity came to Leigh. He said almost softly, "All right, fellah, start talking."

The words came swiftly, and at first they were simply senseless sounds. Only gradually did coherence come. "—And that's the way it was, boss. I'm standing there, and this kid comes up to me and points you out, and gives me five bucks and those papers you've got, and tells me what I'm supposed to say to you and—"

"Kid!" said Leigh; and the first shock was already in him.

"Yeah, kid about sixteen; no, more like eighteen or twenty... and he gives me the papers and—"

"This kid," said Leigh, "would you say he was of college age?"

"That's it, boss; you've got it. That's just what he was. You know him, eh? O.K., that leaves me in the clear, and I'll be going—"

"Wait!" Leigh called. But the little man seemed suddenly

to realize that he need only run. He vanished around a corner, and was gone forever.

Leigh stood, frowning, and read the thin sheaf of papers. There was nothing beyond what the little man had already conveyed by his incoherent talk. It was a vague series of entries on sheets from a loose-leaf notebook. Written down, the tale about the spaceship and its occupants lacked depth, and seemed more unconvincing each passing second. True, there was the single word "Ungarn" inscribed in gold on the top of each sheet but—

The sense of silly hoax grew so violently that Leigh thought angrily: "If that college kid really pulled a stunt like this, it'll be a short interview." The thought ended. The notion was as senseless as everything else that had happened.

And still there was no real tension in him. He was only going to a restaurant.

He turned into the splendid foyer that was the beginning of the vast and wonderful Constantine's. In the great doorway, he paused to survey the expansive glitter of tables, the hanging garden tearooms. Brilliant Constantine's, famous the world over, but not much changed from his last visit.

Leigh gave his name, and began, "A Mr. Patrick made reservations, I understand."

The girl said, "Oh, yes, Mr. Leigh. Mr. Patrick reserved Private Three. He just now phoned to say he'd be along in a few minutes. Our premier will escort you."

Leigh turned away, puzzled at the way the girl had gushed. Then a thought struck him. He turned back to the girl. "Just a minute," he said, "did you say Private Three? Who's paying for this?"

The girl said, "It was paid by phone. Forty-five hundred dollars!"

Leigh stood very still. Even after what had happened on the street, this meeting seemed scarcely more than an irritation to be gotten over with. Now, abruptly, it was become a fantastic, abnormal thing. Forty-five-hundred-dollars! Could it be some fool rich kid determined to make a strong, personal impression?

With cold logic, he rejected that solution. Humanity produced egoists on an elephantine scale, but not one who would order a feast like that to impress a reporter. His eyes narrowed on an idea. "Where's your registered phone?" he asked curtly.

A minute later, he was saying into the mouthpiece: "Is this the Amalgamated Universities Secretariat? I want to find out if there is a Mr. Patrick registered at any of your local colleges, and if there is, whether or not he has been authorized by any college paper to interview William Leigh of the Planetarian News Service. This is Leigh calling."

It took six minutes, and then the answer came, brisk,

tremendous, and final: "There are three Mr. Patricks in our seventeen units. All are at present having supper at their various official residences. There are four Miss Patricks, similarly accounted for by our staff of secretaries. None of the seven is in any way connected with a university paper. Do you wish any assistance in dealing with the impostor?"

Leigh hesitated. When he finally spoke, it was with the queer, dark realization that he was committing himself. "No," he said, and hung up.

He came out of the phone booth, shaken by his own thoughts. There was only one reason why he was in this city at this time. Murder! And he knew scarcely a soul. It seemed incredible that any stranger would want to see him for a reason not connected with his own purpose. He waited until the ugly thrill was out of his system. Then he said to the attendant, "To Private Three, please."

Presently, he was examining the luxurious suite. It turned out to be a splendidly furnished apartment with a palace-like dining salon dominating the five rooms. One entire wall of the salon was lined with decorated mirror facings, behind which glittered hundreds of bottles of liquor. The brands were strange to his inexpensive tastes, the bouquet of several that he opened heady but inviting. In the ladies' dressing room was a long showcase displaying a gleaming array of jewelry. He estimated that there was several hundred thousand dollars' worth, if it were genuine. Leigh was not impressed. For his taste, Constantine's did not supply good value for the money they charged.

"I'm glad you're physically big," said a voice behind him. "So many reporters are thin and small."

The tone was subtly different than it had been over the phone in the early afternoon. Deliberately different. The difference, he noted as he turned, was in the body, too, the difference in the shape of a woman from a boy, skillfully but not perfectly concealed under the well-tailored man's suit. Actually, of course, she was quite boyish in build, young, finely molded. And, actually, he would never have suspected if she had not allowed her voice to be so purposefully womanish. She echoed his thought coolly.

"Yes, I wanted you to know. But now, there's no use wasting words. You know as much as you need to know. Here's a gun. The spaceship is buried below this building."

Leigh made no effort to take the weapon, nor did he glance at it. The first shock was over. He seated himself on the silken chair of the vanity dresser, leaned back against the vanity dresser itself, raised his eyebrows, and said, "Con-

sider me a slow-witted newsman who's got to know what it's all about. Why so much preliminary hocus-pocus?"

He thought deliberately: He had never in his adult life allowed himself to be rushed into anything. He was not going to start now.

III

He saw after a moment that the girl was small of build. Which was odd, he decided carefully. Because his first impression had been of considerable height. Or perhaps—he evaluated the possibility unhurriedly—this second effect was a more considered result of her male disguise.

He dismissed that particular problem as temporarily insoluble. Actually, the girl's size was unimportant. She had long, black lashes and dark eyes that glowed at him from a proud, almost haughty face. And that was it. That was the essence of her personality. There was pride in the way she held her head. And in the poised easiness of every movement, in the natural shift from grace to grace as she walked slowly toward him. It was not a conscious pride, but an awareness of superiority that affected every movement of her muscles, and came vibrantly into her voice, as she said scathingly:

"I picked you because every newspaper I've read today carried your account of the murders, and because it seemed to me that somebody who already was actively working on the case would be reasonably quick at grasping essentials. As for the dramatic preparation, I considered that would be more convincing than explanation. I see I was mistaken." She was quite close to him now. She leaned over, laid her revolver on the vanity beside his arm, and finished almost indifferently, "Here's an effective weapon. It doesn't shoot bullets, but it has a trigger and you aim it like any gun. In the event you develop the beginning of courage, come down the tunnel after me as quickly as possible, but don't blunder

In on me and the people I shall be talking to. Stay hidden! Act only if I'm threatened."

Tunnel, Leigh thought stolidly, as she walked with a free, swift stride out of the room. A tunnel here in this apartment, Private Three. Either he was crazy, or she was.

He realized suddenly that he ought to be offended at the way she had spoken. He felt annoyed at her trick of leaving the room, leaving him to develop curiosity. He smiled ruefully. If it wasn't for the fact that he was a reporter, he'd show her that such a second-rate psychology didn't work on him. Still irritated, he climbed to his feet, took the gun, and then paused briefly as the odd, muffled sound of a door creakily opening came to his ears.

He found her in the bedroom to the left of the dining salon. He felt only the vaguest surprise when he saw that she had the end of a thick green rug rolled back, and that there was a hole in the floor at her feet. The square of floor that was the tunnel-covering lay back neatly, pinned to position by a complicated-looking hinge.

Leigh's gaze reached beyond the opening to the girl. In that moment, just before she became aware of him, there was a hint of uncertainty in her manner. Her right profile, half turned away from him, showed pursed lips and a strained whiteness. The impression he received was of indecision. He had the subtle sense of observing a young woman

who, briefly, had lost her superb confidence. Then she saw him, and her attitude changed.

She didn't seem to stiffen in any way. Paying no attention to him at all, she stepped to the first step of the little stairway that led down into the hole, and began to descend without a quiver of hesitation. Yet his initial conviction that she had faltered brought him forward with narrowed eyes. And, suddenly, the certainty of her brief fear made his whole madness real. He plunged forward, down the steep stairway, and pulled up only when he saw that he was actually in a smooth, dimly-lighted tunnel, and that the girl had paused, one finger to her lips.

"Sssssh!" she said. "The door of the ship may be open."

That irritated Leigh, a hard trickle of anger. Now that he had committed himself, he felt automatically the leader of this fantastic expedition. The girl's pretensions, her haughty manner merely made him impatient.

"Don't 'Ssssh!' me!" he whispered sharply. "Just give the facts and I'll do the rest"

He stopped. The meaning of the words she had spoken penetrated. His anger collapsed. "Ship!" he said incredulously. "Are you trying to tell me there's actually a spaceship buried here under Constantine's?"

The girl seemed not to hear. Leigh saw that they were at the end of a short passageway. Metal gleamed dully just ahead. Then the girl was saying, "Here's the door. Now, remember, you act as guard. Stay hidden, ready to shoot. And if I yell 'Shoot,' you shoot!"

She bent forward. There was the tiniest scarlet flash. The door opened, revealing a second door just beyond. Again that minute, intense blaze of red, and then that door also swung open.

It was swiftly done, too swiftly. Before Leigh could more than grasp that the crisis had come, the girl stepped coolly into the brilliantly lighted room beyond the second door.

Leigh poised, undecided, in the shadows, startled by the girl's action. There was deeper shadow against the metal wall toward which he pressed himself in one instinctive move. He froze there. Silently he cursed a stupid young woman who actually walked into a den of enemies of unknown numbers without an organized plan of self-protection. Or did she know how many there were? And who?

The questions disturbed him. Finally, he thought grimly: She wasn't wholly unprotected. At least he was out here with a gun, unnoticed.

He waited tensely. But the door remained open; and there was no apparent movement towards it. Slowly, Leigh let himself relax, and allowed his straining mind to absorb its first considered impressions. The portion of underground room that he could see showed one end of what seemed to be a control board, a metal wall that blinked with tiny lights.

He could see the edge of a rather sumptuous cot. The whole was actually so suggestive of a spaceship that Leigh thought, astounded: The girl had not been trying to fool him. Incredibly, here under the ground, actually under Constantine's, was a small spaceship.

That thought ended as the silence beyond the open door, the curiously long silence, was broken by a man's cool voice. "I wouldn't even try to raise that gun if I were you. The fact that you have said nothing since entering shows how enormously different we are to what you expected." He laughed gently, an unhurried, deep-throated, derisive laughter that came clearly to Leigh; then he went on,

"Merla, what would you say is the psychology behind this young lady's action? You have of course noticed that she is a young lady, and not a boy."

A richly toned woman's voice replied, "She was brought to this star system shortly after she was born, Jeel. She has none of the normal characteristics of a Klugg, but she is a Galactic, though definitely not the Galactic Observer. Probably, she's not alone. Shall I investigate?"

"No!" The man sounded indifferent. "We don't have to worry about a Klugg's assistant."

Leigh relaxed slowly, but he had a sense of emptiness. For the first time he realized how great a part the calm assurance of the young woman had played in the fabricating of his own confidence. Shattered now! Before the enormous certainties of these two, and in the face of their instant penetration of her male disguise, the effects of the girl's rather wonderful personality seemed a remote pattern, secondary, overwhelmed by a greater power.

He forced the fear from him as the girl spoke. Forced his courage to grow with each word she uttered, feeding on the confidence of her tone. It didn't matter whether she was simulating or not, because they were in this now, he as deep as she. Only the utmost boldness could hope to draw victory from the defeat that threatened them both.

With admiration, he noted the intensity of her voice as she said, "My silence had its origin in the fact that you are the first Dreeghs I have ever seen. Naturally, I studied you with some curiosity. But I can assure you I am not impressed. However, in view of your extraordinary opinions on the matter, I shall come to the point at once: I have been instructed by the Galactic Observer of this system to inform you to be gone by morning. Our sole reason for giving you that much leeway is that we don't wish to bring the truth of all this into the open. But don't count on that. Earth is on the verge of being given fourth-degree rating; and, as you probably know, in emergencies fourths are given Galactic knowledge. That emergency we will consider to have arrived tomorrow at dawn."

"Well, well"—the man was laughing gently, satirically—"a pretty speech, powerfully spoken, but meaningless for us who can analyze its pretensions, however sincere, back to the Klugg origin."

"What do you intend to do with her, Jeel?"

The man was cold, deadly, utterly sure. "There's no reason why she should escape. She has blood, and more than normal life. It will convey to the Observer with clarity our contempt for his ultimatum."

He finished with a slow, surprisingly rich laughter, "We shall now enact a simple drama. The young lady will attempt to jerk up her gun and shoot me with it. Before she can succeed, I shall have my own weapon out, and be firing. The whole thing, as she will discover, is a matter of nervous coordination. And Kluggs are chronically almost as slow-moving as human beings."

His voice stopped. His laughter trickled away. Silence.

In all his alert years, Leigh had never felt more indecisive.

His emotions said—now; surely, she'd call now. And even if she didn't, he must act on his own. Rush in! Shoot!

But his mind was cold with an awful dread. There was something about the man's voice, a surging power. Abnormal, savage strength was here. Could this really be a spaceship from the stars? His brain wouldn't follow that terrible thought. He crouched, fingering the gun she had given him, dimly conscious that it felt queer, unlike any revolver he had ever had.

The silence from the spaceship control room continued. It was the same curious silence that had followed the girl's entrance short minutes before. Only this time it was the girl who broke it, her voice faintly breathless but withal cool, vibrant, unafraid, "I'm here to warn, not to force issues. And unless you're charged with the life energy of fifteen men, I wouldn't advise you to try anything. After all, I came here knowing what you were."

"What do you think, Merla? Can we be sure she's a Klugg? Could she possibly be of the higher Lennel type?" It was the man, his tone conceding her point, but the derision was still there, the implacable purpose, the high, tremendous confidence. "There must be a few of these, also, on a Third Stage planet, well hidden, of course, and not associating with the Galactic Observer." Coldly. "Our experience has been that such other types leave us alone."

And yet, in spite of that sense of imminent violence, Leigh felt himself torn from the thought of danger. His reporter's brain twisted irresistibly to the fantastic meaning of what was taking place:

—Life energy of fifteen men—

It was all there. In a monstrous way, it all fitted. The two dead bodies he had seen drained of blood and life

energy, the repeated reference to a Galactic Observer, with whom the girl was connected. He grew aware that the woman was speaking.

"Klugg!" she said positively. "Pay no attention to her protestations, Jeel. You know I'm sensitive when it comes to women. She's lying. She's just a little fool who walked in here expecting us to be frightened of her. Destroy her at your pleasure."

"I'm not given to waiting," said the man. "So—"

There was no delaying now. Leigh leaped for the open doorway. He had a flashing glimpse of a man and woman, dressed in evening clothes, the man standing, the woman seated. He was aware of a gleaming, metallic background. The control board, part of which he had already seen, was now revealed as a massive thing of glowing instruments; and then all that was blotted out as he snapped:

"That will do. Put up your hands."

For a moment he had the impression that his entry was a surprise, and that he dominated the situation. None of the three people in the room was turned toward him. The man, Jeel, and the girl were standing facing each other. The woman, Merla, sat in a deep chair, her fine profile to him, her golden head flung back. It was she who, still without looking at him, spoke the words that ended his brief conviction of triumph. She said to the disguised girl:

"You certainly travel in low company, a stupid human being. Tell him to go away before he's damaged."

The girl said, "Leigh, I'm sorry I brought you into this. Every move you made in entering was heard, observed, and dismissed before you could even adjust your mind to the scene."

"Is his name Leigh?" said the woman sharply. "I thought I recognized him as he entered. He's very like his photograph over his newspaper column." Her voice grew strangely tense: "Jeel, a newspaper reporter!"

"We don't need him now," the man said. "We know who the Galactic Observer is."

"Eh?" said Leigh. His mind fastened hard on those amazing words. "Who? How did you find out? What—"

"The information," said the woman, and it struck him suddenly that the strange quality in her voice was eagerness, "will be of no use to you. Regardless of what happens to the girl, you're staying."

She glanced swiftly at the man, as if seeking his sanction. "Remember, Jeel, you promised."

It seemed so meaningless that Leigh had no sense of personal danger. His mind scarcely more than passed the words. His eyes concentrated tautly on a reality that had, until that moment, escaped his awareness. He said softly, "Just now you used the phrase, 'Regardless of what happens to the girl.' When I came in, you said, 'Tell him to go away before he's damaged.'" Leigh smiled grimly, "I need hardly say this is a far cry from the threat of immediate death that

hung over us a few seconds ago. And I have just now noticed the reason.

"A little while ago, I heard our pal, Jeel, dare my little girl friend here to raise her gun. I notice now that she has it raised. My entrance did have an effect." He addressed himself to the girl, "Shall we shoot—or withdraw?"

It was the man who answered. "I would advise withdrawal. I could still win, but I am not the heroic type who takes the risk of what might well be a close call." He added, in an aside to the woman: "Merla, we can always catch this man Leigh now that we know who he is."

The girl said, "You first, Mr. Leigh." And Leigh did not stop to argue.

Metal doors clanged behind him as he charged along the runnel. After a moment, he was aware of the girl running lightly beside him.

The strangely unreal, the unbelievably murderous little drama was over, finished as fantastically as it had begun.

IV

Outside Constantine's a gray light gathered around them. It was a twilight side street, and people hurried past them with the strange, anxious look of the late for supper. Night was falling. Leigh stared at his companion. In the dimness of the deep dusk, she seemed all boy, slightly, lithely built,

striding along boldly. He laughed a little, huskily, then more grimly.

"Just what was all that?" he said. "Did we escape by the skin of our teeth? Or did we win? What made you think you could act like God, and give those tough eggs twelve hours to get out of the solar system?"

The girl was silent after he had spoken. She walked just ahead of him, head bent into the gloom. Abruptly, she turned. She said, "I hope you will have enough sense to refrain from telling what you've just seen and heard."

Leigh said, "This is the biggest story since—"

The girl's voice was pitying. "You're not going to print a word of it because in about ten seconds you'll see that no one in the world would believe any of it."

In the darkness, Leigh smiled tightly. "The mechanical psychologist will verify every syllable."

"I came prepared for that, too!" said the vibrant voice. Her hand swung up toward his face. Too late, he jerked back.

Light flared in his eyes, a dazzling, blinding force that exploded into his sensitive optic nerves with all the agonizing power of intolerable brightness. Leigh cursed aloud, wildly, and snatched at his tormentor. His right hand grazed a shoulder. He lashed out violently with his left, and tantalizingly caught only the edge of a sleeve that instantly jerked

away.

"You little devil!" he raged. "You've blinded me."

"You'll be all right," came the cool answer. "But you'll find that the mechanical psychologist will analyze anything you say as pure imagination. In view of your threat to publish, I had to do that. Now, give me my gun."

The first glimmer of sight was returning. Leigh could see her body, a dim shape in the night. In spite of the continuing pain, he smiled grimly. His voice was soft as he said, "I've just now remembered you said this gun didn't shoot bullets. Even the feel of it suggests that it'll make an interesting proof of anything I say. So—"

His smile faded abruptly. For the girl stepped forward. The metal that jabbed into his ribs was so hardly thrust it made him grunt.

"Give me that gun!"

"Like fun I will," Leigh snapped. "You ungrateful little ruffian, how dare you treat me so shoddily after I saved your life? I ought to knock you one right on the jaw."

He stopped. With staggering suddenness the hard realization struck that she meant it. This was no girl raised in a refined school, who wouldn't dare to shoot, but a cold-blooded young creature who had already proved her determination against a deadlier opponent than he himself.

He had never had any notions about the superiority of man over woman, and he felt none now. Hastily, he handed the weapon over. The girl took it, and said coldly, "You seem to be laboring under the illusion that your entry into the spaceship enabled me to raise my weapon. You're quite mistaken. What you did do was to provide me with the opportunity to let them think that that was the situation, and that they dominated it. But I assure you, that is the extent of your assistance. It was almost valueless."

Leigh laughed out loud, a pitying, ridiculing laugh.

"In my admittedly short life," he said, "I've learned to recognize a quality of personality and magnetism in human beings. You've got it, a lot of it, but not a fraction of what either of those two had, particularly the man. He was terrible. He was the most abnormally magnetic human being I've ever run across. Lady, I can only guess what all this is about, but I'd advise you"—Leigh paused, then finished slashingly—"you and all the other Kluggs to stay away from that couple. Personally, I'm going to get the police in on this, and there's going to be a raid on Private Three. I didn't like that odd threat that they could capture me at any time. Why me?"

He broke off hastily, "Hey, where are you going? I want to know your name. I want to know what made you think you could order those two around. Who did you think you were?"

He said no more. His whole attention was concentrated

on running. He could see her for a moment, a hazy, boyish figure against a dim corner light. Then she was around the corner. Leigh thought: "She's my only point of contact with all this. If she gets away—"

Sweating, he rounded the corner; and at first the street seemed dark and empty of life. Then he saw the car. A normal-looking, high-hooded coupe, long, low-built, that began to move forward noiselessly and quite naturally. It became unnatural. It lifted. Amazingly, it lifted from the ground. He had a swift glimpse of white rubber wheels folding out of sight. Streamlined, almost cigar-shaped now, the spaceship that had been a car darted at a steep angle into the sky.

Swiftly, it was gone.

Above Leigh the gathering night towered, a strange, bright blue. In spite of the brilliant lights of the city glaring into the sky, one or two stars showed. He stared up at them, empty inside, thinking: "It's like a dream. Those—Dreeghs—coming out of space—bloodsuckers, vampires."

Suddenly hungry, he bought a chocolate bar from a sidewalk stand and stood munching it. He began to feel better. He walked over to a near-by wall socket, and plugged in his wrist radio.

"Jim," he said, "I've got some stuff I need help on; not for publication yet, but I'd like to talk to one of those science teams where all the disciplines are represented. Think you could get the office to authorize the expense?"

"This is related to the vampire story?"

"Yes."

"In the past we've used a Research Alpha team. Why don't you head over there; and I'll get the authorization for you while you're en route,"

"Good."

His tone was brisk. His sense of inadequacy waned. Reporter Leigh was himself again.

V

Even optimum detector equipment has its limitations. The Dreegh version pointed accurately toward William Leigh. Its fix on him was unshakably steady.

But it was like a compass. True, a compass needle indicates the direction of the magnetic north pole. But it says nothing about what that pole is doing, or what else is there, or who is talking to whom on the surface, or if there are buildings nearby.

For that—to determine what the reporter was doing—they had to sneak up into the night sky, and watch as the indicator system presently pointed straight down at a com-

plex of glass and steel buildings, which identified themselves with a sign in lights:

RESEARCH ALPHA

Scientific Studies

Jeel, naturally, tried to ride a spy ray down on the pointer's fix; but it was bounced back at him by a crude screen. Crude in the sense that the energies involved primarily distorted the incoming wave; and what came back was gibberish. Which was crude all right, but good enough.

Jeel said irritably, "Looks like he's gone for expert advice. So rather than go in and tangle with that field, we'll wait until he comes out, and follow him home."

The woman said nothing. She recognized that this low-level culture nevertheless had atomic energy, and vast, established bases of energy, which a single spaceship, despite its superior equipment, simply did not confront directly.

So she waited with her companion, patiently.

". . . William Leigh," said the report on Hammond's desk, "currently reporter for Planetarian Service, was born 28 years ago in middle western North America to Cynthia Coster Leesoff and Jan Leesoff, respectively teacher and farmer. Family legally changed name to Leigh when young William was seven. Was poor student in lower schools, fair student in high school, and made it through college, receiving his B.A. from Western State of Agua with an average of B+.

"After graduation began journalistic career as a reporter with International News Survey Syndicate. Had average career until, at age 25, was seriously injured in the India riots of '57. Hospitalized, expected to die, he made an almost miraculous recovery. At which time he began a more dynamic career, indicating that the body-mind was unusually overstimulated by the accident.

"His I.Q. in college tests was never higher than 123—which is surely a minimum requirement for college as well as for journalism as a profession. Though no subsequent tests were made, we may conjecture from his career since then—so much more dynamic and intelligent—that he now has an I.Q. of at least 135 or 140—"

Hammond, a calm-faced, handsome man of about forty, thoughtfully studied the photograph of William Leigh that

was attached to the report. Finally, he glanced up at Helen Wendell. "Unusually good-looking man," he said. "Anything on his female associations?"

"He was engaged to be married at the time of his accident," the woman replied. "After coming out of the hospital, broke that engagement, and has had a number of casual associations since then. Would you like to hear the tape of his meeting with our science team?"

The Executive Director and First Vice President of Research Alpha shook his head. "Summarize it for me."

The woman, who looked about thirty, said, "I brought this matter to your personal attention because Leigh made what you and I are in a position to know is an accurate analysis of the vampires as being from space, and of Professor Ungarn and his daughter as also being extraterrestrials. Our earth scientists team naturally listened to his account sceptically and suggested that one of our own sealed psychology machines be sent over to his hotel room. This is being done, and the machine will do its work on him tonight while he sleeps."

"Do you think it will verify his story?"

"I doubt it. I think the girl—Patricia Ungarn—successfully erased the evidence."

After a brief silence, the woman went on, "Do you think I should call one of the warden ships to come to the solar system?"

Hammond shook his head. "The reason I was silent a moment ago is because I was considering what I should and should not reveal to you. I'm a little startled to realize how much time has gone by since Sloane spoke to me about this matter—back in '57." Sloane was president of Research Alpha. "He had had a communication that a basic solution would occur in three years."

Helen's eyes widened. "Are you using basic in a precise sense?"

Hammond nodded, but said nothing.

"Oh, my God!" said the woman, awed. "Then this reporter—William Leigh—has intruded where he is utterly unqualified."

That brought a faint smile. "Well, my dear, when you put it like that, I can only say, 'Who here on earth is qualified?'"

"I suppose you're right."

"We'll have to be extra careful," said the man. "Those

Dreeghs are, on one level, no smarter than some of the extraterrestrials—like ourselves, for example—who have been here quite a while. But they are the only immortals in the known universe in the below-1000 I.Q. level. That makes them sharper, in the sense that they have had so incredibly much experience." His smile broadened. "So I've already had two calls requesting sanctuary, believe it or not. It looks like we'll have the interstellar community living behind the screens here at Alpha until that basic solution is achieved."

"No attempt to influence?"

"None."

"What about the human beings William Leigh contacted in the organization?"

"Get me a list."

The list was presently laid on his desk. It consisted of three names: Dr. Henry Gloge, Barbara Ellington, and Vince Strather. "Hmm," said Hammond, "Gloge, eh. Who are the others?"

"Barbara is a typist in the stenography pool downstairs, and Vince works as a second class photo technician in one of the labs."

Hammond nodded decisively. "Figure out a mission for each of them that'll take them to one of our European or Asian facilities during the crisis."

"I suppose"—doubtfully—"I could say to Barbara and Vince that they're being considered for promotion."

"That's as good as anything. Have them out of the country by midnight, if possible."

VI

The little glistening balls of the mechanical psychologist whirred faster and faster. They became a single, glowing circle in the darkness. And not till then did the first, delicious whiff of psycho-gas touch his nostrils. He felt himself drifting, slipping. A voice began to speak in the dim distance, so far

away that not a word came through. There was only the sound, the faint, curious sound, and the feeling, stronger every instant, that he would soon be able to hear the fascinating things it seemed to be saying.

The longing to hear, to become a part of the swelling, murmuring sound tugged at him, in little rhythmical, wave-like surges. And still the promise of meaning was unfulfilled. Private thoughts ended utterly. Only the mindless chant remained and the pleasing gas holding him so close to sleep, its flow nevertheless so delicately adjusted that his mind hovered minute after minute on the ultimate abyss of consciousness. He lay, finally, still partially awake, but even the voice was merging now into blackness. It clung for a while, a gentle, friendly, melodious sound in the remote background of his brain, becoming more remote with each passing instant. He slept, a deep, hypnotic sleep, as the machine purred on.

When Leigh opened his eyes, the bedroom was dark except for the floor lamp beside a corner chair. It illuminated the darkly dressed woman who sat there, all except her face, which was in shadow above the circle of light. He must have moved, for the shadowed head suddenly looked up from some sheets of typewriter-size paper. The voice of Merla, the Dreegh, said:

"The girl did a very good job of erasing your subconscious memories. There's only one possible clue to her identity and—"

Her words went on, but his brain jangled them to senselessness in that first shock of recognition. It was too much, too much fear in too short a time. For a moment, he was

like a child, and strange, cunning, intense thoughts of escape came. If he could slide to the side of the bed, away from where she was sitting, and run for the bathroom door—

"Surely, Mr. Leigh," the woman's voice reached toward him, "you know better than to try anything foolish. And, surely, if I had intended to kill you, I would have done it much more easily while you were asleep."

Leigh lay still, gathering his thoughts and licking dry lips. Her words were not reassuring. "What—do—you—want?" he managed finally.

"Information!" Laconically. "What was that girl?"

"I don't know." He stared into the half-gloom, where her face was. His eyes were more accustomed to the light now, and he could catch the faint, golden glint of her hair.

"I thought—you knew." He went on more swiftly, "I thought you knew the Galactic Observer; and that implied the girl could be identified any time."

He had the impression she was smiling. She said, "Our statement to that effect was designed to throw both you and the girl off guard, and constituted the partial victory we snatched from what had become an impossible situation."

The body sickness was still upon Leigh. But the desperate fear that had produced it faded before the implications of her confession of weakness. These Dreeghs were not so superhuman as he had thought. Relief was followed by caution. Careful, he warned himself, it wouldn't be wise to underestimate. But he couldn't help saying:

"I'd like to point out that even your so-called snatching of victory from defeat was not so well done. Your husband's - statement that you could pick me up any time could easily have spoiled the picking."

The woman's voice was faintly contemptuous. "If you knew anything of psychology, you would realize that the vague phrasing of the threat actually lulled you. Certainly, you failed to take even minimum precautions. And the girl has made no effort to protect you."

The suggestion of deliberately subtle tactics brought to Leigh a twinge of returning alarm. Deep inside him he thought: What ending did the Dreegh woman plan for this strange meeting?

"You realize, of course," the Dreegh said softly, "that you will either be of value to us alive—or dead. There are no easy alternatives. I would advise alertness and sincerity in your cooperation. You are in this affair without any limitations."

So that was the idea. A thin bead of perspiration trickled down Leigh's cheek. His fingers trembled as he reached for a cigarette on the table beside the bed. He was shakily lighting the cigarette when his gaze fastened on the window. That brought a faint shock. For it was raining, a furious rain that ham-

mered soundlessly against the noiseproof glass.

He pictured the bleak, empty streets, their brilliance dulled by the black, rain-filled night. Deserted streets—deserted Leigh. For he was deserted here. All the friends he had, scattered over the great reaches of the earth, couldn't add one ounce of strength, or bring one real ray of hope to him in this darkened room, against this woman who sat so calmly under the light, studying him from shadowed eyes.

With an effort, Leigh steadied himself. He said, "I gather that's my psychograph report you have in your hand. What does it say?"

"Very disappointing." Her voice seemed far away. "There's a warning in it about your diet. It seems your meals are irregular."

She was playing with him. The attempt at humor made her seem more inhuman, not less. For, somehow, the words clashed unbearably with the reality of her; the dark immensity of space across which she had come, the unnatural lusts that had brought her and the man to unprotected Earth. Leigh shivered. Then he thought fiercely, "Damn it, I'm scaring myself. So long as she stays in her chair, she can't pull the vampire on me."

Aloud he said, "If there's nothing in the psychograph, then I'm afraid I can't help you. You might as well leave. Your presence isn't adding to my happiness."

In a dim way, he hoped she'd laugh. But she didn't. She sat there, her eyes glinting dully out of the gloom. At last she said, "We'll go through this report together. I think we can safely omit the references to your health as being irrelevant. But there are a number of factors that I want developed. Who is Professor Ungarn?"

"A scientist." Leigh spoke frankly. "He invented this system of mechanical hypnosis, and he was called in when the dead bodies were found because the killings seemed to have been done by perverts."

"Have you any knowledge of his physical appearance?"

"I've never seen him," Leigh said more slowly. "He never gives interviews and his photograph is not available now. I've heard stories, but—" He hesitated. He was giving her general knowledge only, but even that could be dangerous.

"These stories," the woman said, "do they give the impression that he's a man of inordinate magnetic force, but with lines of mental suffering etched in his face, and a sort of resignation?"

"Resignation to what?" Leigh exclaimed sharply. "I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about. I've only seen photographs, and they show a fine, rather sensitive, tired face."

She said, "There would be more information in any library?"

"Or in the Planetarian Service morgue," Leigh said, and could have bitten off his tongue for that bit of gratuitous information.

"Morgue?" said the woman.

Leigh explained, but his voice was trembling with self-rage. For seconds now the feeling had been growing on him: Was it possible this devilish woman was on the right track? And getting damaging answers out of him because he dared not stop and organize for lying. He had an incongruous sense of the unfairness of the abnormally swift way she had solved the Observer's identity. Because, damn it, it could be Professor Ungarn.

Ungarn was a mysterious figure, a scientist, great inventor in a dozen highly complicated, widely separated fields. He had a home near one of Jupiter's moons, and he had a daughter named Patricia. Good heavens, Patrick-Patricia!

His shaky stream of thoughts ended as the woman said, "Can you have your office send the information to your recorder here?"

"Y-yes." His reluctance was so obvious that the woman bent into the light. For a moment, her golden hair glittered; her pale blue eyes glowed at him in a strangely humorless, satanic amusement.

"Ah!" she said. "You think so, too?"

She laughed, an odd, musical laugh, odd in that it was at once so curt and so pleasant. The laugh ended abruptly, unnaturally, on a high note. And then-although he had not seen her move-there was a metal thing in her hand, pointing at him. Her voice came at him with a brittle, jarring command, "You will climb out of the bed, operate the recorder, and naturally you will do nothing and say nothing but what is necessary."

Leigh moved slowly to obey the woman's command. As he stood up, the room swayed dizzily. He thought sickly: If only he could faint. But he recognized that that was beyond the power of his tough body. It was dismay that made him so shivery. Annoyingly, he grew steadier even as he walked to the recorder. For the first time in his life, he hated the resilience of his strength. He set the machine, and said:

"This is William Leigh. Give me all the dope you've got on Professor Garrett Ungarn."

There was a pause, then a brisk voice said, "You've got it. Sign the form."

Leigh signed, and watched the signature dissolve into the machine. It was then, as he was straightening, that the woman said, "Shall I read it here, Jeel, or shall we take the machine with us?"

Leigh blinked, and whirled; and then, very carefully,

he sat down on the bed. The Dreegh, Jeel, was leaning idly against the jamb of the bathroom door, a dark, malignantly handsome man, with a faint, unpleasant smile on his lips. Behind him—incredibly, behind him, through the open bathroom door, was, not the gleaming bath, but another door; and beyond that door still another door, and beyond that the control room of the Dreegh spaceship!

There it was, exactly as he had seen it in the solid ground under Constantine's. He had the same partial view of the sumptuous cot, the imposing section of instrument board, the tastefully padded floor. In his bathroom!

Leigh thought insanely: "I keep my spaceship in my bathroom, of course."

It was the Dreegh's voice that drew his brain from its dizzy contemplation. The Dreegh said, "I think we'd better leave. I'm having difficulty holding the ship on the alternation of space-time planes. Bring the man and the machine and—"

Leigh didn't hear the last word. He jerked his mind all the way out of the bathroom. "You're-taking-me?"

"Why, of course." It was the woman who spoke. "You've been promised to me, and besides, we'll need your help in finding Ungarn's meteor."

Leigh sat quiet, and without plans of his own. He saw after a moment that the rain was still beating against the glass, great sparkling drops that washed murkily down the broad panes. And he saw that the night was dark. Dark night, dark rain, dark destiny—they fitted his dark, grim thoughts. With an effort he forced his body and his mind to relax. When at last he faced his alien captors again, Reporter Leigh was cold with acceptance of his fate, and ready to fight for his life.

"I can't think of a single reason," he said, "why I should go with you. And if you think I'm going to help you destroy the Observer, you're crazy."

The woman said matter-of-factly, "There was a passing reference in your psychograph to a Mrs. Jan Leigh, who lives in a village called Relton, on the Pacific coast. We could be there in half an hour, your mother and her home de-

stroyed within a minute after that. Or, perhaps, we could add her blood to our reserves."

"She would be too old," the man said in a chill tone. "We do not want the blood of old people."

It was the icy objection that brought horror to Leigh. He had a mental picture of a silent, immensely swift ship sweeping out of the eastern night, over the peaceful hamlet. The destroying energy would reach down, and the ship would sweep on over the long, dark waters to the west.

The deadly picture faded. The woman was saying, gently, "Jeel and I have evolved an interesting little system of interviewing human beings of the lower order. For some

reason, he frightens people merely by his presence. Similarly, people develop an unnatural fear of me when they see me clearly in a strong light. So we have always tried to arrange our meetings with human beings with me sitting in semidarkness and Jeel in the background. It has proved very effective."

She stood up, a tall, lithely built, shadowed figure in a rather tight-fitting skirt and a dark blouse. She finished, "But now, shall we go? You bring the machine, Mr. Leigh."

"I'll take it," said the Dreegh.

Leigh glanced sharply at the lean, sinewed face of the terrible man, startled at the instant, accurate suspicion of his own desperate intention.

The Dreegh loomed over the small machine, where it stood on a corner desk. "How does it work?" he asked.

Leigh stepped forward. There was still a chance that he could manage this without additional danger to anyone. Not that it would be more than a vexation, unless, as their suggestion about finding the Ungarn meteor indicated, they headed straight out to space. If they did that, then he might actually delay them. He said, "Press the key marked 'Titles,' and the machine will type all the main headings."

"That sounds reasonable." The long, grim-faced head nodded. The Dreegh reached forward, pressed the button. The recorder hummed softly, and a section of it lit up, showing typed lines under a transparent covering. There were several headings.

"'-His Meteor Home,'" read the Dreegh. "That's what I want. What is the next step?"

"Press the key marked 'Subheads.'"

Leigh was suddenly shaky. He groaned inwardly. Was it possible this creature-man was going to obtain the informa-

tion he wanted? Certainly, such a tremendous intelligence would not easily be led away from logical sequence. He forced himself to grimness. He'd have to take a chance.

"The subhead I desire," said the Dreegh, "is marked 'Location.' And there is a number, one, in front of it. What next?"

"Press Key No. 1," Leigh said, "then press the key lettered 'General Release.'"

The moment he had spoken, he grew taut. If this worked, and there was no reason why it shouldn't, Key No. 1 would impart all the information under that heading. And surely the man would not want more until later. After all, this was only a test. They were in a hurry. And later, when the Dreegh discovered that the "General Release" key had dissolved all the other information, it would be too late.

The thought dimmed. Leigh started. The Dreegh was staring at him bleakly. The man said, "Your voice has been

like an organ; each word uttered full of subtle shadings that mean much to the sensitive ear. Accordingly—a ferocious smile twisted the lean face—"I shall press Key No. 1. But not 'General Release.' And as soon as I've examined the little story on the recorder, I shall attend to you for that attempted trick. The sentence is—death."

"Jeel!"

"Death!" reiterated the man flatly. And the woman was silent.

There was silence, then, except for the subdued humming of the recorder. Leigh's mind was almost without thought. He felt fleshless, and only gradually did he realize that he was waiting here on the brink of a night darker than the black wastes of space from which these monster humans had come.

He felt a kinship with the black rain that poured with such solid, noiseless power against the glinting panes. His aimless gaze returned to the recorder machine, and to the grim man who stood so thoughtfully staring down at the words it was unfolding. His thought quickened. And, suddenly, there was purpose in him.

If death was inescapable, at least he could try again, somehow, to knock down that "General Release" key. He stared at the key, measuring the distance. Three feet, he thought, perhaps four. If he should fling himself toward it, how could even a Dreegh prevent the dead weight of his body and his extended fingers from accomplishing such a

simple mission? After all, his sudden action had once before frustrated the Dreeghs by allowing the Ungarn girl—in spite of her denials—to get her gun into position for firing.

He saw that the Dreegh was turning away from the machine. The man pursed his lips, but it was the woman, Merla, who spoke from where she stood in the gloom:

"Well?"

The man frowned. "The exact location is nowhere on record. Apparently, there has been no development of meteors in this system. I suspected as much. After all, space travel has only existed a hundred years; and the new planets and the moons of Jupiter have absorbed all the energies of exploring, exploiting man."

"I could have told you that," said Leigh.

If he could move a little to one side of the recorder, so that the Dreegh would have to do more than simply put his arm out—

The man was saying, "There is, however, a reference to some man who transports food and merchandise from the moon Europa to the Ungarns. We will ... er ... persuade this man to show us the way."

"One of these days," said Leigh, "you're going to discover that all human beings cannot be persuaded. What pressure

are you going to put on this chap? Suppose he hasn't got a mother."

"He has—life!" said the woman softly.

"One look at you," Leigh snapped, "and he'd know that he'd lose that, anyway."

As he spoke, he stepped to the left, one short step. He had an impulse to say something, anything to cover the action. But his voice had betrayed him once. And actually, it might already have done so again. The cold face of the man was almost too enigmatic.

"We could," said the woman, "use William Leigh to persuade him."

The words were softly spoken, but they shocked Leigh. For they offered a distorted hope. And that shattered his will to action. His purpose faded into remoteness. He fought to draw that hard determination back into his consciousness. He concentrated his gaze on the recorder machine, but the woman was speaking again; and his mind wouldn't hold anything except the urgent meaning of her words:

"He is too valuable a slave to destroy. We can always take his blood and energy, but now we must send him to

Europa, there to find the freighter pilot of the Ungarns, and actually accompany him to the Ungarn meteor. If he could investigate the interior, our attack might conceivably be simplified, and there is just a possibility that there might be new weapons, of which we should be informed. We must not underestimate the science of the great Galactics. Naturally, before we allowed Leigh his freedom, we would do a little tampering with his mind, and so blot out from his conscious mind all that has happened in this hotel room. The identification of Professor Ungarn as the Galactic Observer we would make plausible for Leigh by a little rewriting of his psychograph report; and tomorrow he will awaken in his bed with a new purpose, based on some simple human impulse such as love of the girl."

The very fact that the Dreegh, Jeel, was allowing her to go on, brought the first, faint color to Leigh's cheeks, a thin flush at the enormous series of betrayals she was expecting of him. Nevertheless, so weak was his resistance to the idea of continued life, that he could only snap: "If you think I'm going to fall in love with a dame who's got twice my I.Q., you're—"

The woman cut him off. "Shut up, you fool! Can't you see I've saved your life?"

The man was cold, ice-cold. "Yes, we shall use him, not because he is essential, but because we have time to search for easier victories. The first members of the Dreegh tribe will not arrive for a month and a half, and it will take Mr. Leigh a month of that to get to the moon, Europa, by one of Earth's primitive passenger liners. Fortunately, the nearest Galactic military base is well over three months distant —by Galactic ship speeds.

"Finally"—with a disconcerting, tigerish swiftness the Dreegh whirled full upon Leigh, eyes that were like pools of black fire measured his own startled stare—"as a reminder to your subconscious of the error of trickery, and as complete punishment for past and—intended—offenses, this!"

Despairingly, Leigh twisted away from the metal that glowed at him. His muscles tried horribly to carry out the purpose that had been working to a crisis inside him. He lunged for the recorder—but something caught his body. Something not physical.

The pain that struck him seemed mortal. There was no visible flame of energy, only that glow at the metal source.

But his nerves writhed; enormous forces contorted his throat muscles; froze the scream that quivered there. His whole being welcomed the blackness that mercifully blotted out the hellish pain.

VII

As the scene faded, Hammond turned away from the viewplate and smiled at Helen Wendell. "So that," he said, "is the notorious Dreegh vampire. Life has its moments, doesn't it?"

The woman nodded soberly. "I've known of them all my life, and here on this remote planet we finally get to see one. Or rather—" She shuddered in a genteel way—"two." She added, "That woman was absolutely awful." She grew thoughtful. "Do you think they suspected that we were using the mechanical psychologist as an intermediary for observing them?"

"Jeel looked it over for any threat," was the reply. "When there was none of that, I'm sure he didn't care about anything else."

He had been sitting on a couch in front of the viewing instrument. Now he rose and walked over to his desk; sat down behind it. His companion followed. She was a lissome woman, quick and graceful, and she settled into the chair across from him with easy strength.

"What do we do now?" she asked.

"Still nothing. Don't forget, we're watching a police operation which one of the Great Ones initiated all of three earth years ago." He seemed strangely stimulated by the thought. "Do you realize," he asked, "that we may actually have the tremendous experience of being privy to an entire operation by one of these super-beings? This could be the educational opportunity of our lifetime."

"Hmmm. "

The strong, handsome face looked bemused. "It's interesting that a Great Galactic finally noticed the Dreegh situation

at all. There's so much murder and war among the thou-

sands of lower races in this part of the universe that, from above, it must look like almost featureless carnage."

Helen Wendell confessed, "I have to admit that sometimes it also looks that way to me."

He frowned. "One thing, though, the fact that the president of Research Alpha was advised in advance suggests to me that we will eventually be directly involved."

"Oh, my God!" said the woman.

"So tell me: where are the three people you listed for me last evening? Barbara Ellington, Vince Strather, and Dr. Gloge. Were they successfully transported?"

"Getting Dr. Gloge off was not easy. He has the Omega Project, you know. But apparently there is an Asian chameleon that he's been wanting to test. So he's going to our Tokyo facility to observe the chameleon in a simulation of its natural habitat."

The woman continued, "The young man, Vince, was not too eager to go out of the country. He's an angry type; and, though he didn't say it in so many words, I gather he suspects somebody in his department is trying to maneuver him out of there. So—"faint smile—"with him it was not the promise of a new job, but reassurance that he would get his old one back."

"I see you're as skillful as ever," said the man.

"Anyway," said the woman, "they're at our British facility. I must say I can imagine the possibility of a super-scientist such as Dr. Gloge being of some vague interest to the Dreeghs, but"—she shrugged dismissingly—"these two young people, no."

Hammond was grim. "My dear, I'm taking the attitude that there are no coincidences in this affair. So the deepening role of William Leigh, a reporter, is significant. And his accidental—as you termed it—contacting of three employees of Research Alpha needs to be noted."

"What about the science team that questioned Leigh?"

"I've considered that. They were assigned objectively at random. So it's not the same."

"I have their names, in case you ever want them."

"Good." He stood up, smiling. "Now, let's go back to bed."

They both left the room.

VIII

On the third day Europa began to give up some of the sky to the vast mass of Jupiter behind it. The engines that so imperfectly transformed magnetic attraction to a half-hearted repulsion functioned more and more smoothly as the complication of gravitic pull and counterpull yielded to

distance. The old, slow, small freighter scurried on into the immense, enveloping night; and the days dragged into weeks, the weeks crawled their drab course toward the full month. On the thirty-seventh day, the sense of slowing up was so distinct that Leigh crept dully out of his bunk, and croaked, "How much farther?"

The stolid-faced space tracker grinned at him. The man's name was Hanardy, and he said now matter-of-factly, "We're just pulling in. See that spot of light over to the left? It's moving this way."

He ended with a rough sympathy. "Been a tough trip, eh? Tougher'n you figgered when you offered to write up my little route for your big syndicate."

Leigh scarcely heard. He was clawing at the porthole, straining to penetrate the blackness. At first his eyes kept blinking compulsively, and nothing came. Stars were out there, but it was long seconds before his bleary gaze made out moving lights. He counted them with sluggish puzzlement. "One, two, three-seven-" he counted. "And all traveling together."

"What's that?" Hanardy bent beside him. "Seven?"

There was a brief silence between them as the lights grew visibly dim with distance and winked out.

"Too bad," Leigh ventured, "that Jupiter's behind us. They mightn't fade out like that in silhouette. Which one was Ungarn's meteorite?"

Hanardy stood up, his heavy face dark with frown. He said slowly, "Those were ships. I never saw ships go so fast before. They were out of sight in less than a minute."

The frown faded from his stolid face. He shrugged. "Some of those new police ships, I guess. And we must have seen them from a funny angle for them to disappear so fast."

Leigh half sat, half knelt, frozen into immobility. And after that one swift glance at the pilot's rough face, he averted his own. For a moment, the black fear was in him that his wild thoughts would blaze from his eyes.

Dreeghs! Two and a half months had wound their slow course since the murders. More than a month to get from Earth to Europa, and now this miserable, lonely journey with Hanardy, the man who trucked for the Ungarns. Every day of that time he had known with inner certainty that the danger had not basically altered but had assumed a more hidden form. The one fortunate reality in the whole affair was that he had wakened on the morning after the mechanical psychologist test from a dreamless sleep; and there in the psychograph report was the identification of Ungarn as the Observer, and the statement, borne out by an all too familiar emotional tension, that he was in love with the girl.

Now this! His mind flared. Dreeghs in seven ships. That meant the first had been reinforced by many. And perhaps

the seven were only a reconnaissance group, withdrawing at Hanardy's approach. Or perhaps those fantastic murderers had already attacked the Observer's base. Perhaps the girl was dead.

He watched uneasily as the Ungarn meteorite made a dark, glinting path in the blackness to one side. The two objects, the ship and the bleak, rough-shaped mass of metallic stone drew together in the night, the ship slightly behind. A great steel door slid open in the rock. Skillfully, the ship glided into the chasm. There was a noisy clicking. Hanardy came out of the control room, his face dark with puzzlement.

"Those damn ships are out there again," he said. "I've closed the big steel locks, but I'd better tell the professor and—"

Crash! The world jiggled. The floor came up and hit Leigh with a violent blow. He lay there, cold in spite of the thoughts that burned at fire heat in his mind. For some reason, the vampires had waited until the freighter was inside. Then instantly, ferociously, attacked. In packs!

"Hanardy!" A vibrant girl's voice blared from one of the loud-speakers.

The pilot sat up shakily on the floor, where he had fallen, near Leigh. "Yes, Miss Patricia."

"You dared to bring a stranger with you!"

"It's only a reporter, miss. He's writing up my route for me."

"You conceited fool! That's William Leigh. He's a hypnotized spy of those devils who are attacking us. Bring him immediately to my apartment. He must be killed at once."

"Huh!" Leigh began, and then stiffened. The pilot was staring at him from narrowing eyes, all the friendliness gone from his rough, heavy face. Leigh laughed curtly. "Don't you be a fool too, Hanardy. I made the mistake once of saving that young lady's life, and she's -hated me ever since."

The heavy face scowled at him. "So you knew her before, eh. You didn't tell me that. You'd better come along before I sock you one."

Awkwardly, he drew the gun from his side holster and pointed its ugly snout at Leigh.

"Get along!" he said. . . .

Hanardy reached toward an arrangement of tiny lights beside the paneled door of Patricia Ungarn's apartment—and Leigh made a single leap and struck one blow. He caught the short, heavy body as it fell, grabbed at the sagging gun, lowered the dead weight to the floor of the corridor, and then stood like a great animal, straining for sound.

Silence! He studied the blond panels of the doorway to the apartment, as if by sheer, savage intentness he would penetrate their golden, beautifully grained opaqueness. It was the silence that struck him again, presently, the emptiness of the long, tunnel-like corridors. He thought, amazed: Was it possible father and daughter actually lived here without companions or servants or any human association? And that they had some idea that they could withstand the attack of the mighty and terrible Dreeghs?

They had a lot of power here, of course. The earth-like gravity alone would take stupendous energy to maintain. But now, he'd better be on his way before the girl grew impatient and came out with one of her weapons. What he must do was quite simple, unconnected with any nonsense of spying, hypnotic or otherwise. He must find the combination automobile-spaceship in which—Mr. Patrick—had escaped him that night after they left Constantine's. And

with that tiny ship, he must try to slip out of Ungarn's meteorite, sneak through the Dreegh line, and so head back for Earth.

What a fool he'd been, a mediocre human being, mixing with such people. The world was full of normal girls of his own general I.Q. level. Why wasn't he safely married to one of them? Still thinking about that, he began laboriously to drag Hanardy along the smooth flooring. Halfway to the nearest corner, the man stirred. Without hesitation, Leigh struck him hard with the revolver butt. This was no time for squeamishness.

The pilot went limp again, and the rest was simple. He deserted the body as soon as he had pulled it out of sight around the corner, and raced along the hallway, trying doors. The first four wouldn't open. The fifth was also locked, but this time Leigh paused to consider.

It seemed unbelievable that the whole place was locked up. Two people in an isolated meteorite wouldn't go around perpetually locking and unlocking doors. Carefully, he examined the door before him. And found its secret. It opened to a slight pressure on a tiny, half-hidden push button that had seemed an integral part of the design of the latch. He stepped through the entrance, then started back with a terrible shock.

The room had no ceiling. Above him was—space. An ice-cold blast of air swept at him. He had a glimpse of gigantic machines in the room, machines that dimly resembled the ultramodern astronomical observatory on the moon that he had visited on opening day two years before. That one, swift look was all Leigh allowed himself. Then he stepped back into the hallway. The door of the observatory closed automatically in his face.

As he hurried to the next door, it struck him that he had made a fool of himself. The existence of the cold air showed that the open effect of the ceiling was only an illusion of invisible glass. But he decided not to go back.

The sixth door opened into a little cubbyhole. A blank

moment passed before he recognized what it was. An elevator!

He scrambled in. The farther he got away from the residential floor, the less likelihood of quick discovery. He turned to close the door, and saw that it was shutting automatically. It clicked softly, then immediately started up. Leigh frowned. The elevator was apparently geared to go

to some definite point. And that could be very bad. His eyes searched for controls; but nothing was visible. Gun poised, he stood alert as the elevator stopped. The door slid open.

Leigh stared. There was no corridor. The door opened onto blackness. Not the blackness of space with its stars. Or a dark room, half revealed by the light from the elevator. But blackness! Impenetrable. He put a tentative hand forward, half expecting to feel a solid object. But as his hand entered the black area, it vanished. He jerked it back, and stared at it, dismayed. It shone with a light of its own, all the bones plainly visible.

Swiftly, the light faded, the skin became opaque, but his whole arm pulsed with a pattern of pain. He thought: Fool, fool! He laughed bitterly, braced himself. And then it happened.

There was a flash out of the blackness. Something that sparkled vividly, something material that blazed a brilliant path to his forehead—and drew itself inside his head. And then—

He was no longer in the elevator. On either side of him stretched a long corridor. The stocky Hanardy was just reaching for some tiny lights beside the door of Patricia Ungarn's apartment. The man's fingers touched one of the lights. It dimmed. Softly, the door opened. A young woman with proud, insolent eyes and a queenlike bearing stood there.

"Father wants you down on Level 4," she said to Hanardy. "One of the energy screens has gone down; and he needs some machine work before he can put up another."

She turned to Leigh. Her voice took on metallic overtones as she said, "Mr. Leigh, you can come in!"

IX

Leigh entered with scarcely a physical tremor. A cool breeze caressed his cheeks; and there was the liltingly sweet sound of birds singing in the distance. He stopped as he

saw the sunlit garden beyond the French windows. After a moment, he thought:

"What happened to me?"

He put his hands to his head, and felt his forehead, then his whole head. But nothing was wrong, not a contusion, not a pain. He saw that the girl was staring at him, and he realized that his actions must seem unutterably queer.

"What's the matter with you?" she asked.

Leigh looked at her suspiciously. He said harshly, "Don't pull that innocent stuff. I've been up in the blackness room, and all I've got to say is, if you're going to kill me, don't skulk behind artificial night and other trickery."

The girl's eyes, he saw, were narrowed, unpleasantly cold. "I don't know what you're trying to pretend," she said icily. "I assure you it will not postpone the death we have to deal you." She hesitated, then finished sharply, "The what room?"

Leigh explained, puzzled by her puzzlement, then annoyed by the contemptuous smile that came into her face. She cut him off curtly, "I've never heard a less balanced story. If your intention was to astound me and delay your death with that improbable tale, it has failed. You must be mad. You didn't knock out Hanardy, because when I opened the door, Hanardy was there, and I sent him down to Father."

"See here!" Leigh began. Then he stopped. Because Hanardy had been there as she opened the door! And yet earlier—

When?

Doggedly, Leigh pushed the thought on: Earlier, he had attacked Hanardy. And then he—Leigh—had gone up in an elevator; and then, somehow, back. He began to feel unbalanced. With trembling ringers, he felt his head again. And it was absolutely normal. Only, he thought, there was something inside it that sparkled and tingled.

With a start, he saw that the girl was drawing a gun from a pocket of her simple white dress. He stared at the weapon, and he thought, "I've got to delay her some more."

He said urgently, "I'm going to assume you're puzzled by my words. Let's begin at the beginning. There is such a room, is there not?"

"Please," said the girl wearily, "let us not have any of your logic. My I.Q. is 243, yours is 132. So I assure you I am quite capable of reasoning from any beginning you can think of." She went on, her low voice curt, "There is no

'blackness' room, as you call it, no sparkling thing that crawls inside a human head. There is but one fact: The Dreeghs in their visit to your hotel room hypnotized you; and this curious mind illusion can only be a result of that hypnotism—don't argue with me—"

With a savage gesture of her gun, she cut off his attempt to speak. "There's no time. For some reason, the Dreeghs did something to you. Why? What did you see in those rooms?"

As he explained and described, Leigh realized that he would have to attack her, and take all the attendant risk. The purpose was a taut thing in his mind as he obeyed her motion and went ahead of her into the corridor. It was there, an icy determination, as he counted the doors from the corner where he had left the unconscious Hanardy.

"One, two, three, four, five. This door!" he said.

"Open it!" the girl said.

He did so; and his lower jaw sagged. He was staring into a fine, cozy room filled with shelf on shelf of beautifully bound books. There were comfortable chairs, a magnificent handwoven rag rug, and a desk.

It was the girl who closed the door firmly and once more motioned him ahead of her. They came to the sixth room.

"And this is your elevator?"

Leigh nodded mutely; and because his whole body was shaking, he was only dimly surprised that there was no elevator, but only a long, empty, silent corridor. The girl was standing with her back partly to him; and if he hit her, it would knock her head against the doorjamb.

The sheer brutality of the thought was what stopped him, held him for an instant. And then it was too late. The girl whirled and looked straight into his eyes.

Her gun came up and pointed steadily. "Not that way," she said quietly. "For a moment I was wishing you would have the nerve to try it. But that would be the weak way for me." Her eyes glowed with pride. "After all, I've killed before through necessity, and hated it. You can see that, because of what the Dreeghs have done to you, it is necessary."

Her voice was curt again. "So back to my rooms. I have a space lock there to get rid of your body. Move!"

It was the emptiness, the silence except for the faint click of their shoes that caught at Leigh's nerves. He felt hopeless as he walked back to the apartment. He was trapped in this

meteorite, hurtling darkly through the remote wastes of the Solar System. Here in this prison, pursued and attacked by deadly ships from the fixed stars, he was under sentence of death, the executioner to be a girl. That was the devastating part. He couldn't argue with this young woman. Every word would sound like pleading, and that he would not do.

The singing of the birds, as he entered the apartment, brought him out of his mental depression. He walked to the stately French windows, and stared at the glorious summery garden. At least two acres of grass and flowers and trees spread before him. There was a wide, deep pool of green, green water. Everywhere gorgeously colored birds fluttered and trilled, and over all blazed the glory of brilliant sunshine.

It was the sunshine that held Leigh longest. Finally, it seemed to him that he had the solution. He said in a hushed voice, without turning, "The roof—is an arrangement—of magnifying glass. It makes the Sun as big as on Earth. Is that the—"

"You'd better turn around," came the hostile, vibrant

voice from behind him. "I don't shoot people in the back. And I want to get this over with."

It was the moralistic smugness of her words that enraged Leigh. He whirled. "You damned little Klugg. You can't shoot me in the back, eh? Oh, no! And you couldn't possibly shoot me while I was attacking you because that would be the weak way. It's all got to be made right with your conscience."

He stopped so short that, if he had been running, instead of talking, he would have stumbled. Figuratively, almost literally, he saw Patricia Ungarn for the first time since his arrival. His mind had been so concentrated, so absorbed by deadly danger—

—For the first time as a woman.

Leigh drew a long breath. Dressed as a man, she had been youthfully handsome. Now, she wore a simple, snow-white sports dress. It was scarcely more than a tunic, and came well above her knees. Her hair shone with a brilliant brownness, and cascaded down to her shoulders. Her bare arms and legs gleamed a deep, healthy tan. Pure white sandals graced her feet. Her face gave the impression of extraordinary beauty. And then, amazed, he saw that her perfect cheeks were flushing vividly.

The girl said, "Don't you dare use that word to me."

She must have been utterly beside herself with rage. Her fury was such an enormous fact that Leigh gasped. Abruptly, he realized his tremendous opportunity.

"Klugg!" he said. "Klugg, Klugg, Klugg! So you realize now that the Dreeghs had you down pat, that all your mighty pretension was simply your Klugg mind demanding pretentious compensation for a dreary, lonely life. You had to think you were somebody, and yet all the time you must have known they'd only ship the tenth-raters to these remote posts. Klugg, not even Lennel; the Dreegh woman wouldn't even grant you Lennel status, whatever that is. And she'd know. Because if you're I.Q. 243, the Dreeghs were 400. You've realized that, too, haven't you?"

"Shut up! Or I'll kill you by inches!" said Patricia Ungarn. And Leigh was amazed to see that she had blanched under the tan. Stronger than before, he realized that he had struck, not only the emotional Achilles' heel of this strange and terrible young woman, but the very vital roots of her mental existence.

"So," he said deliberately, "the high morality is growing dim. Now you can torture me to death without a qualm. And to think that I came here to ask you to marry me because I thought a Klugg and a human being might get along."

"You what?" said the girl. Then she sneered. "So that was the form of their hypnotism. They would use some simple impulse for a simple human mind." She broke off, visibly fighting for calmness. "I think we've had just about enough."

I know just the type of thoughts that come to a male human in love. Even knowing you're not responsible makes the idea none the less bearable. I feel sickened, insulted. Know, please, that my future husband is arriving with the reinforcements three weeks from now. He will be trained to take over Father's work--"

"Another Klugg!" said Leigh, and the girl turned shades whiter.

Leigh stood thunderstruck. In all his life, he had never seen anyone so violently affected as was this young girl. The intellectual mask was off, and underneath was a seething mass of emotions bitter beyond the power of words to express. Here was evidence of a life so lonely that it strained his imagination. Her every word showed an incredible pent-up masochism as well as sadism, for she was torturing herself as well as him. But he couldn't stop now to feel sorry for her. His life was at stake, and only more words could postpone death--or bring the swift and bearable surcease of a bullet fired in passion. He went on grimly:

"I'd like to ask one question. How did you find out my I.Q. is 132? What special interest made you inquire about that? Is it possible that, all by yourself here, you, too, had a special type of thought, and that, though your intellect rejected such lowly love, its existence is the mainspring behind your determination to kill, rather than cure me? I--"

"That will do," interrupted Patricia Ungarn.

It required a moment for Leigh to realize that in those few short seconds she had pulled herself completely together. He watched her tensely as her gun motioned toward a door he had not noticed before. She said curtly, "I suppose there is a solution other than death. That is, immediate death. And I have decided to accept the resultant loss of my spaceship."

She nodded at the door. "It's there in the air lock. It works very simply. The steering wheel pulls up or down or sideways, and that's the way the ship will go. Just step on the accelerator, and the machine will go forward. The decelerator is the left pedal. The automobile wheels fold in automatically as soon as they lift from the ground. Now, get going. I need hardly tell you that the Dreeghs will probably catch you. But you can't stay here. That's obvious."

"Thanks." That was all Leigh allowed himself to say. He had exploded an emotional powder keg, and he dared not tamper with it further. There was a tremendous psychological mystery here, but it was not for him to solve. Suddenly shaky from the realization of what was still ahead of him, he walked gingerly toward the air lock. And then--

It happened!

He had a sense of awful nausea. There was a wild swaying through blackness.

And then he was standing at the paneled doorway leading

from the corridor to Patricia Ungarn's apartment. Hanardy stood beside him. The door opened. The young woman who stood on the other side of the threshold said strangely familiar words to Hanardy about going down to the fourth level to fix an energy screen. Then she turned to Leigh, and in a voice hard and metallic said:

"Mr. Leigh, you can come in."

X

The crazy part of it was that he walked in with scarcely a physical tremor. A cool breeze caressed his cheeks. And there was the liltingly sweet sound of birds singing in the distance. Leigh paused uncertainly. By sheer will power he shook the daze out of his mind, and bent mentally into the cyclone path of complete memory. Everything was there suddenly, the way the Dreeghs had come to his hotel apartment and ruthlessly forced him to their will, the way the "blackness" room had affected him, and how the girl had spared his life.

For some reason, the whole scene with the girl had been unsatisfactory to Jeel; and it was now, fantastically, to be repeated.

That thought ended. The entire, tremendous reality of what had happened yielded to a vastly greater fact: There Was—something—inside his head, a physical something. In a queer, horrible, inexperienced way, his mind instinctively fought against it. The result was ghastly confusion. Whatever it was, rested inside his head, unaffected by his brain's feverish contortions, cold, aloof, watching.

Watching.

Madly, then, he realized what it was. Another mind. Leigh shrank from the fact as from destroying fire. He tensed his brain. For a moment, his frenzy was so great that his face twisted with the anguish of his efforts. And everything blurred.

Exhausted finally, he simply stood there. And the thing-mind was still inside his head. Untouched.

What had happened to him?

Shakily, Leigh put his hands up to his forehead. Then he felt his whole head. There was a vague idea in him that if he pressed hard, it would be affected. He jerked his hands down with an unspoken curse. Damnation on damnation, he

was even repeating the actions of this scene. He grew aware of the girl staring at him. He heard her say:

"What's the matter with you?"

It was the sound of the words, exactly the same words, that did it. He smiled wryly. His mind drew back from the abyss where it had teetered. He was sane again.

Gloomily, he recognized that he was still far from normal. Sane yes, but dispirited. Clearly, the girl had no memory

of the previous scene, or she wouldn't be parroting. That thought ceased, too. A strange thing was happening. The mind inside him stirred, and looked through his eyes. Looked intently.

Intently.

The room and the girl in it changed, not physically, but subjectively, in what he saw, in the details. The details burned at him. Furniture and design that a moment before had seemed a flowing, artistic whole, abruptly showed flaws, errors in taste and arrangement and structure. His gaze flashed to the garden, and in instants tore it to mental shreds. Never in all his existence had he seen or felt criticism on such a high, devastating scale.

Only it wasn't criticism. Actually. The mind was indifferent. It saw things. Automatically, it saw some of the possibilities. By comparison the reality suffered. It was not a matter of anything being hopelessly bad. The wrongness was frequently a subtle thing. Birds not suited, for a dozen reasons, to their environment. Shrubs that added infinitesimal discord, not harmony, to the superb garden.

The mind flashed back from the garden; and this time, for the first time, studied the girl. On all Earth, no woman had ever been so piercingly examined. The structure of her body and her face, to Leigh so finely, proudly shaped, so gloriously patrician—he found low grade now.

An excellent example of low-grade development in isolation.

That was the thought, not contemptuous, nor derogatory, simply an impression by an appallingly direct mind that saw overtones, realities behind realities, a thousand facts where one showed.

There followed crystal-clear awareness of the girl's psychology, objective admiration for the system of isolated upbringing that made Klugg girls such fine breeders; and then—

Purpose!

Instantly carried out. Leigh took three swift steps toward

the girl. He was aware of her snatching at the gun in her pocket. There was startled amazement on her face. Then he had her. Her muscles writhed like steel springs. But they were useless against his superstrength, his superspeed. He tied her with some wire he had noticed in a half-opened clothes closet.

Then he stepped back, and to Leigh came the shocked personal thought of the incredible thing that had happened, comprehension that all this, which seemed so normal, was actually so devastatingly superhuman, so swift that—seconds only had passed since he came into the room.

His private thought ended. He grew aware of the mind, contemplating what it had done, and what it must do before the meteorite would be completely under control.

Vampire victory was near.

There was a phase of walking along empty corridors, down several flights of stairs. Leigh thought dully, his own personal thought, that the Dreegh seemed to know thoroughly the interior of the meteorite. Somehow, during the periods of transition, of time manipulated, the creature-mind must have used his captive body to explore the place completely. And now, with simple, deadly purpose, he was heading for the machine shops on the fourth level, where Professor Ungarn and Hanardy labored to put up another energy defense screen.

He found Hanardy alone, working at a lathe that throbbed, and the sound made it easy to sneak up-

The professor was in a vast room, where great engines hummed a strange, deep tune of titanic power. He was a tall man, and his back was turned to the door as Leigh entered. But his reactions were much quicker than Hanardy's, quicker even than the girl's. He sensed danger. He whirled with a catlike agility. And succumbed instantly to muscles that could have torn him limb from limb. It was during the binding of the man's hands that Leigh had time for an impression.

In the photographs that Leigh had seen, as he had told the Dreegh, Merla, in the hotel, the professor's face had been sensitive, tired-looking, withal noble. He was more than that. The man radiated power, as no photograph could show it, good power in contrast to the savage, malignant, greater power of the Dreegh.

The sense of a powerful personality faded before the aura of cosmic weariness. It was a lined, an amazingly lined

face. In a flash, Leigh remembered what the Dreegh woman had said. It was all there: deep-graven lines of tragedy and untold mental suffering, interlaced with a curious peacefulness. Like resignation. On that night months ago, he had asked the Dreegh woman: Resignation to what? And now, here in this tortured, kindly face was the answer: Resignation to hell.

Queerly, an unexpected second answer trickled into his consciousness: Morons, they're Galactic morons. Kluggs. The thought seemed to have no source; but it gathered strength. Professor Ungarn and his daughter were Kluggs, morons in the incredible Galactic sense. No wonder the girl had reacted like a crazy person. Obviously born here, she must have guessed the truth only in the last two months.

The I.Q. of human morons wavered between seventy-five and ninety, of Kluggs possibly between two hundred and twenty-five, and, say, two hundred and forty-three. What could be the nature of Galactic civilization if Dreeghs were four hundred, and Kluggs of the lowest I.Q. range were on the highest genius level by Earth standards? Somebody, of course, had to do the dreary, routine work of civilization. Kluggs and Lennels and their kind were obviously elected. No wonder they looked tired with that weight of inferiority to influence their very nerve and muscle structure. No wonder whole planets were kept in ignorance.

Leigh left the professor tied hand and foot, and began to turn off power switches. Some of the great motors were slowing noticeably as he went out of that mighty engine room. The potent hum of power dimmed.

Back in the girl's room, he entered the air lock, climbed into the small automobile spaceship, and launched into the night. Swiftly, the gleaming mass of meteorite receded into the darkness behind him. Suddenly, magnetic force rays caught his tiny craft, and drew it remorselessly toward the hundred-and-fifty-foot, cigar-shaped machine that flashed out of the darkness. He felt the spy rays; and he must have been recognized. For another ship flashed up to claim him. Air locks opened noiselessly, and shut again. Sickly, Leigh stared at the two Dreeghs, the tall man and the tall woman. He explained what he had done. Dimly, hopelessly, he wondered why he should have to explain. Then he heard Jeel say:

"Merla, this is the most astoundingly successful case of hypnotism in our existence. He's done everything. Even the

tinest thoughts we put into his mind have been carried out to the letter. And the proof is, the screens are going down. With the control of this station, we can hold out even after the Galactic warships arrive, and fill our tankers and our energy reservoirs for as long as a hundred years."

His excitement died. He smiled with sudden dry understanding as he looked at the woman. Then he said laconically, "My dear, the reward is all yours. We could have broken down those screens in another twelve hours, but it would have meant the destruction of the meteorite. This victory is so much greater. Take your reporter. Satisfy your craving-while the rest of us prepare for the occupation. Meanwhile, I'll tie him up for you."

Leigh thought, a cold, remote thought: The kiss of death. And shivered in appalled realization of what he had done.

XI

He lay on the couch, where Jeel had tied him. He was surprised, after a moment, to notice that, though the mind had withdrawn into the background of his brain, it was still there, cold, steely, abnormally conscious.

He wondered: what possible satisfaction could Jeel obtain from experiencing the mortal thrill of death with him? These people must be ultimately sadistic. The wonder died like dry grass under a heat ray as the woman came into the room and glided toward him. She smiled. She sat down on the edge of the couch.

"So here you are," she said.

She was, Leigh thought, like a tigress. There was purpose in every tense muscle of her long body. In surprise he saw that she had changed her dress. She wore a sleek, flimsy, tight-fitting gown that set off in startling fashion her golden

hair and starkly white face. He watched her with fascination. He said, "Yes, I'm here."

Silly words. But he didn't feel silly. He stiffened even as he spoke. It was her eyes that did it. For the first time since he had first seen her, her eyes struck him like a blow. Blue eyes, and steady. So steady. Not the steady frankness of honesty. But steady like dead eyes. A chill grew on Leigh, a special, extra chill, adding to the ice that was already there inside him. He had the unholy thought that this was a dead woman, artificially kept alive by the blood and life of dead men and women. She smiled, but the bleakness remained in those cold, fish eyes. No smile, no warmth could ever bring light to that chill, beautiful countenance. But she smiled the form of a smile, and she said:

"We Dreeghs live a hard, lonely life. So lonely that sometimes I cannot help thinking our struggle to remain alive is a blind, mad thing. We're what we are through no fault of our own. It happened during an interstellar flight that took place a thousand years ago—" She stopped, almost hopelessly. "It seems longer. It must be longer. I've really lost track."

She went on, suddenly grim, as if the memory, the very telling, brought a return of horror, "We were among several thousand holidayers who were caught in the gravitational pull of a sun, afterward called the Dreegh Sun. Its rays, immensely dangerous to human life, infected us all. It was discovered that only continuous blood transfusions, and the life force of other human beings could save us. For a while we received donations; then the government decided to have us destroyed as hopeless incurables. We were all young, and in love with life, of course. Some hundreds of us had been expecting the sentence, and we still had friends in the beginning. We escaped. We've been fighting ever since to stay alive."

And still he could feel no sympathy. It was odd, for all the thoughts she undoubtedly wanted him to have, came. Picture of a bleak, endless existence in spaceships, staring out into the perpetual night. Life processes circumscribed by the tireless, abnormal needs of bodies gone mad from ravenous disease. It was all there, the emotional pictures. But no emotions came. She was too cold. The years and that devil's hunt had stamped her soul and her eyes and her face.

And besides, her body seemed tenser now, leaning toward him, bending forward closer, closer, till he could hear her slow, measured breathing. Even her eyes suddenly held the vaguest inner light. Her whole being quivered with the chill

tensity of her purpose. When she spoke, she almost breathed the words, "I want you to kiss me, and don't be afraid. I shall keep you alive for days, but I must have response, not passivity. You're a bachelor, at least thirty. You won't have any more morals about the matter than I. But you must let your whole body yield."

He didn't believe it. Her face hovered six inches above

him. And there was such a ferocity of suppressed eagerness in her that it could mean only death. Her lips were pursed, as if to suck, and they quivered with a strange, tense, trembling desire, unnatural, almost obscene. Her nostrils dilated at every breath. Surely no normal who had kissed as often as she must have in all her years could feel like that, if that was all she expected to get.

"Quick!" she said breathlessly. "Yield, yield!"

Leigh scarcely heard. For that other mind that had been lingering in his brain surged forward in its incredible way. He heard himself say, "I'll trust your promise because I can't resist such an appeal. You can kiss your head off. I guess I can stand it—"

There was a blue flash, an agonizing burning sensation that spread in a wave to every nerve of his body.

The anguish became a series of tiny pains, like small needles piercing a thousand bits of his flesh. Tingling, writhing a little, amazed that he was still alive. Leigh opened his eyes.

He felt a wave of purely personal surprise. The woman lay slumped, lips half twisted off of his, body collapsed hard across his chest. And the mind, that blazing mind was there, watching, as the tall figure of the Dreegh man sauntered into the room, stiffened, and then darted forward.

Her jerked her limp form into his arms. There was the same kind of blue flash as their lips met, from the man to the woman. She stirred finally, moaning. He shook her brutally. "You wretched fool!" he raged. "How did you let a thing like that happen? You would have been dead in another minute, if I hadn't come along."

"I—don't—know." Her voice was thin and old. She sank down to the floor at his feet, and slumped there like a tired old woman. Her blonde hair straggled and looked curiously faded. "I don't know, Jeel. I tried to get his life force, and he got mine instead. He—"

She stopped. Her blue eyes widened. She staggered to her feet. "Jeel, he must be a spy. No human being could do a thing like that to me. Jeel"—there was sudden terror

in her voice—"Jeel, get out of this room. Don't you realize? He's got my energy in nun. He's lying there now, and whatever has control of him has my energy to work with—"

"All right, all right." He patted her fingers. "I assure you he's only a human being. And he's got your energy. You made a mistake, and the flow went the wrong way. But it would take much more than that for anyone to use a human body successfully against us. So—"

"You don't understand!"

Her voice shook. "Jeel, I've been cheating. I don't know what got into me, but I couldn't get enough life force. Every time I was able, during the four times we stayed on Earth, I sneaked out. I caught men on the street. I don't know exactly how many because I dissolved their bodies

after I was through with them. But there were dozens. And he's got all the energy I collected, enough for scores of years, enough for—don't you see?—enough for them."

"My dear!" The Dreegh shook her violently, as a doctor would an hysterical woman. "For a thousand years, the great ones have ignored us and—"

He paused. A black frown twisted his long face. He whirled like the tiger man he was, snatching at his gun as Leigh stood up.

The man Leigh was no longer surprised at anything. At the way the hard cords fell rotted from his wrists and legs. At the way the Dreegh froze rigid after one look into his eyes. For the first shock of the tremendous, the almost cataclysmic truth was already in him.

"There is only one difference," said Leigh in a voice so vibrant that the top of his head shivered from the unaccustomed violence of the sound. "This time there are two hundred and twenty-seven Dreegh ships gathered in one concentrated area. The rest—and our records show only a dozen others—we can safely leave to our police patrols."

The Great Galactic, who had been William Leigh, smiled darkly and walked toward his captives. "It has been a most interesting experiment in deliberate splitting of personality. Three years ago, our time manipulators showed this opportunity of destroying the Dreeghs, who hitherto had escaped by reason of the vastness of our galaxy. And so I came to Earth, and here built up the character of William Leigh, reporter, complete with family and past history. It was necessary to withdraw into a special compartment of the brain

some nine-tenths of my mind, and to drain completely an equal percentage of life energy.

"That was the difficulty: How to replace that energy in sufficient degree at the proper time, without playing the role of vampire. I constructed a number of energy caches, but naturally at no time had we been able to see all the future. We could not see the details of what was to transpire aboard this ship, or in my hotel room that night you came, or under Constantine's restaurant. Besides, if I had possessed full energy as I approached this ship, your spy ray would have registered it. And you would instantly have destroyed my small automobile-spaceship. My first necessity, accordingly, was to come to the meteorite, and obtain an initial control over my own body through the medium of what my Earth personality called the 'blackness' room.

"That Earth personality offered unexpected difficulties. In three years it had gathered momentum as a personality, and that impetus made it necessary to repeat a scene with Patricia Ungarn, and to appear directly as another conscious mind in order to convince Leigh that he must yield. The rest, of course, was a matter of gaining additional life energy after boarding your ship, which"—he bowed slightly at the muscularly congealed body of the woman—"which she supplied me.

"I have explained all this because of the fact that a mind will accept complete control only if full understanding of defeat is present. I must finally inform you, therefore, that you are to remain alive while certain additional developments occur. Among other things you will assist me in making personal contact with your friends."

He made a gesture of dismissal. "Return to your normal existence. I have still to coordinate my two personalities and that does not require your presence."

The Dreeghs went out blank-eyed, almost briskly; and the two minds in one body were alone!

For Leigh, the Leigh of Earth, the first desperate shock was past. The room was curiously dim, as if he were staring out through eyes that were no longer-his! He thought, with a horrible effort at self-control: "I've got to fight. Some thing is trying to possess my body. All the rest is lie."

A soothing, mind-pulsation stole into the shadowed chamber where his-self-was cornered: "No lie, but wondrous truth. You have not seen what the Dreeghs saw and felt, for

you are inside this body, and know not that it has come marvellously alive, unlike anything that your petty dreams on Earth could begin to conceive. You must accept your high destiny, else the sight of your own body will be a terrible thing to you. Be calm, be braver than you've ever been, and pain will turn to joy."

Calm came not. His mind quivered in its dark corner, abnormally conscious of strange and unnatural pressures that pushed in at it like winds out of unearthly night. For a moment of terrible fear, it funk'd that pressing night, then forced back to sanity, and had another thought of its own, a grimly cunning thought: The devilish interloper was arguing. Could that mean-his mind rocked with hope-that coordination was impossible without his yielding to clever persuasion?

Never would he yield.

"Think," whispered the alien mind, "think of being one valuable facet of a mind with an I.Q. twelve hundred, think of yourself as having played a role. And now you are returning to normalcy, a normalcy of unlimited power. You have been an actor completely absorbed in your role, but the play is over. You are alone in your dressing room removing the grease paint. Your mood of the play is fading, fading, fading--"

"Go to hell!" said William Leigh loudly. "I'm William Leigh, I.Q. one hundred and thirty, satisfied to be just what I am. I don't give a damn whether you built me up from the component elements of your brain, or whether I was born normally. I can see what you're trying to do with that hypnotic suggestion stuff, but it isn't working. I'm here. I'm myself. And I stay myself. Go find yourself another body, if you're so smart."

Silence settled where his voice had been. And the empti-

ness, the utter lack of sound brought a sharp twinge of fear greater than that which he had had before he spoke.

He was so intent on that inner struggle that he was not aware of outer movement until, with a start, he realized he was staring out of a port window. Night spread there, the living night of space.

A trick, he thought, in an agony of fear; a trick somehow designed to add to the corroding power of hypnotism. A trick! He tried to jerk back. And, terrifyingly, couldn't. His body wouldn't move. Instantly, then, he tried to speak, to crash through that enveloping blanket of unholy silence. But no sound came.

Not a muscle, not a finger stirred; not a single nerve so much as trembled.

He was alone.

Cut off in his little corner of brain.

Lost.

Yes, lost, came a strangely pitying sibilation of thought, lost to a cheap, sordid existence, lost to a life whose end is visible from the hour of birth, lost to a civilization that has already had to be saved from itself a thousand times. Even you, I think, can see that all this is lost to you forever.

Leigh thought starkly: The thing was trying by a repetition of ideas, by showing evidence of defeat, to lay the foundations of further defeat. It was the oldest trick of simple hypnotism for simple people. He couldn't let it work.

You have, urged the mind inexorably, accepted the fact that you were playing a role; and now you have recognized our oneness, and are giving up the role. The proof of this recognition on your part is that you have yielded control of -our-body.

-Our body, our body, OUR body-

The words re-echoed like some Gargantuan sound through his brain, then merged swiftly into that calm, other-mind pulsation:

-concentration. All intellect derives from the capacity to concentrate; and, progressively, the body itself shows life, reflects and focuses that gathering, vaulting power.

-One more step remains: You must see-

Amazingly, then, he was staring into a mirror. Where it had come from, he had no memory. It was there in front of him where, an instant before, had been a black porthole—and there was an image in the mirror, shapeless at first to his blurred vision.

Deliberately—he felt the enormous deliberateness—the vision was cleared for him. He saw. And then he didn't.

His brain wouldn't look. It twisted in a mad desperation, like a body buried alive, and briefly, horrendously conscious of its fate. Insanely, it fought away from the blazing thing in the mirror: So awful was the effort, so titanic the fear, that it began to gibber mentally, its consciousness to whirl dizzily, like a wheel spinning faster, faster.

The wheel shattered into ten thousand aching fragments.

Darkness came, blacker than Galactic night And there was—
Oneness!

FIRST STAGE I.Q. 10,000

REHABILITATION COMPLETED.

BEGIN SECOND STAGE

XII

Lying there on the floor, bound hand and foot, Hanardy thought in anguish: "If I ever get loose, I'm gonna hightail it out of here!"

He tested the rope that held him and groaned at its unyielding toughness. He lay, then, for a while, accepting the confinement of the bonds, but underneath was a great grief and a great fear.

He suspected that Professor Ungarn and the professor's daughter, Patricia, were equally helpless, or they would have tried during the past hour to find out what had happened to him.

He listened again, intently, holding himself still. But only the steady throbbing of the distant dynamos was audible. No footsteps approached; there was no other movement.

He was still listening when he felt an odd tugging inside his body.

Shivering a little, Hanardy shook his head as if to clear it of mental fog—and climbed to his feet.

He didn't notice that the cords that had bound him fell away.

Out in the corridor, he paused tensely. The place looked deserted, empty. Except for the vague vibration from the dynamos, a great silence pressed in upon him. The place had the look and feel of being on a planet. The artificial

gravity made him somewhat lighter than on Earth, but he was used to such changes. It was hard to grasp that he was inside a meteorite, hundreds of thousands of miles from the nearest moon or inhabited planet. Being here was like being inside a big building, on an upper floor.

Hanardy headed for the nearest elevator shaft. He thought: I'd better untie Miss Pat, then her pop, and then get.

It was an automatic decision, to go to the girl first. Despite her sharp tongue, he admired her. He had seen her use weapons to injure, but that didn't change his feeling. He guessed that she'd be very angry—very possibly she'd blame him for the whole mess.

Presently he was knocking hesitantly on the door to Patricia's apartment. Hesitantly, because he was certain that she was not in a position to answer.

When, after a reasonable pause, there was no reply, he pressed gently on the latch. The door swung open.

He entered pure enchantment.

The apartment was a physical delight. There were French-type windows that opened onto a sunlit window. The French doors were open, and the sound of birds singing wafted in through them. There were other doors leading to the inner world of the girl's home, and Hanardy, who had occasionally been in the other rooms to do minor repair work, knew that there also everything was as costly as it was here in this large room that he could see.

Then he saw the girl. She was lying on the floor, half-hidden behind her favorite chair, and she was bound hand and foot with wire.

Hanardy walked toward her unhappily. It was he who had brought William Leigh, and he wasn't quite sure just how he would argue himself out of any accusation she might make about that. His guilt showed in the way he held his thick-set body, in the shuffling of his legs, in the awkward way he knelt beside her. He began gingerly to deal with the thin wire that enlaced and interlaced her limbs.

The girl was patient. She waited till he had taken all the wire off her and then, without moving from the floor, began to rub the circulation back into her wrists and ankles.

She looked up at him and made her first comment:
"How did you avoid being tied up?"

"I didn't. He got me, too," said Hanardy. He spoke eagerly, anxious to be one of the injured, along with her. He already felt better. She didn't seem to be angry.

"Then how did you get free?" Patricia Ungarn asked.

"Why, I just—" Hanardy began.

He stopped, thunderstruck. He thought back, then, over what had happened. He had been lying there, tied. And then... and then...

What?

He stood blank, scarcely daring to think. Realizing that an answer was expected, he began apologetically, "I guess he didn't tie me up so good, and I was in a kind of a hurry, figuring you were here, and so I just—"

Even as he spoke, his whole being rocked with the remembrance of how tough those ropes had been a few minutes before he freed himself.

He stopped his mumbling explanation because the girl wasn't listening, wasn't even looking. She had climbed to her feet, and she was continuing to rub her hands. She was small of build and good-looking in a bitter way. Her lips were pressed too tightly together; her eyes were slightly narrowed with a kind of permanent anxiety. Except for that, she looked like a girl in her teens, but cleverer and more sophisticated than most girls her age.

Even as Hanardy, in his heavy way, was aware of the complexity of her, she faced him again. She said with an ungirl-like decisiveness, "Tell me everything that happened to you."

Hanardy was glad to let go of the unsatisfactory recollection of his own escape. He said, "First thing I know, this guy comes in there while I'm working at the lathe. And is he strong, and is he fast! I never would've thought he had that land of muscle and that fast way of moving. I'm pretty chunky, y'understand—"

"What then?" She was patient, but there was a pointedness about her question that channeled his attention back to the main line of events.

"Then he ties me up, and then he goes out, and then he takes those Dreeghs from the spaceship and disappears into space." Hanardy shook his head, wonderingly. "That's what gets me. How did he do that?"

He paused, in a brown study; but he came from the distance of his thought back into the room, to realize guiltily that the girl had spoken to him twice.

"Sorry," he muttered. "I was thinking about how he did

that, and it's kind of hard to get the idea." He finished, almost accusingly: "Do you know what he does?"

The girl looked at him, a startled expression on her face. Hanardy thought she was angry at his inattention and said hastily: "I didn't hear what you wanted me to do. Tell me again, huh!"

She seemed unaware that he had spoken. "What does he do, Steve?"

"Why, he just—"

At that point, Hanardy stopped short and glanced back mentally over the glib words he had been using. It was such a fantastic dialogue, that he could feel the blood draining from his cheeks.

"Huh!" he said.

"What does he do, Steve?" He saw that she was looking at him, as if she understood something that he didn't. It irritated him.

He said unhappily: "I'd better go and untie your father before that last bunch of Dreeghs shows up."

Having spoken, he stopped again, his mouth open in amazement. He thought: "I must be nuts. What am I saying?"

He turned and started for the door.

"Come back here!"

Her voice, sharp and commanding, cut into him. Defensively, he put up between himself and her the thick barrier of stolidity which had served him for so many years in his relations with other people. He swung awkwardly around to face her again. Before he could speak, she said with intensity: "How did he do it, Steve?"

The question ran up against a great stubbornness in him. He had no feeling of deliberately resisting her. But the mental fog seemed to settle down upon his being, and he said: "Do what, Miss?"

"Leave?"

"Who?" He felt stupid before her questions, but he felt even more stupid for having had meaningless thoughts and said meaningless things.

"Leigh—you fool! That's who."

"I thought he took that spaceboat of yours that looks like an automobile."

There was a long pause. The girl clenched and unclenched her hands. Now she seemed very unchildlike indeed. Hanar-

dy, who had seen her angry before, cringed and waited for the thunder and lightning of her rage to lash out at him. Instead, the tenseness faded. She seemed suddenly thoughtful and said with unexpected gentleness: "After that, Steve? After he got out there!"

She swung her arm and pointed at the aviary, where the sunlight glinted beyond the French windows. Hanardy saw birds fluttering among the trees. Their musical cries gave the scene a homey touch, as if it really were a garden. As he watched, the tree leaves stirred; and he knew that hidden fans were blowing an artificial breeze. It was like a summer afternoon, except that just beyond the glasslike wall was the blackness of space.

It was a cosmic night outside, disturbed here and there by an atom of matter—a planet hidden from sight by its own relative smallness and distance from anything else, a sun, a point of light and energy, quickly lost in darkness so vast that presently its light would fade, and become one grain in a misty bright cloud that obscured the blackness for a moment of universe time and occupied an inch of space, or so it seemed....

Hanardy contemplated that startling vista. He was only

vaguely aware that his present intensity of interest was quite different from similar thoughts he had had in the past. On his long journeys, such ideas had slipped into and out of his mind. He recalled having had a thought about it just a few months before. He had been looking out of a porthole, and—just for an instant—the mystery of the empty immensity had touched him. And he'd thought: "What the heck is behind all this? How does a guy like me rate being alive?"

Aloud, Hanardy muttered: "I'd better get your father free, Miss Pat." He finished under his breath: "And then beat it out of here—fast."

XIII

He turned, and this time, though she called after him angrily, he stumbled out into the corridor and went down to the depths of the meteorite, where the dynamos hummed and throbbed; and where, presently, he had Professor Ungarn untied.

The older man was quite cheerful. "Well, Steve, we're not dead yet. I don't know why they didn't jump in on us, but the screens are still holding, I see."

He was a gaunt man with deep-set eyes and the unhealthiest face Hanardy had ever seen. He stood, rubbing the circulation back into his arms. Strength of intellect shone from his face, along with the melancholy. He had defended the meteorite in such a calm, practical way from the attacking Dreeghs that it was suddenly easy to realize that this sad-faced man was, actually the hitherto unsuspected observer of the solar system for a vast galactic culture, which included at its top echelon the Great Galactic—who had been William Leigh—and at the bottom, Professor Ungarn and his lovely daughter.

The thoughts about that seeped into Hanardy's subconscious. He realized that the scientist was primarily a protector. He and this station were here to prevent contact between Earth and the galaxy. Man and his earth-born civilization were still too low on the scale of development to be admitted to awareness that a gigantic galactic culture existed. Interstellar ships of other low-echelon cultures which had been admitted to the galactic union were warned away from the solar system whenever they came too close. Accidentally, the hunted, lawless Dreeghs had wandered into this forbidden sector of space. In their lust for blood and life energy they had avidly concentrated here in the hope of gaining such a quantity of blood, and so great a supply of life energy, that they would be freed for endless years from their terrible search.

It had been quite a trap, which had enabled the Great Galactic to capture so many of them. But now another shipload of Dreeghs was due; and this time there was no trap. Professor Ungarn was speaking: "Did you get that part machined before Leigh tied you up?" He broke off: "What's the matter, Steve?"

"Huh! Nothing." Hanardy came out of a depth of wonderment: "I'd better get onto that job. It'll take a half hour,

maybe."

Professor Ungarn nodded and said matter-of-factly: "I'll feel better when we get that additional screen up. There's quite a gang out there."

Hanardy parted his lips to say that that particular "gang" was no longer a problem, but that another supership, a late arrival, would shortly appear on the scene. He stopped the words, unspoken; and now he was consciously dismayed. "What's going on?" he wondered. "Am I nuts?"

Almost blank, he headed down to the machine shop. As he entered, he saw the ropes that had bound him, lying on the floor. He walked over in a haze of interest and stooped to pick up one of the short sections.

It came apart in his fingers, breaking into a fine, powdery stuff, some of which drifted into his nostrils. He sneezed noisily.

The rope, he discovered, was all like that. He could hardly get over it. He kept picking up the pieces, just so that he could feel them crumble. When he had nothing but a scattering of dust, he stood up and started on the lathe job. He thought absently: "If that next batch of Dreeghs arrives, then maybe I can start believing all this stuff."

He paused and for the first time thought: "Now, where did I get that name, Dreegh?"

Instantly, he was trembling so violently that he had to stop work. Because—if he could get the professor to admit that that was what they were—Dreeghs—then....

Then what?

"Why, it'd prove everything," he thought. "Just that one thing!"

Already, the crumbled rope, and whatever it proved, was fading into the background of his recollection, no longer quite real, needing to be reinforced by some new miracle. As it happened, he asked the question under optimum circumstances. He handed the part to the scientist and man-

aged to ask about the Dreeghs as the older man was turning away. Ungarn began immediately with an obvious urgency to work on the shattered section of the energy screen drive. It was from there, intent on what he was doing, and in an absent-minded tone, that he answered Hanardy's question.

"Yes, yes," he muttered. "Dreeghs. Vampires, in the worst sense of the word ... but they look just like us."

At that point he seemed to realize to whom he was talking. He stopped what he was doing and swung around and stared at Hanardy.

He said at last very slowly, "Steve, don't repeat everything you hear around this place. The universe is a bigger territory than you might think but people will ridicule if you try to tell them. They will say you're crazy."

Hanardy did not move. He was thinking: "He just don't realize. I gotta know. All this stuff happening--"

But the idea of not telling was easy to grasp. At Spaceport, on the moon, Europa, at the bars that he frequented, he was accepted by certain hangers-on as a boon companion. Some of the people were sharp, even educated, but they were cynical, and often witty, and were particularly scathing of serious ideas.

Hanardy visualized himself telling any one of them that there was more to space than the solar system--more life, more intelligence--and he could imagine the ridiculing discussion that would begin.

Though they usually treated him with tolerance--it sure wouldn't do any good to tell them.

Hanardy started for the door. "I gotta know," he thought again. "And right now I'd better get on my ship and beat it before that Dreegh comes along pretending that he's Pat's future husband."

And he'd better leave on the sly. The professor and the girl wouldn't like him to go away now. But defending this meteorite was their job, not his. They couldn't expect him to deal with the Dreegh who had captured, and murdered, Pat's boy friend.

Hanardy stopped in the doorway, and felt blank. "Huh!" he said aloud.

He thought: Maybe I should tell them. They won't be able to deal with the Dreegh if they think he's somebody else.

"Steve!" It was Professor Ungarn.

Hanardy turned. "Yeah, boss?" he began.

"Finish unloading your cargo."

"Okay, boss."

He walked off heavily along the corridor, tired and glad that he had been told to go and relieved that the decision to tell them could not be put into effect immediately. He thought wearily: First thing I'd better do is take a nap.

XIV

Hanardy walked slowly up the ramp into his own ship, and so to his own cabin. Before lying down for the sleep he needed, he paused to stare at his reflection in the mirror-bright metal wall of the room. He saw a short, muscular man in greasy, gray dungarees, and a dirty yellow shirt. A stubble of beard emphasized a coarseness of features that he had seen before, but somehow never so clearly, never with such a conviction that he was a low-grade human being. Hanardy groaned and stretched out in the bunk. He thought: I sure got my eyes open all of a sudden to what kind of a lug I am.

He took a quick look back along the track of years, and groaned again. It was a picture of a man who had downgraded himself as a human being, seeking escape in a lonely space job from the need to compete as an individual.

"Nobody will believe a word I say," he thought. "All that other junk was only in my noodle—it didn't happen out where you could prove anything. I'd better just keep my mouth shut and stop thinking I understand what's going on."

He closed his eyes—and looked with a clear inner vision at the universe.

He opened his eyes to realize that he had slept.

He realized something else. The screens were down; a Dreegh in a spaceboat was coming into an airlock at the extreme lower side of the meteorite.

The vampire was primarily intent on information, but he would destroy everyone in the meteorite as soon as he felt it was safe.

Sweating, Hanardy tumbled out of the bunk and hurried out of his ship, and so into the meteorite. He raced along the corridor that led to the other airlock. At the entrance he met the professor and Patricia. They were smiling and excited.

The scientist said, "Great news, Steve. Pat's fiance has just arrived. He's here sooner than we expected; but we were getting worried that we hadn't received some communication."

Hanardy muttered something, feeling immensely foolish. To have been so wrong! To have thought: Dreegh!—when the reality was—Klugg ... the girl's long-awaited fiance, Thadled Madro.

But the identification of the new arrival made all his fantasies just that—unreal vaporings, figments of an unsettled mind.

Hanardy watched gloomily as Madro came down the ramp from the lifeboat. The girl's lover was a very tall, slim man in his thirties, with deep-set eyes. He had an intensity about him that was impressive, commanding—and repellent. Instantly repellent.

Hanardy realized ruefully that his reaction was overcritical. Hanardy couldn't decide what had twisted this man. But he was reminded of the degraded people who were his principal buddies at Spaceport, on Europa. Smart, many of them were—almost too smart. But they gave off this same emanation of an overloaded personality.

Hanardy was a little surprised to realize that the girl was not rushing forward to greet the gaunt-bodied visitor. It was Professor Ungarn who approached the man and bowed courteously. Madro bowed in return and then stood stiffly near Hanardy. The scientist glanced at his daughter

and then smiled at the newcomer apologetically. He said, "Thadled Madro, this is my daughter, Patricia—who has suddenly become very shy."

Madro bowed. Patricia inclined her head. Her father turned to her, and said, "My dear, I realize that this is an unfortunate way of marrying and giving in marriage—to entrust yourself to a man whom neither of us has ever seen before. But let us remember his courage in coming here at

all and resolve to offer him communication and the opportunity to show us what he is."

Madro bowed to the girl. "On those terms, I greet you, Patricia." He straightened. "About communication—I am baffled by the message I received en route. Will you please give me further information?"

Professor Ungarn told him of the Dreegh attack and of its abrupt cessation; he told him of William Leigh, the Great Galactic. He finished: "We have our report as to what happened from a member of the race of this system—who was somehow infected by the mere presence of this mighty being, and who apparently acquired the ability to see at a distance, and to be aware of some of the thoughts of some people, temporarily at least."

There was a faint smile on Ungarn's tired face. Hanardy shriveled a little inside, feeling that he was being made fun of. He looked unhappily at the girl. She must have told her father what he had said.

Patricia Ungarn caught his gaze on her and shrugged. "You said it, Steve," she stated matter-of-factly. "Why not tell us everything you felt?"

The newcomer stared somberly and intently at Hanardy; so intently that it was almost as if he also were reading minds. He turned slowly to the girl. "Can you give me a swift summary?" he asked. "If there's action to be taken, I'd like to have some basis for it."

There was a hard note in his voice that chilled Hanardy, who had been thinking for many minutes over and over: They don't really know him! They don't know him. . . . He had a mental picture of the real Madro's ship being intercepted, Madro captured and drained of information and then murdered by the vampire method. The rest was skillful makeup, good enough apparently to pass the inspection of the professor and his perceptive daughter. Which meant that, before killing the real Madro, the Dreegh had learned passwords, secret codes and enough back history to be convincing.

Within minutes, this creature could decide that it was safe to take action.

Hanardy had no illusions, no hope. It had taken an unbounded being to defeat these mighty Dreeghs. And now, by a trick, a late arrival had achieved what his fellows en masse had not been able to do—he had gotten into the

meteorite fortress of the galactic watcher of the solar system; and his whole manner indicated that his fears had nothing to do with either the professor or his daughter, or Hanardy.

He wanted to know what had happened. For a little while he might be forbearing, in the belief that he could learn more as an apparent ally than as a revealed enemy.

"We have to put him off," Hanardy thought in agony. "We have to hold back, or maybe give him what he wants." Somehow, the latter seemed preferable.

He grew aware that the girl was talking. While Hanardy listened, she gave the essential picture of what he had said. It was all there, surprisingly sharp in detail. It even penetrated some of the blur that had settled over his own memory.

When she had finished, Madro frowned and nodded. His slim body seemed unnaturally tense. He said, almost to himself: "So they were almost all captured—" He paused and, turning, looked at Hanardy. "You have the feeling there will be one more ship?"

Hanardy nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

"How many Dreeghs are there aboard this one ship?" Madro asked.

This time there was no escaping a verbal reply. "Nine," said Hanardy.

He hadn't thought about the exact number before. But he knew the figure was correct. Just for a moment, he knew it.

Madro said in an odd tone, "You get it that clearly? Then you must already know many other things as well."

His dark eyes gazed directly into Hanardy's. The unspoken meaning that was in them seemed to be: "Then you already know who I am?"

There was such a hypnotic quality in the other's look that Hanardy had to wage an inner fight against admitting that he knew.

Madro spoke again. "Were these—this first group of Dreeghs—all killed?"

"Why, I—" Hanardy stopped, amazed. "Gee, I don't know. I don't know what happened to them. I think he intended to kill them; up to a certain moment, he intended to; and then—"

"And then what, Steve?" That was Pat, her voice urging him.

"I don't know. He noticed something."

"Who noticed something?" asked Pat.

"Leigh. You know—him. But I don't know what he did after that."

"But where could they be now?" the girl asked, bewildered.

Hanardy remained blank, vaguely guilty, as if somehow he was failing her by not knowing.

He grew aware that Madro was turning away. "There is apparently more to discover here," the Dreegh said quietly. "It is evident that we must re-assess our entire situation; and I might even guess that we Kluggs could through the chance perceptive stimulation of this man achieve so great a knowledge of the universe that, here and now, we might be able to take the next step of development for our kind."

The comment seemed to indicate that the Dreegh was still undecided. Hanardy followed along behind the others. For a few desperate seconds he thought of jerking out his gun, in the hope that he might be able to fire before the Dreegh could defend himself.

But already doubt was upon him. For this suspicion was just in his head. He had no proof other than the steady stream of pictures in his mind; and that was like a madness having no relation to anything that had been said and done before his eyes. Crazy people might act on such inner pictures, but not stolid, unimaginative Steve Hanardy.

"Gotta keep my feet on the ground!" Hanardy muttered to himself.

Ahead, Professor Ungarn said in a conversational voice: "I've got to give you credit, Thadled. You have already said something that has shocked Pat and myself. You have used the hateful word 'Klugg' just as if it doesn't bother you." "It's just a word," said Madro.

And that was all that was said while they walked. They came to the power room. The girl sank into a chair, while her father and the visitor walked over to the power control board. "The screens are working beautifully," said Professor Ungarn with satisfaction. "I just opened them for the few seconds it took for you to get through them. We've got time to decide what to do, in case this last Dreegh ship attacks us."

Madro walked over near the girl, and settled into a chair. He addressed Professor Ungarn, "What you said a moment ago, about the word and the identification of Klugg—you're right. It doesn't bother me."

The scientist said grimly, "Aren't you fooling yourself a little? Of all the races that know of the galactic civilization, we're the lowest on the scale. We do the hard work. We're like the day laborers on planets such as Earth. Why, when Pat found out, she nearly went mad with self-negation. Galactic morons!" He shuddered.

Madro laughed in a relaxed way; and Hanardy had to admire the easiness of him. If Madro was a Dreegh, then for all Madro knew this, also, was a trap set by the Great Galactic; and yet he seemed unworried. If, on the other

hand, he was actually a Klugg, then somehow he had made inferiority right within himself. "I could use some of that," Hanardy thought gloomily. "If these guys are galactic morons, what does that make me?"

Madro was speaking: "We're what we are," he said simply. "It's not really a matter of too much difference in intelligence. It's an energy difference. There's a way here, somewhere, of utilizing energy in a very superior fashion. But you've got to have the energy, and you've got to get it from somewhere. That's what makes the case of this fellow Leigh interesting. If we could backtrack on what he did here, we might really get at the heart of a lot of things."

Patricia and her father said nothing. But their eyes glistened, as they waited for the man to continue. Madro turned to Hanardy. "That question she asked you before"—he indicated the girl—"when you first untied her. How did he leave the solar system after capturing those—Dreeghs?" He hesitated the slightest bit before using the name.

Hanardy said simply, "He didn't exactly leave. It's more like ... he was somewhere else. And he took them with him." He fumbled for words. "You see, things aren't the way they seem. They're—" He stopped, unhappy.

He realized that the two men and the girl were waiting. Hanardy waved his arms aimlessly, indicating things beyond the safeguarding of the meteorite. "All that—that's not real."

Madro turned towards his companions. "It's the concept of a universe of illusion. An old idea; but maybe we should take another look at it."

Professor Ungarn murmured, "It would take complex techniques to make it work."

Hanardy said, straining for meaning, "You just keep putting it out there. As if you're doing it, even though you're not. That tunes you in."

"Put what out, Steve?" It was the girl, her voice as strained as his.

"The world. The universe... the whole deal."

"Oh!"

Hanardy went on, "And then, for a moment, you don't put anything there. That's when you do something I don't understand."

"What's that?" The girl's voice, almost emotionless, led him forward.

"You stop everything," said Hanardy wonderingly. "You let the nothingness rush in. And then—you become the real you ... for as long as you have energy."

He stared at the three people, through them, unseeing. As from a distance, Madro's voice came to him:

"You see—it's a matter of energy," the man said calmly.
"Hanardy?"

He came back into the room, mentally as well as physically. "Yeah?"

"Where did he get his energy?" Madro asked.

"Uh," said Hanardy, "he got most of it out where it was stored—a kind of dark room."

It was a new thought; a picture came with it of how the energy had been put there by somebody else, not by Leigh. Before Hanardy could speak another word, Madro was over there beside him.

"Show us!" he said, and his voice was like a fire, burning a path of action, demanding counter-action.

Hanardy led the way, his heavy body trembling. He had the feeling that he had made an admission that spelled victory for the Dreegh. But there was no turning back. If this creature was a Dreegh, then resistance was useless. He knew that intuitively.

"If I could only be sure," Hanardy thought miserably.

And the stupid thing was that he was sure. As sure, it seemed to him, as he could ever be. But he wasn't sure enough even to make the attempt to save his own life. As things stood, he'd have to go through with this farce until the Dreegh—satisfied that all was well—destroyed them all in his own good time.

XV

It was twenty minutes later.

. . . After they had gone down all the elevators, and stopped at every floor; and after Hanardy had, finally, stubbornly, selected a door, which opened into a closet with tools in it—

"Where was it stored?" Madro demanded of Hanardy. "I mean the energy that Leigh got."

Hanardy pointed unhappily at the metal wall inside the closet.

"Are you saying the energy was in the wall?"

The question once more disturbed Hanardy's sense of the reality of his own thoughts, and so he simply stood there shaken, as Pat and Professor Ungarn pressed forward and with a portable instrument tested the wall.

Madro did not join them, nor did he again look into the little room. Hanardy felt an inner tremor as the Dreegh, ignoring what the father and daughter were doing, turned and strode toward him.

"Steve," he said, "I want to talk to you."

He glanced back, raised his voice, "I'm going to take Hanardy for a little private questioning."

"All right!" That was Pat. But neither she nor her father turned. Madro had not waited. His fingers gripped Hanardy's arm firmly at the elbow. Shrinking, Hanardy realized the other's intent.

A test!

To determine how vulnerable he was.

To the death—if he were that weak.

Even as Hanardy had these awarenesses, Madro drew him away from the storeroom and around a corner. Hanardy kept looking back, not daring to call for help but yet hoping that the professor and his daughter would be motivated to follow.

His final view of them showed them still inside the closet, and the professor was saying, "A series of tests on this wall should—"

Hanardy wondered what they would think when they found him gone—and dead.

Madro drew Hanardy along the side corridor and into a room. He closed the door, and they were alone. Hanardy still not resisting.

Madro stood there for a few minutes, tall, lean, smiling.

"Let's settle this once and for all," he said softly. "Myself—against whatever ability you were endowed with."

And because Hanardy had begun to have fantasies, had nurtured a tiny hope that maybe it was true, that maybe something great had rubbed off on him—as Professor Ungarn had implied—for a few seconds, Hanardy actually waited for that something inside him to handle this situation.

That was all the tune he had—seconds. The speed of Madro's attack, and the total violent intent of it, instantly defeated that waiting reaction.

He was lifted effortlessly, grabbed by one foot, held like a rag doll, and incredibly was about to have his head dashed against the near wall—when, with a primitive survival spasm of effort, Hanardy kicked with his other foot, kicked hard against the wrist of the hand by which Madro held him.

For that moment, for that one attack, it was resistance enough. The Dreegh let him go. Hanardy fell—the slow-motion fall of less than Earth gravity. Far too "slow for the speed of Madro's second attack.

In his awkward, muscle-bound way, only one of Hanardy's dragging legs actually struck the floor. The next moment he was caught again by fingers that were like granite biting into his clothes and body—Madro obviously neither heeding nor caring which.

And there was no longer any doubt in Hanardy's mind.

He had no special ability by which he might defeat the Dreegh's deadly intent.

He had no inner resources. No visions. He was helpless. His hard muscles were like putty in the steely grip of a man whose strength overwhelmingly transcended his own.

Hanardy ceased his writhings and yelled desperately, "For Pete's sake, why all this murder? Why don't you Dreeghs change, try once more to become normal?"

As swiftly as it had started, the violence ended.

Madro let him go, stepped back and stared at him. "A message!" he said. "So that's your role."

Hanardy did not immediately realize that the threat was ended. He had fallen to the floor. From that begging position he continued his appeal. "You don't have to kill me! I'll keep my mouth shut. Who'd believe me, anyway?"

"What's normal?" The Dreegh's voice was cold and demanding. The radiation from him—uncleanness—was stronger.

"Me," said Hanardy.

"You!" Incredulous tone.

"Yeah, me." Hanardy spoke urgently. "What ails me is that I'm a low-lifer, somehow. But I'm a normal lug. Things balance out in me—that's the key. I take a drink, but not because I have to. It doesn't affect me particularly. When I was in my teens once I tried taking drugs. Hell, I just felt it didn't fit in my body. I just threw it off. That's normal. You can't do that with what you've got."

"What's normal?" Madro was cold, steady, remote.

"You're sick," said Hanardy. "All that blood and life energy. It's abnormal. Not really necessary. You can be cured."

Having spoken the strange words, Hanardy realized their strangeness. He blinked.

"I didn't know I was going to say that," he mumbled.

The Dreegh's expression was changing as he listened. Suddenly he nodded and said aloud, "I actually believe we've been given a communication from the Great Galactic. A twelfth-hour, last-chance offer."

"What will you do with me?" Hanardy mumbled.

"The question," came the steely reply, "is what is the best way to neutralize you? I choose this way!"

A metallic something glittered in the Dreegh's hand. From its muzzle a shimmering line of light reached toward Hanardy's head.

The spacemen flinched, tried to duck, had the cringing thought that this was death and stood there expecting at the

very least a terrible shock.

He felt nothing. The light hit his face; and it was as if a pencil beam from a bright flashlight had briefly glared into his eyes. Then the light went, and there he stood blinking a little, but unhurt so far as he could determine.

He was still standing there when the Dreegh said, "What you and I are going to do now is that you're going to come with me and show me all the places on this meteorite where there are armaments or small arms of any kind."

Hanardy walked ahead, kept glancing back; and there, each time he looked, was the long body with its grim face.

The resemblance to Thadled Madro was visibly fading, as if the other had actually twisted his features into a duplication of the young male Klugg's face, not using makeup at all, and now he was relaxing.

They came to where the Ungarns waited. Father and daughter said nothing at all. To Hanardy they seemed subdued; the girl was strangely pale. He thought: "They do know!"

The overt revelation came as the four of them arrived in the main living quarters. Professor Ungarn sighed, turned and—ignoring Hanardy—said, "Well, Mr. Dreegh, my daughter and I are wondering why the delay in our execution?"

"Hanardy!" was the reply.

Having uttered the name, as if Hanardy himself were not present, the Dreegh stood for a long moment, eyes narrowed, lips slightly parted, even white teeth clamped together. The result was a kind of a snarling smile.

"He seems to be under your control. Is he?" That was Pat Ungarn, in a small voice. The moment she had spoken, and thus attracted the Dreegh's attention, she shrank, actually retreated a few steps, as he looked at her.

Sween-Madro's tense body relaxed. But his smile was as grim as ever. And still he ignored Hanardy's presence.

"I gave Steve a special type of energy charge that will nullify for the time being what was done to him."

Professor Ungarn laughed curtly. "Do you really believe that you can defeat this—this being—William Leigh . . . defeat him with what you have done to Steve? After all, he's your real opponent, not Hanardy. This is a shadow battle. One of the fighters has left a puppet to strike his blows for him."

Sween-Madro said in an even tone, "It's not as dangerous as it seems. Puppets are notoriously poor fighters."

The professor argued, "Any individual of the race known to lesser races as Great Galactics—which was obviously not their real name—must be presumed to have taken all such

possibilities into account. What can you gain by delay?"

Sween-Madro hesitated, then: "Steve mentioned a possible cure for our condition." His voice held an edge in it.

There was a sudden silence. It settled over the room and seemed to permeate the four people in it.

The soundless time was broken by a curt laugh from Sween-Madro. He said, "I sensed that for a few seconds I seemed—"

"Human," said Pat Ungarn. "As if you had feelings and hopes and desires like us."

"Don't count on it." The Dreegh's voice was harsh.

Professor Ungarn said slowly, "I suspect that you analyzed Steve has a memory of mental contact with a supreme, perhaps even an ultimate, intelligence. Now, these earth people when awake are in that particular, perennially confused state that makes them unacceptable for galactic citizenship. So that the very best way to defend yourself from Steve's memory is to keep him awake. I therefore deduce that the energy charge you fired at him was designed to maintain in continuous stimulation the waking center in the brain stem.

"But that is only a temporary defense. In four or five days, exhaustion in Hanardy will reach an extreme state, and something in the body will have to give. What will you have then that you don't have now?"

The Dreegh seemed surprisingly willing to answer, as if by uttering his explanations aloud he could listen to them himself, and so judge them.

He said, "My colleagues will have arrived by then."

"So then you're all in the trap," said Professor Ungarn. "I think your safest bet would be to kill Pat and me right now. As for Steve—"

Hanardy had been listening to the interchange with a growing conviction that this melancholy old man was arguing them all into being immediately executed.

"Hey!" he interrupted urgently. "What are you trying to do?"

The scientist waved at him impatiently. "Shut up, Steve. Surely you realize that this Dreegh will Mil without mercy. I'm trying to find out why he's holding off. It doesn't fit with what I consider to be good sense."

He broke off, "Don't worry about him killing you. He doesn't dare. You're safe."

Hanardy felt extremely unsafe. Nevertheless, he had a

long history of accepting orders from this man; so he remained dutifully silent.

The Dreegh, who had listened to the brief interchange thoughtfully, said in an even tone that when his companions arrived, he, Hanardy and Pat Ungarn would go to Europa. He believed Pat was needed on such a journey. So no one would be killed until it was over.

"I'm remembering," Sween-Madro continued, "what Steve said about the Great Galactic noticing something. I deduce that what he noticed had to do with Steve himself. So we'll go to Spaceport and study Steve's past behavior there. Right now, let's disarm the entire place for my peace of mind."

Clearly, it would not be for anyone else's.

From room to room, and along each corridor, silently the three prisoners accompanied their powerful conqueror.

And presently every weapon in the meteorite was neutralized or disposed of. Even energy sources that might be converted were sealed off. Thus, the meteorite screens were actually de-energized and the machinery to operate them, wrecked.

The Dreegh next cut off escape possibilities by dismantling several tiny space boats. The last place they went, first Hanardy, then the professor, then Pat, and finally Sween-Madro, was Hanardy's space freighter. There, also, all the weapons were eliminated, and the Dreegh had Hanardy dismantle the control board. From the parts that were presently lying over the floor, the gaunt man, with unerring understanding, selected key items. With these in hand, he paused in the doorway. His baleful gaze caught Hanardy's shifting eyes. "Steve!" he said. "You'll stay right here."

"You mean, inside my ship?"

"Yes. If you leave here for any reason, I'll kill you. Do you understand?"

Hanardy glanced helplessly toward Professor Ungarn and then back at the Dreegh. He said, "There's some work the professor wanted me to do."

"Professor Ungarn"—it was the vampire's harsh voice cutting across Hanardy's uncertain protest—"tell him how unimportant such work is."

Hanardy was briefly aware of the old man's wan smile. The scientist said wearily, "Pat and I will be killed as soon as we have served our purpose. What he will eventually do with you, we don't know."

"So you'll stay right here. You two come with me," Sween-Madro ordered the professor and his daughter.

They went as silently as they had come. The airlock door clanged. Hanardy could hear the interlocking steel bolts wheeze into position. After that, no sound came.

The potentially most intelligent man in the solar system was alone—and wide awake.

XVI

Sitting, or lying down, waiting posed no problems for Hanardy. His years alone in space had prepared him for the ordeal that now began. There was a difference.

As he presently discovered when he lay down on his narrow cot, he couldn't sleep.

Twenty-four earth hours ticked by.

Not a thinking man, Steve Hanardy; nor a reader. The four books on board were repair manuals. He had thumbed through them a hundred times, but now he got them out and examined them again. Every page was, as he had expected, dully familiar. After a slow hour he used up their possibilities.

Another day, and still he was wide-eyed and unsleeping, but there was a developing restlessness in him, and exhaustion.

As a spaceman, Hanardy had received indoctrination in the dangers of sleeplessness. He knew of the mind's tendency to dream while awake, the hallucinatory experiences, the normal effects of the unending strain of wakefulness.

Nothing like that happened.

He did not know that the sleep center in his brain was tunelessly depressed and the wake center tunelessly stimulated. The former could not turn on, the latter could not turn off. So between them there could be none of the usual interplay with its twilight states.

But he could become more exhausted.

Though he was lying down almost continuously now, he became continually more exhausted.

On the fourth "morning" he had the thought for the first time: this is going to drive me crazy!

Such a fear had never before in his whole life passed through his mind. By late afternoon of that day, Hanardy was scared and dizzy and hopeless, in a severe dwindling spiral of decreasing sanity. What he would have done had he remained alone was not at that time brought to a test.

For late on that fourth "day" Pat Ungarn came through the airlock, found him cowering in his bunk and said, "Steve, come with me. It's time we took action."

Hanardy stumbled to his feet. He was actually heading after her when he remembered Sween-Madro's orders to him, and he stopped.

"What's the matter?" she demanded.

He mumbled simply, "He told me not to leave my ship. He'll kill me if I do."

The girl was instantly impatient. "Steve, stop this nonsense." Her sharp words were like blows striking his mind.

"You haven't any more to lose than we have. So come along!"

And she started back through the airlock. Hanardy stood, stunned and shaking. In a single sentence, spoken in her preemptory fashion, she challenged his manhood by implication, recognized that the dumb love he felt for her made him her slave and so re-established her absolute ascendancy.

Silently, tensely, he shuffled across the metal floor of the airlock and moments later was in the forbidden meteorite.

Feeling doomed.

The girl led the way to what was, in effect, the engine room of the meteorite.

As Steve trailed reluctantly behind her, Professor Ungarn rose up from a chair and came forward, smiling his infinitely tired smile.

His greeting was, "Pat wants to tell you about intelligence. Do you know what your I.Q. is?"

The question barely reached the outer ramparts of Hanardy's attention. Following the girl along one corridor after another, a fearful vision had been in his mind, of Sween-Madro suddenly rounding the next corner and striking him dead. That vision remained, but along with it was a growing wonder: Where was the Dreegh?

The professor snapped, "Steve, do you hear me?"

Forced to look at him, Hanardy was able to remember proudly that he belonged in the 55th percentile of the human race, intelligence-wise, and that his I.Q. had been tested at 104.

"The tester told me that I was above average," Hanardy said in a tone of pleasure. Then, apologetic again, he added, "Of course, beside you guys I'm nothing."

The old man said, "On the Klugg I.Q. scale you would probably rate higher than 104. We take into account more factors. Your mechanical ability and spatial relations skill would not be tested correctly by any human I.Q. test that I have examined."

He continued, "Now, Steve, I'm trying to explain this all to you in a great hurry, because some time in the next week you're going to be, in flashes, the most intelligent man in the entire solar system, and there's nothing anybody can do about it except help you use it. I want to prepare you."

Hanardy, who had anxiously stationed himself so that he could keep one eye on the open door—and who kept expecting the mighty Dreegh to walk in on the little conspiratorial group of lesser beings—shook his head hopelessly.

"You don't know what's already happened. I can be killed. Easy. I've got no defenses."

He glumly described his encounter with the Dreegh and

told how helpless he had been. "There I was on my knees, begging, until I just happened to say something that made him stop. Boy, he sure didn't think I was unkillable."

Pat came forward, stood in front of him, and grabbed his shoulders with both hands.

"Steve," she said in an urgent voice, "above a certain point of I.Q. mind actually is over matter. A being above that intelligence level cannot be killed. Not by bullets, nor by any circumstance involving matter. Now listen: in you is a memory of such an intelligence level. In manhandling you, the Dreegh was trying to see what limited stress would do. He found out. He got the message from the Great Galactic out of you.

"Steve, after that he didn't dare put a bullet into you, or fire a death-level energy beam. Because that would force this memory to the surface!"

In her intense purposefulness she tried to move him with her hands. But that only made Hanardy aware of what a

girlish body she had. So little body, so much imperious woman—it startled him for she could barely budge him, let alone shake him.

She said breathlessly, "Don't you see, Steve? You're going to be king! Try to act accordingly."

"Look—" Hanardy began, stolidly.

Rage flashed into her face. Her voice leaped past his interjection. "And if you don't stop all this resistance, in the final issue I'll put a bullet into your brain myself, and then you'll see."

Hanardy gazed into her blue eyes, so abruptly furious. He had a sinking conviction that she would do exactly what she threatened. In alarm, he said, "For Pete's sake, what do you want me to do?"

"Listen to what dad has to say!" she commanded. "And stop looking the other way. You need a high-speed education, and we haven't got much time."

That last seemed like a total understatement to Hanardy. His feeling was that he had no time at all.

Awareness saved him, then. There was the room with its machinery, and the old man and his daughter; and there was he with his mind jumping with the new fear of her threat. Hanardy had a flitting picture of the three of them lost forever inside this remote meteorite that was just one tiny part of Jupiter's colossal family of small, speeding particles of matter—a meaningless universe that visibly had no morality or justice, because it included without a qualm creatures like the Dreeghs.

As his skittering thought reached that dark depth, it suddenly occurred to Hanardy that Pat couldn't shoot him. She didn't have a gun. He opened his mouth to tell her of her helplessness. Then closed it again.

Because an opportunity might open up for her to obtain a weapon. So the threat remained, receded in time . . . but not to be dismissed. Nonetheless, he grew calmer. He still felt compelled, and jittery. But he stayed there and listened, then, to a tiny summary of the story of human intelligence and the attempts that had been made to measure it.

It seemed human intelligence tests were based on a curve where the average was 100. Each test Professor Ungarn had seen revealed an uncertainty about what constituted an intelligence factor, and what did not. Was the ability to tell left from right important to intelligence? One test included

it. Should an individual be able to solve brain twisters? Many testers considered this trait of great importance. And almost all psychologists insisted on a subtle understanding of the meaning of words and many of them. Skill at arithmetic was a universal requirement. Quick observation of a variety of geometric shapes and forms was included. Even a general knowledge of world conditions and history was a requirement in a few tests.

"Now, we Kluggs," continued the professor in his melancholy voice, "have gone a step beyond that."

The words droned on through Hanardy's mind. Kluggs were theory-operating people . . . theories based on primary and not secondary abilities. Another race, "higher" than the Kluggs—called the Lennels—operated on Certainty . . . a high harmonic of Authority.

"Certainty, with the Lennels," said the old man, "is of course a system and not an open channel. But even so it makes them as powerful as the Dreeghs."

On an I.Q. curve that would include humans, Kluggs, Lennels and Dreeghs, the respective averages would be 100, 220, 380, and 450. The Dreeghs had an open channel on control of physical movement.

"Even a Great Galactic can only move as fast as—he cannot move faster than—a Dreegh," Professor Ungarn commented and explained. "Such open channels are pathways in the individual to a much greater ability than his standard I.Q. permits."

Musical, mathematical, artistic, or any special physical, mental or emotional ability was an open channel that operated outside the normal human, Klugg, or even the Dreegh curve. By definition, a Great Galactic was a person whose I.Q. curve included only open channels.

It had been reported that the open channel curve began at about 80. And, though no one among the lesser races had ever seen anything higher than 3,000—the limits of the space phenomenon—it was believed that the Great Galactic I.Q. curve ascended by types to about 10,000.

"It is impossible," said the Professor's melancholy voice, "to imagine what kind of an open channel that would be. An example of an 800 open channel is Pat. She can deceive.

She can get away with a sleight of hand, a feint, a diversion--"

The old man stopped suddenly. His gaze flicked past

Hanardy's right shoulder and fastened on something behind him that Hanardy couldn't see.

XVII

The spaceman froze with the sudden terrified conviction that the worst had happened, and that the Dreegh Sween-Madro was behind him.

But it couldn't be, he realized. Professor Ungarn was looking at the control board of the meteorite. There was no door there.

Hanardy allowed himself to turn around. He saw that on the big instrument panel a viewplate had lighted, showing a scene of space.

It was a familiar part of the starry heavens looking out toward interstellar space, away from the sun. Near the center of the scene a light was blinking.

Even as Hanardy watched, the viewplate picture shifted slightly, centering exactly on the blinking light.

Behind Hanardy, there was a gasp from the girl, "Dad," she whispered, "is it--?"

Professor Ungarn had walked toward the viewplate, past Hanardy and so into the latter's range of vision. The old man nodded with an air of utter weariness.

"Yes, I'm afraid it is, my dear. The other eight Dreeghs have arrived."

He glanced hopelessly at Hanardy. "My daughter had some kind of idea of using you against Sween-Madro before they got here."

Hanardy said blankly, "Using me?"

The meaning of that brought him with a jar out of his own body exhaustion.

The old man was shrugging. "Whatever the merit of her plan, of course, now it's too late."

He finished dully, "Now we'll learn our fate."

The tableau of dejection held for seconds only. A sound, a high-pitched human voice, broke through the silence and the dark emotion that filled the room.

"How far away are they?" It was the girl's voice, from behind Hanardy, strained but recognizable. "Exactly how long till they get here?"

Hanardy's mind stirred from its thrall as Professor Ungarn said dully, "Less than two hours would be my guess."

Notice--

He thereupon started a technical comment to her about the speed with which the viewplate had centered on the ship, implying--he said--the enormous velocity of its approach.

His explanation was never completed. In the middle of it, the girl uttered a screech and then, to Hanardy's amazement, she raced past him and flung herself, arms flailing, at the old man.

She kept striking at his face then, yelling the most blood-curdling curses in a furious soprano voice. A long moment went by before Hanardy was able to make out what she was saying:

"--You stupid old man! What do you mean, only two hours? Two hours is all we need, damn you!"

At that point Hanardy emerged from his surprise. Awkwardly, he jumped over her, grabbed her, pulled her away. "For Pete's sake!" he cried.

The girl tried to turn on him, her struggling body writhing in his grip. But he held her, uttering apologies the while. Finally, she realized that his strength was too much for her. She ceased her efforts, and with an attempt at control said grimly, "Steve, this crazy old fool who is my father has twice now accepted defeat--when it wasn't necessary!"

She broke off, addressed the old man. Her voice went up a whole octave as she said, "Show Steve what you showed me only a few minutes before I went to get him."

Professor Ungarn was white and haggard. "I'm sorry, my dear," he mumbled. He nodded to Hanardy. "I'm sure you can let her go now."

Hanardy released the girl. She stood straightening her clothes, but her eyes still flashed. "Show him, damn it," she snapped, "and make it quick."

Professor Ungarn took Hanardy's arm and drew him toward the control board, speaking in apologetic tones. "I failed my daughter. But the truth is I'm over three hundred years old. That's just about it for a Klugg; so I keep forgetting how younger people might feel."

Pat--he went on--was a product of a late-life marriage. Her mother had flatly refused to go along on his assignment as a galactic watcher. In bringing the girl with him, he had hoped to shield her from the early shock of discovering that she was a member of a servant race. But isolation had not, in fact, saved her feelings. And now, their very remoteness from the safeguarding military strength of associated lower-level races had brought a horrifying threat of death from which he had decided there was no escape.

"So it didn't even occur to me to tell her--"

"Show him," the girl's voice came shrilly from the rear,

"what you didn't bother to tell me."

Professor Ungarn made a few control adjustments, and there appeared on the viewplate first a picture of a room and then of a bed in one corner with an almost naked man lying on it.

The bed came into full focus, filled the viewplate. Hanardy drew in his breath with a sharp hiss of disbelief. It was the Dreegh.

The man who lay there, seemingly unconscious, bore almost no resemblance to the tall, vital being who had come aboard in the guise of Pat's fiance. The body on the bed was unnaturally thin; the rib cage showed. His face, where it had been full-cheeked, was sunken and hollow.

"They need other people's blood and life energy to survive, and they need it almost continuously," the old man whispered.

"That's what I wanted to show you, Steve." Her tone grew scathing, as she continued, "My father didn't let me see that until a few minutes ago. Imagine! Here we are under sentence of death, and on the day, almost on the hour that the other Dreeghs are due to arrive, he finally reveals it—something he had watched developing for days."

The old man shut off the scene on the viewplate and sighed.

"I'm afraid it never occurred to me that a Klugg could challenge a Dreegh. Anyway, I imagine Sween-Madro originally arrived here expecting to use us as a source of blood and life force. And then when you showed all that Great Galactic programming, he changed his mind and decided to

wait until the coming of his colleagues. So there he is—at our mercy, Pat thinks."

Hanardy had spent his years of association with this couple deferring to them. So he waited now, patiently, for the scientist to tell him what to do about the opportunity.

The old man said, with a sigh, "Pat thinks if we make a bold attack at this stage, we can kill him."

Hanardy was instantly skeptical, but he had never been able to influence this father and daughter in any way, and he was about to follow the old, withdrawing pattern, when he remembered again that there were no weapons around to make any kind of attack whatsoever.

He pointed out that fact and was still talking when he felt something cold touch his hand.

Startled, he glanced down and back—and saw that the girl was pushing a metal bar about one and a half feet long, at his palm. Involuntarily, still not thinking, he closed his fingers over it. As soon as he had it firmly in one chunky hand, Hanardy recognized by its feel that it was a special aluminum alloy, hard, light, and tough.

The girl spoke. "And just in case that dumb look on your

face means what I think it does," she said, "here are your orders: take that bar, go where the Dreegh is and beat him to death with it."

Hanardy turned slowly, not quite sure that it was he who was being addressed. "Me?" he said. And then, after a long pause, "Hey!"

"And you'd better get started," said the girl, "there isn't much time."

"Hey!" repeated Hanardy, blankly.

XVIII

Slowly, the room swung back into a kind of balance. And Hanardy grew aware that the girl was speaking again:

"I'll go in through the door facing the bed," she stated. "If he can awaken at all in his condition, I want to ask him some questions. I must know about the nature of super-intelligence."

For a brain in as dulled a state as Hanardy's, the words were confusing. He had been striving to adjust to the idea that he was the one who was supposed to go in to the Dreegh, and simultaneously he was bracing himself against what she wanted him to do.

With so many thoughts already in his mind, it was hard to get the picture that this slip of a girl intended to confront the Dreegh by herself.

Pat was speaking again, in an admonishing tone. "You stand just inside the other door, Steve. Now listen carefully. Do your best not to attract his attention, which I hope will be on me. The information I want is for your benefit. But when I yell, 'Come!' don't delay. You come and you kill, understand?"

Hanardy had had a thought of his own. A sudden stark realization. The realization was that in this deadly dangerous situation there was ultimately a solution.

He could cast off in his own spacecraft!

But that meant he would have to obtain the key equipment Sween-Madro had taken from his ship. Obtain it, repair the control board, get away!

To obtain it he'd have to go to where it was—into the Dreegh's bedroom. At least apparently, he would have to do exactly what Pat wanted.

Fear dimmed before that obvious purpose, yielded to the feeling that there was no other way.

Thinking thus, Hanardy abruptly uttered agreement. "Yep," he said, "I understand."

The girl had started toward the door. At the tone of his voice, she paused, turned back and gazed at him suspicious-

ly. "Now, don't you go having any plans of your own!"
She spoke accusingly.

Hanardy was instantly guilty, instantly confused. "For Pete's sake," he said, "I don't like what you want to do—going in there and waking this guy. I don't see any good in my listening to a lecture on intelligence. I'm not smart enough to understand it! So, my vote is if we're going in let's just kill him right off."

The girl had turned away. She did not glance back as she walked out of the room. Hanardy grimaced at Professor Ungarn. Moments later he was through the door, following her, weary, hopeless, mentally shut down, but resigned.

Pat heard him stumbling along behind her. Without looking around she said, "You're a weapon, Steve. I have to figure out how to fire that weapon and escape. Basically, that's all we need to do! Get away from the Dreeghs and hide. Understand?"

He was a man stumbling along metal and rock corridors in a remote part of the solar system, his normal stolidness made worse now by an immense weariness. So he heard the words she uttered; even understood their surface meaning.

It was enough awareness for him to be able to mumble, "Yeah—yeah!"

Otherwise—she went on when he had acknowledged—he might go off like a firecracker, discharging whatever energy homo-galactic had endowed him with in a series of meaningless explosions aimed at nothing and accomplishing nothing.

So the question was: What kind of weapon was he?

"As I see it," she finished, "that information we can only hope to gain from the Dreegh. That's why we have to talk to him."

"Yeah," mumbled Hanardy, hoarsely. "Yeah."

They came all too quickly to their destination. At the girl's nod Hanardy broke into an uneven lope and ran around to the far corridor. He fumbled the door open and stepped inside.

At this point Pat had already been through her door for fifteen seconds. Hanardy entered upon a strange scene, indeed.

On the bed, the almost naked body was stirring. The eyes opened and stared at the girl, and she said breathlessly, "That! What you just now did—becoming aware of me
How do you do that?"

From where he stood, Hanardy could not see the Dreegh's head. He was aware only that the Dreegh did not answer.

"What," asked Pat Ungarn, "is the nature of the intelligence of a Great Galactic?"

The Dreegh spoke. "Pat," he said, "you have no future, so why are you making this inquiry?"

"I have a few days."

"True," said Sween-Madro.

He seemed unaware that there was a second person in the room. So he can't read minds! Hanardy exulted. For the first time he had hope.

"I have a feeling," Pat was continuing, "that you're at least slightly vulnerable in your present condition. So answer my question! Or--"

She left the threat and the sentence unfinished.

Again the body on the bed shifted position. Then:

"All right, my dear, if it's information you want, I'll give you more than you bargained for."

"What do you mean?"

"There are no Great Galactics," said the Dreegh. "No such beings exist, as a race. To ask about their intelligence is--not meaningless, but complex."

"That's ridiculous!" Pat's tone was scathing. "We saw him!"

She half-glanced at Hanardy for confirmation, and Hanardy found himself nodding his head in full agreement with her words. Boy, he sure knew there was a Great Galactic.

On the bed, Sween-Madro sat up.

"The Great Galactic is a sport! Just a member of some lesser race who was released by a chance stimulus so that he temporarily became a super-being. The method?" The Dreegh smiled coldly. "Every once in a while, accidentally, enough energy accumulates to make such a stimulus possible. The lucky individual, in his super-state, realized the whole situation. When the energy had been transformed by his own body and used up as far as he himself was concerned, he stored the transformed life-energy where it could eventually be used by someone else. The next person would be able to utilize the energy in its converted form. Having gone through the energy, each recipient in turn sank back to some lower state.

"Thus William Leigh, earth reporter, had for a few brief hours been the only Great Galactic in this area of space. By now his super-ability is gone forever. And there is no one to replace him.

"And that, of course," said the Dreegh, "is the problem with Hanardy. To use his memory of intelligence in its full possibility, he'll need life energy in enormous quantities. Where will he get it? He won't! If we're careful, and investigate his background cautiously, we should be able to

prevent Steve getting to any source, known or unknown."

Hanardy had listened to the account with a developing

empty feeling from the pit of his stomach. He saw that the color had drained from the girl's face.

"I don't believe it," she faltered. "That's just a--"

She got no further, because in that split instant the Dreegh was beside her. The sheer speed of his movement was amazing. Hanardy, watching, had no clear memory of the vampire actually getting off the bed.

But now, belatedly, he realized what the Dreegh's movements on the bed must have been--maneuverings, reballancings. The creature-man had been surprised--had been caught in a prone, helpless position, but used the talk to brace himself for attack.

Hanardy was miserably aware that Pat Ungarn was equally taken by surprise. Sween-Madro's fingers snatched at her shoulder. With effortless strength, he spun her around to face him. His lank body towered above her, as he spoke.

"Hanardy has a memory of something, Pat. That's all. And that is all there is. That's all that's left of the Great Galactics."

Pat gasped, "If it's nothing, why are you scared?"

"It's not quite nothing," Sween-Madro replied patiently. "There is a--potential. One chance in a million. I don't want him to have any chance to use it, though of course we'll presently have to take a chance with him and put him into a state of sleep."

He released her and stepped back. "No, no, my dear, there's no possible chance of you making use of some special ability in Hanardy--because I know he's over there by the door. And he can't move fast enough to get over here and hit me with that metal bar."

The tense Hanardy sagged. And Pat Ungarn seemed frozen, glaring at the creature. She came back to life, abruptly. "I know why you don't dare shoot Steve. So why don't you shoot me?" Her tone was up in pitch, challenging.

"Hey!" said Hanardy. "Careful!"

"Don't worry, Steve," she answered gaily without turning around. "It's not because I have any I.Q. potentialities. But he won't touch me either. He knows you like me. You might have a bad thought about him at a key moment, later. Isn't that right, Mr. Dreegh? I've got your little dilemma figured out, haven't I, even though I've only got a Klugg brain."

Her words seemed suicidal to Hanardy. But Sween-Madro

just stood gazing at her, swaying a little, saying nothing--a naked scarecrow of a man from the waist up, and below, wearing knee-length dungarees over bone-thin legs.

Yet there was no belief in Hanardy that the Dreegh was vulnerable. He remembered the other's high speed movements—that seemingly instantaneous transition from one location in space to another . . . from the bed to Pat, at invisible speed. Fantastic!

Once more Pat's voice broke the silence, mockingly:
"What's this? An I.Q. of 400 or 500 baffled? Doesn't know what to do? Remember, no matter what action you take, he can't stay awake much longer. It's only a matter of time before something has to give."

At that point, another sharp anxiety struck through Hanardy. He thought: She's wasting time. Every minute those other Dreeghs are getting closer!

The thought was so urgent in his mind, he spoke it aloud, "For Pete's sake, Miss Pat, those other Dreeghs'll be here any second—"

"Shut up, you fool!"

Instantly shrill, hysterical, terrified—that was her totally unexpected reaction.

She said something else in that same high-pitched tone, but Hanardy did not hear it clearly. For in that moment between his own words and hers, the Dreegh turned. And his arm moved. That was all that was visible. Where did it move to? The super-speed of the movement blurred that. It could only, logically, have been toward the pocket of his dungarees, but nothing like that was visible.

A weapon glittered; a beam of light touched Hanardy's face.

As blackness swept over him, he realized what else it was the girl had said: "Steve, he'll put you to sleep while that thought about the Dreeghs coming quickly is in your mind. . . ."

XIX

How swiftly can transition between wakefulness and sleep take place?

As long as it requires for the wakefulness center to shut off and the sleep center to turn on.

So there is no apparent conscious time lag. If you live a dull, human existence, it seems brief enough.

To Hanardy, who was normally duller than most, it seemed no time at all.

He started forward, his lips parted to speak—and he was already asleep . . . so far as he—the self—was aware. He did have a vague feeling of starting to fall.

Consciously, nothing more occurred.

Below the conscious, there was a measurable lapse of

time.

During that time, the particles inside the atoms of his body did millions of millions of separate actions. And molecules by the quadrillion maneuvered in the twilight zone of matter. Because of the thought that had been in Hanardy's mind, at some level of his brain he noticed exact spots of space, saw and identified the other-ness of the Dreeghs in the approaching Dreegh ship, estimated their other-where-ness, computed the mathematics of change. It was simple in the virtual emptiness of space, difficult where matter was dense. But never impossible.

As he did so, the Dreegh ship with its eight Dreeghs changed location from one spot to another exact spot in space, bridging the gap through a lattice-work of related spots.

In the bedroom in the meteorite, the visible event was that Hanardy fell. A twisting fall, it was, whereby he sprawled on his side, the arm with the metal bar in it partly under him.

As Hanardy collapsed to the floor, the Dreegh walked

past Pat toward the open door behind it. Reaching it, he clutched at it, seemingly for support.

Pat stared at him. After what had happened she didn't quite dare to believe that his apparent weakness was as great as she saw it to be.

Yet after a little, she ventured, "May I ask my father a question?"

There was no answer. The Dreegh stood at the door, and he seemed to be clinging to it.

Excitement leaped through the girl.

Suddenly she dared to accept the reality of the exhaustion that was here. The Dreegh's one mighty effort had depleted him, it seemed.

She whirled and raced over to Hanardy, looking for the metal bar. She saw at once that he was lying on top of it and tried to roll him over. She couldn't. He seemed to be solidly imbedded in the floor in that awkward position.

But there was no time to waste! Breathing hard, she reached under him for the metal weapon, found it, tugged at it.

It wouldn't budge.

Pull at it, twist it, exert all her strength—it was no use. Hanardy had a vice-like grip on the bar, and his body weight reinforced that grip. Nothing she could do could move it, or him.

Pat believed the position, the immovability, was no accident. Dismayed, she thought the Dreegh caused him to fall like that.

She felt momentarily awed. What an amazing prediction ability Sween-Madro had had—to have realized the nature of the danger against him and taken an exact defense against it.

It was a maneuver designed to defeat, exactly and precisely, a small Klugg woman, whose ability at duplication could not lighten the weight of a body like Hanardy's enough to matter and whose ability to solve problems did not include the ability to unravel a muscularly knotted hand grip.

But—she was on her feet, infinitely determined—it would do him no good!

The Dreegh also had a weapon. His only hope must be that she wouldn't dare come near him.

Instants later, she was daring. Her trembling fingers fumbled over his dungarees, seeking openings.

They found nothing.

But he had a weapon, she told herself, bewildered. He fired it at Steve. I saw him!

Again, more frantically, she searched all the possibilities of the one garment he wore—in vain.

She remembered, finally, in her desperation, that her father must have been watching this room. He might have seen where it was.

"Dad!" she called anxiously.

"Yes, my dear?" The reply from the intercom came at once, reassuringly calm.

Watching the Dreegh warily, she asked, "Do you have any advice on how to kill him?"

The old man, sitting in the control room of the meteorite, sighed. From his viewpoint, he could on one viewplate see the girl, Hanardy's unconscious body and Sween-Madro; on another he observed gloomily that the Dreegh ship had arrived and had attached to an airlock. As he watched that second viewplate, three men and five women came out of the ship and into a corridor of the meteorite. It was obvious that killing Sween-Madro was no longer of value.

The girl's voice cut across his awareness. "He must have used the super-speed again without my noticing and hidden his weapon. Did you see what he did with it?"

What Professor Ungarn was seeing was that the newly arrived Dreeghs, though in no hurry, were heading directly toward Madro and Pat.

Watching them, the professor thought, Pat was right. Sween-Madro had been vulnerable. He could have been killed. But it was too late.

Sick with self-recrimination he abandoned the control room and hurried to join his daughter.

By the time he arrived, Sween-Madro was back in the bed, and Hanardy had been lifted onto a powered dolly which had been wheeled alongside a machine that had evidently been brought from the Dreegh ship.

The machine was a simple device with a pair of bulbous, transparent cups and a suction system. A needle was inserted into a blood vessel on Hanardy's right arm. Swiftly, a turgid bluish-red liquid rose in one of the bulbous cups;

about a quart, Professor Ungarn estimated to Ms daughter in a whisper.

One by one, wordlessly, the Dreeghs went to the machine. Another needle was used. And into each a tiny drain of blood siphoned from the red stuff in the bulbous cup. It seemed as if about half of it was taken.

Still without anyone speaking, the needle was inserted into Sween-Madro's arm; and the rest of the blood from the cup flowed into him.

Pat stared at the dreadful beings with avid curiosity. All her life she had heard of, and been warned against, these creatures; and here they were from all those distances of years and miles. Four men and five women.

Three of the five women were brunette, one was a blonde; the fifth was a redhead.

The women were, every one, tall and willowy. The men were uniformly six feet four or five and gaunt of build. Was height a part of the Dreegh illness? Pat wondered, seeing them together like this. Did Dreegh bones grow as a result of their disease? She could only wonder.

The figure on the bed moved. Sween-Madro opened his eyes and sat up.

He seemed shaky and unsure. Again, there was silent action. The Dreegh men did not move, but the women one by one went over and lightly kissed Sween-Madro on the lips.

At each touch of lips there was a faint bluish light, a flash of brightness, like a spark. Invariably, the blue spark leaped from the woman to the man.

And with each flash he grew more alive. His body became visibly larger. His eyes grew bright.

Pat, who had been watching with total fascination, suddenly felt two pairs of hands grab her. She had time to let out a shriek as two Dreegh men carried her over to Sween and held her above him, her face over his.

At the final moment, she ceased her futile struggle and froze.

She was aware of Sween's sardonic eyes gazing up at her.

Then, with a deliberate movement he raised his head and brushed her lips with his.

She expected to die.

Deep inside the back of her head, a fire started. The heat of it seemed instantly unbearable; instantly there was a flash of blue flame from her lips to his.

Then she was back on the floor, dizzy, but—as she realized presently—recovering. And still alive.

Sween-Madro swung his feet over the edge of the bed and said, "The existence of such brother-and-sister energy flows, Pat—which you have now experienced—and the Dreegh ability to use them make it likely that we could become the most powerful beings in the galaxy on a continuing basis. If we can defeat Hanardy. We only took about ten percent from you. We don't want you damaged—yet."

He stood up, walked over and looked down at the unconscious spaceman. Presently he beckoned Pat and Professor Ungarn; father and daughter came at once.

The Dreegh said, "I'm still not well. Can you detect any change in him?" He did not wait for a reply, but said in relief, "I guess nothing happened. He looks as low-grade a human as you could ever not want to meet or deal with in any way, and that's the way he was before—don't you agree?"

Pat said quickly, "I don't understand. What did you expect?"

"Hopefully, nothing," was the reply. "But that remark about how near our ship was was the first un-programmed use of his ability. A spatial relationship action like that comes in the Great Galactic intelligence curve at about I.Q. 1200."

"But what did you fear?" Pat persisted.

"That it would feed back through his nervous system!"

"What would that do?"

The Dreegh merely stared at her, sardonically. It was Professor Ungarn's voice that finally broke the silence. "My dear, the Dreeghs are actually acting as if their only enemy is a programmed Hanardy."

"Then you believe their analysis of the nature of the Great Galactics?"

"They believe it; so I believe it."

"Then there's no hope?"

The old man pointed at Hanardy. "There's Steve."

"But he's just a bum. That's why we selected him to be our drayhorse, remember?" She spoke accusingly. "Because he was the dumbest, most honest jerk in the solar system—"

remember?"

The old man nodded, suddenly looking gloomy. Pat became aware that the Dreeghs were watching them, as if they were listening.

It was one of the dark-haired women who spoke. "My name is Rilke," she said. She went on, in a low, husky voice, "What you've just described—a man as unimportant as this one—is one of the reasons why we want to go to Europa. We must find out what did the Great Galactic see in this strange little man. We should know because for our blood storage tanks and energy pool we need the blood and life force of a million people from this otherwise undefended planetary system. And we dare not kill a single one of those million until the riddle of Hanardy is resolved."

XX

Take a sentient being—

Everyone aboard the Dreegh super-ship that flew to the moon Europa in thirty hours (instead of many weeks) fitted that description: the Dreeghs, Pat, Professor Ungarn, and the sleeping Hanardy.

They had brought along Hanardy's freighter to be their landing craft. They came down without incident into Hanardy's permanent, spaceship berth in Spaceport, the large moon's principal city.

Consider any sentient person—

That includes a man asleep . . . like Hanardy.

There he lies, helpless. In that fourth sleep stage that Hanardy was in—the deep delta-wave stage—push at him, hit him, roll him over. It is enormously difficult to awaken him. Yet it is in this stage that a person can act out a sleep-walker's strange goal.

Force this sentient individual to interact with a grossly vast universe—

"We're taking no chances," said the Dreegh brunette woman, Rilke. "We're going to bring him into motion on the somnambulistic level."

It was Sween who directed a bright light at Hanardy's face; after mere seconds, he shut it off.

There was a measurable passage of time. Then the body on the bed stirred.

A second woman—the blonde—without glancing up from the instrument she was monitoring, made a gesture and said hurriedly, "The somnambulistic purpose is in the delta-wave band C-10-13B."

It was a private nomenclature that meant nothing to Pat. But the words caused an unexpected flutter of excitement among the Dreeghs.

Sween-Madro turned to Pat. "Have you any idea why Hanardy should want to visit with, and have a feeling of affection for, thirteen people in Spaceport?"

Pat shrugged. "He associates with certain space bums around town," she said contemptuously. "Typical hangers-on of the kind you find out in space. I wouldn't waste a minute on them."

Sween said coldly, "We take no chances, Pat. The ideal solution would be to kill all thirteen. But if we do, Hanardy might have punitive dreams about us as he awakens--which awakening will happen very soon now, one way or another. So"--the long gaunt face cracked into a grimace of a smile --"we'll render them useless to him."

"Ssssh!" said the blonde woman. She motioned toward the figure on the bed.

The somnambulistic Hanardy had opened his eyes.

Pat was aware, then, of the Dreeghs watching alertly. Involuntarily, briefly, she held her breath and waited.

Hanardy did not glance at her or at the Dreeghs, showed no awareness of anyone else being in the room.

Without a word, he got out of bed and removed his pajamas. Then he went into his bathroom and shaved and combed his hair. He came out again into the bedroom and began to dress, putting on his dirty pants, a shirt, and a pair of boots.

As Hanardy walked out of the room, Rilke shoved at Pat. "Remain near the sleepwalker," she commanded.

Pat was aware that Rilke and Sween-Madro stayed close behind her. The others had slipped somewhere out of sight.

The somnambulistic Hanardy opened the airlock and headed down the gangplank.

Sween-Madro gestured with his head for Pat to follow,

The girl had hesitated at the top of the spidery "plank." And now she stood for a moment gazing out at the city of Spaceport.

The airlock of Hanardy's freighter was located about fifty feet above the heavy lower scaffolding that held the vessel. There was a space of about five feet between the opening and the upper scaffolding which actually constituted a part of the dock.

Almost straight ahead of her Pat could see the first building of the city. It was hard for her to realize that the entire populace of the port, with all their available equipment, had no chance against the Dreeghs. There was no protection here for her, or Hanardy, or anyone.

Awe came. The decisive factor was the intelligence of the Dreeghs.

She thought: and what's in Steve's memory of intelligence is all that stands between these vampires and their victims.

Minutes later she found herself walking beside Hanardy. She stole a glance at his blank face, so stolid and unintellectual. He seemed like a small hope, indeed.

The Dreeghs and she followed Hanardy along a street, into a hotel, up an elevator and along a corridor to a door numbered 517. Hanardy pressed a little button, and after a little the door opened. A middle-aged woman shuffled into view. She was dumpy and bleary-eyed, but her face brightened into a welcoming smirk as she saw Hanardy.

"Hi, there, Han!" she yelled.

Having spoken, she must have realized that the Dreeghs and Pat were with the spaceman. If she had any defensive thought, it was too late. Sween made her helpless with his mechanical light-flash hypnotism, about which he commented casually after they were inside and the door shut, "Nothing more complex is needed for human beings, or—" he shrugged—"Kluggs. Sorry, Pat," he apologized to the girl, "but the fact is that, like the people of this system, you also have a vague idea that hypnotism and other nonconscious phenomena were invented by hypnotists and similar unscrupulous people."

He added ruefully, "You'll never surprise a Lennel, or a Medder, or a Hulak with any control method short of—" He broke off. "Never mind!"

He turned to the woman. Presently, under his guidance she was speaking enforced truths about her real relationship with Hanardy.

From the time they had met, Hanardy had given her money.

"What does he really get for it?" asked Rilke.

"Nothing."-

Since their method evoked only truth, Rilke frowned at Sween, "It couldn't be altruism. Not on his low level?"

It was visibly an unexpected development. Pat said scathingly, "If altruism is an I.Q. factor, you Dreeghs probably come in below idiot."

The man did not reply. The next instant his preternaturally long body was bending over the bloated female whom they had so briefly interrogated. There was a flash of blue as his lips touched hers. Half a dozen times he repeated that caricature of a kiss. Each time, the woman grew visibly smaller, like a sick person fading away on a hospital bed.

Finally, a bright light was flashed into the tired eyes, excising all memory of her degradation. But when they departed, the shriveled being on the bed was still alive.

The next" person that the somnambulistic Hanardy led them to was a man. And this time it was Rilke who took the glancing kiss, and it was into her nervous system that the blue fire was drawn.

They drained all thirteen of Hanardy's friends in the same way; and then they decided to kill Hanardy.

Grinning, Sween explained. "If we blow him up with you, the woman for whom he feels a dumb devotion, standing beside him in his home port—the only home he knows—he'll be busy protecting those he loves. And then we, who will be out in space while this is going on, will probably survive the few instants that it will take for him to awaken."

As she heard those words, Pat felt a hardening of her own resolve, a conviction that she had nothing to lose.

They had started up the metal gangplank that led to the airlock of Hanardy's ship. Hanardy walked blankly in front, behind him was the girl, then Rilke, and, bringing up the rear, Sween. As they reached the final few feet, Pat braced herself and spoke aloud.

"It seems wrong—" she said.

And leaped forward. She put her hands against Hanardy and shoved him over the side of the plank.

As she expected, the Dreeghs were quick. Hanardy was

still teetering over the fifty-foot drop from the narrow walk when both the man and woman were beside him. As one person, they reached over the low handrail, reached out, reached down. That swiftly they had him.

In pushing at Hanardy, Pat found herself automatically propelled by the effort of her thrust away from Hanardy and over the other edge of the plank.

As she fell, she completed in her mind the sentence she had begun: "It seems wrong . . . not to put that dumb love to the uttermost test!"

XXI

Spaceport, on Europa, like other similar communities in the solar system, was not at all like an ordinary little town of four thousand human beings. If anything, it resembled an old-style naval refueling station in the South Pacific, with its military establishment and garrison. Except that the "garrison" of Spaceport consisted of technical experts who worked in complex mechanical systems for the repair and servicing of spaceships. In addition, Spaceport was a mining post, where small craft brought their meteorite ore, gigantic plants separated the precious from the debris, and the resultant refined materials were trans-shipped to Earth.

The similarity to a South Pacific port was borne out in one other respect. Exactly as each little island post of Earth's Pacific Ocean gradually accumulated a saturation of human flotsam and jetsam, so on Spaceport there had gathered a strange tribe of space bums. The tribe consisted

of men and women in almost equal numbers, the size of the group being variable. Currently, it consisted of thirteen persons. They were not exactly honest people, but they were not criminals. That was impossible. In space, a person convicted of one of the basic crimes was automatically sent back to Earth and not allowed out again. However, there was a great tolerance among enforcement officials as to what constituted a crime. Not drunkenness, certainly, and

not dope addiction, for either men or women. Any degree of normal sex, paid for or not, was never the subject of investigation.

There was a reason for this latitude. The majority of the persons involved—men and women—were technically trained. They were bums because they couldn't hold a steady job, but during rush periods, a personnel officer of the pressured company could often be found down in the bars on Front Street looking for a particular individual, or group. The bums thus located might then earn good money for a week or two, or perhaps even three.

It was exactly such a personnel officer looking for exactly such lost souls who discovered all thirteen of the people he wanted—four women and nine men—were sick in their hotel rooms.

Naturally, he called the port authorities. After an examination, the M.D. who was brought in stated that all thirteen showed extreme weakness. They seemed to be, as he so succinctly put it, "only marginally alive".

The report evoked an alarm reaction from the Port Authority. The Director had visions of some kind of epidemic sweeping up from these dregs of people and decimating his little kingdom.

He was still considering a course of action when reports from private doctors indicated that the illness, whatever it was, had affected a large number of affluent citizens of Spaceport in addition to the bums.

The total in the final count came to a hundred and ninety-three persons sick with the same loss of energy and near-death apathy.

XXII

At some mind level, Hanardy became aware that Patricia Ungarn was falling to her death.

To save her, he had to get energy from somewhere.

He knew immediately where the energy would have to come from.

For a cosmic moment, as his somnambulism was disrupted and replaced by the dreaming state that precedes awakening, he was held by rigidities of his personality.

There was a split instant, then, as some aware part of him gazed in amazement and horror at a lifetime of being a sloppy Joe.

That one glance of kaleidoscopic insight was all that was necessary.

The barriers went down.

Time ceased. For him, all particle flows ended.

In that forever state, Hanardy was aware of himself as being at a location.

Around him were 193 other locations. He observed at once that thirteen of the locations were extremely wavery. He immediately excluded the thirteen from his purpose.

To the remaining 180 locations, he made a postulate. He postulated that the 180 would be glad to make immediate payment.

Each of the 180 thereupon willingly gave to Hanardy seven-tenths of all the available life-energy in their 180 locations.

As that energy flowed to Hanardy, tune resumed for him.

The living universe that was Steve Hanardy expanded out to what appeared to be a great primeval dark. In that dark were blacker blobs, nine of them—the Dreeghs. At the very heart of the black excrescences ran a fine, wormlike thread of silvery brightness: the Dreegh disease, shining, twisting, ugly.

As Hanardy noticed that utterly criminal distortion, he became aware of a red streak in the sinister silver.

He thought, in immense astonishment, "Why, that's my blood!"

He realized, then, with profound interest that this was the blood the Dreeghs had taken from him when they first arrived at the Ungarn meteorite.

They had given Sween most of it. But the others had each eagerly taken a little of the fresh stuff for themselves.

Hanardy realized that that was what the Great Galactic had noticed about him. He was a catalyst! In his presence by one means or another people got well... in many ways.

In a few days longer, his blood in them would enable the Dreeghs to cure their disease.

The Dreeghs would discover the cure belatedly—too late to change their forcing methods.

For Hanardy, the scene altered.

The nine black blobs were no longer shaped by their disease, as he saw them next. He found himself respecting the nine as members of the only lower race that had achieved immortality.

The cure of them was important.

Again, for Hanardy, there was a change. He was aware of long lines of energy that were straight and white flowing at him from some greater darkness beyond. In the near distance was a single point of light. As his attention focused there, all the numerous lines, except from that light-point, vanished.

It occurred to Hanardy that that was the Dreegh ship and that, in relation to earth, it would eventually be in a specific direction. The thin, thin, white line was like a pointer from the ship to him. Hanardy glanced along that line. And because he was open—oh, so open!—he did the touching. Then he touched other places and did a balancing thing between them and the Dreegh ship.

He oriented himself in space.

Oriented it!

As he completed that touching, he realized that the Dreegh ship was now slightly over six thousand light-years away.

That was far enough, he decided.

Having made that decision, he allowed particle flow to resume for the Dreeghs. And so—

As time began again, the Dreeghs found themselves in their own spaceship. There they were, all nine of them. They gazed uneasily at each other and then made a study of their surroundings. They saw unfamiliar star configurations. Their unhappiness grew. It was not a pleasant thing to be lost in space, as they knew from previous experience.

After a while, when nothing further happened, it became apparent that—though they would probably never again be able to find the Earth's solar system—they were safe ...

Pat's first consciousness of change was that she was no longer falling. But no longer on Europa. As she caught her balance, she saw that she was in a familiar room.

She shook her head to clear away the fuzziness from her eyes. And then she realized it was a room in the Ungarn meteorite, her home. She heard a faint sound and swung about—and paused, balancing, on one heel, as she saw her father.

There was an expression of relief on his face. "You had me worried," he said. "I've been here for more than an hour. My dear, all is well! Our screens are bad? to working; everything is the way it was ... before. We're safe."

"B-but," said the girl, "where's Steve?"

... It was earlier. Hanardy had the impression that he was remembering a forgotten experience on the Ungarn meteorite—a time before the arrival of Sween-Madro and the second group of Dreeghs.

The Great Galactic of that earlier time, he who had been William Leigh, bent over Hanardy where he lay on the floor.

He said with a friendly, serious smile, "You and that girl make quite a combination. You with so much owed to you, and she with that high ability for foolhardiness.

He broke off. "Steve, there are billions of open channels in the universe. Awareness of the genius in them is the next step up for intelligence. Because you've had some feedback, if you take that to heart you might even get the girl."

Leigh's words ended abruptly. For at that instant he touched the spaceman's shoulder.

The memory faded—

SECOND STAGE I.Q. 10,000

REHABILITATION COMPLETED.

BEGIN FINAL STAGE!

XXIII

Barbara Ellington felt the touch as she straightened up from the water cooler. It was the lightest of touches, but quite startling—a momentary, tiny flick of something ice-cold against the muscle of her right arm at the shoulder.

She twisted quickly and rather awkwardly around from the cooler, then stared in confusion at the small well-dressed, bald-headed man who stood a few feet behind her, evidently awaiting his turn for a drink.

"Why, good afternoon, Barbara," he said pleasantly.

Barbara was now feeling embarrassment. "I . . ." she began incoherently. "I didn't know anyone else was near, Dr. Gloge. I'm finished now!"

She picked up the briefcase she had set against the wall when she stopped for a drink and went on along the bright lit corridor. She was a tall, lean-bodied girl—perhaps a little too tall, but, with her serious face and smooth brown hair, not unattractive. At the moment, her cheeks burned. She knew she walked with wooden, self-conscious stiffness, wondering if Dr. Gloge was peering after her, puzzled by her odd behavior at the water cooler.

"But something did touch me," she thought.

At the turn of the corridor, she glanced back. Dr. Gloge had had his drink and was walking off unhurriedly in the opposite direction. Nobody else was in sight.

After she'd turned the corner, Barbara reached up with her left hand and rubbed the area of her upper arm where she had felt that tiny, momentary needle of ice. Had Dr. Gloge been responsible for—well, for whatever it had been? She frowned and shook her head. She'd worked in Gloge's office for two weeks immediately after she'd been employed here. And Dr. Henry Gloge, head of the biology section at Research Alpha, while invariably polite, even courteous, was a cold, quiet, withdrawn character, completely devoted to his

work.

He was not at all the kind of man who would consider it humorous to play a prank on a stenographer.

And it hadn't, in fact, been a prank.

From Dr. Henry Gloge's point of view, the encounter with Barbara Ellington in the fifth-floor hallway that afternoon had been a very fortunate accident. A few weeks earlier he had selected her to be one of two unwitting subjects for Point Omega Stimulation.

His careful plans had included a visit to her bedroom apartment when she was not there. He had installed equipment that might be of value later in his experiment. And it was not until these preliminaries were accomplished that he had headed for the steno pool, only to find that Barbara had been transferred out of the department.

Gloge dared not risk inquiring about her. For if the experiment had undesirable results, no one must suspect a connection between a lowly typist and himself. And even if it were successful, secrecy might continue to be necessary.

Gloge chafed at the delay. When on the fourth day of his search for her he suddenly recognized her walking along a hallway fifty feet ahead of him, it seemed as if fate was on his side after all.

As the girl paused at a water cooler, he came up behind her. Quickly he made sure that no one else was in view. Then he drew the needle jet gun and aimed it at her shoulder muscles. The gun carried a gaseous compound of the Omega serum, and the only sign of a discharge, when he fired it, was a thin line of mist from the needle end to her skin.

His task then accomplished, Gloge hastily slipped the instrument into the holster inside his coat and buttoned his coat

Barbara, still carrying her briefcase, presently came to the offices of John Hammond, special assistant to the president of Research Alpha, which lay on the fifth floor of what was generally considered the most important laboratory complex on Earth. Alex Sloan, the president, was on the floor above.

Barbara paused before the massive black door with Hammond's name on it. She gazed possessively at the words Scientific Liaison and Investigation lettered on the panel. Then she took a small key from her briefcase, slipped it

into the door lock, and pressed to the right.

The door swung silently back. Barbara stepped through into the outer office, heard the faint click as the door closed behind her.

There was no one in sight. The desk of Helen Wendell, Hammond's secretary, stood across the room with a number of papers on it. The door to the short hall which led to

Hammond's private office was open. From it Barbara heard Helen's voice speaking quietly.

Barbara Ellington had been assigned to Hammond—actually, to Helen Wendell—immediately after her return from the unexpected training trip to Europe. The memory of that vacation, as she preferred to call it, continued to exhilarate her. And yet, it evidently had been intended as a forerunner to her new assignment.

Aside from the pleasant salary increase, part of her interest in the position had been, and continued to be, the intriguing if somewhat alarming figure of John Hammond himself, and part had been an expectation that she would find herself in the center of the behind-the-scene operations of Scientific Liaison and Investigation. In that she had so far been disappointed.

Barbara walked over to Helen Wendell's desk, took some papers from her briefcase, and was putting them into a basket when her eye caught the name of Dr. Henry Gloge on a note in the adjoining basket. Entirely on impulse—because she had seen the man only minutes before—she bent over the paper.

The note was attached to a report. It was a reminder to Hammond that he was to see Dr. Gloge today at three-thirty in connection with Gloge's Omega project. Barbara glanced automatically at her watch; it was now five minutes to three.

Unlike most of the material she handled, this item was at least partly understandable. It referred to a biological project, Point Omega Stimulation. Barbara couldn't remember having heard of such a project while she was working under Dr. Gloge. But that was hardly surprising—the biological section was one of the largest in Research Alpha. From what she was reading, the project had to do with "the acceleration of evolutionary processes" in several species of animals, and the only real information in the report seemed to be that a number of test animals had died and been disposed of.

Was the great John Hammond spending his time on this sort of thing?

Disappointed, Barbara put the report back into the basket and went on to her own office.

As she sat down at her desk, Barbara noticed a stack of papers which hadn't been there when she had left on her errand. Attached to them was a note in Helen's large, clear handwriting. The note said:

Barbara,

This came in unexpectedly and must be typed today. It obviously will require several hours of overtime. If you have made special arrangements for the evening, let me know and I'll have a typist sent up from the pool to do this extra work.

Barbara felt an instant pang of possessive jealousy. This was her job, her office! She definitely did not want some other girl coming in.

Unfortunately, she did have a date. But to keep an intruder from taking her place in John Hammond's office, even if only for a few hours, was the more important matter. That was her instant decision, needing no second thought. But she sat still a moment, biting her lip; for that moment she was a woman considering how to put off a male who had a quick temper and no patience. Then she picked up the telephone and dialed a number.

For some months now, Barbara had settled her hopes for the future on Vince Strather, a technician in the photo lab. When his voice came on the telephone, she told him what had happened, finished contritely, "I'm afraid I can't get out of it very well, Vince, so soon after starting here."

She could almost feel Vince absorbing the impact of the denial she was communicating; she had discovered quickly in their brief romance that he was trying to move her toward premarital intimacy, a step she was wholly determined not to take.

She was relieved now, when he accepted her explanation. She replaced the receiver, feeling very warm toward him. "I really do love him!" she thought.

It was a few moments later that she suddenly felt dizzy.

The feeling was peculiar, not like her usual headaches. She could feel it build up, a giddy, light swirling which seemed both within and without her, as if she were weight-

less, about to drift out of the chair, turning slowly over and over.

Almost simultaneously, she became aware of a curious exhilaration, a sense of strength and well-being, quite unlike anything she could remember. The sensations continued for perhaps twenty seconds; then they faded and were gone, almost as abruptly as they had come.

Confused and somewhat shaken, Barbara straightened up in her chair. For a moment she considered taking aspirin. But there seemed no reason for that. She didn't feel ill. It even seemed to her that she felt more awake and alert.

She was about to return to her typing when she became aware of a movement out of the corner of her eye. She looked up and saw that John Hammond had paused in the doorway of her little office.

Barbara froze, as she always did in his presence; then slowly she turned to face him.

Hammond stood there, staring at her thoughtfully. He was a man about six feet tall, with dark brown hair and steel-gray eyes. He seemed to be about forty years old, and he was built like an athlete. Yet it was not his appearance of physical strength but the fine intelligence of his face and eyes that had always impressed her during the ten days

since she had been assigned to his office. She thought now, not for the first time: This is what really great people are like.

"Are you all right, Barbara?" Hammond asked. "For a moment, I thought you were going to fall out of your chair."

It was highly disturbing to Barbara to realize that her dizzy spell had been observed. "I'm sorry, Mr. Hammond," she murmured shyly. "I must have been daydreaming."

He gazed at her a moment longer, then nodded, turned, and walked off.

XXIV

On leaving Barbara, Gloge went down several floors and stationed himself behind a pile of shipping crates. These were in a passage across from the locked door of the main photo-lab storeroom. On the dot of 3:15, a door farther along the passage opened. A lanky, scowling, redheaded young man wearing a stained white smock over his street clothes, pushing a loaded handtruck ahead of him, appeared and turned down the passage toward Gloge and the laboratory storeroom.

It was the end of the lab shift. Gloge had discovered that one of the regular duties of Vincent Strather, Barbara Ellington's boyfriend, was to return certain materials to the storeroom at this hour.

Peering through the slats of a crate, Dr. Gloge watched Strather's approach. He was, he realized, much more tense and nervous now than he had been when he had given Barbara the injection. Of himself, Vincent Strather was not the kind of subject Dr. Gloge would have chosen—the young man was too angry, too bitter. But the fact that he was Barbara's friend and that they spent their spare time together should be useful in the further steps of the experiment—so it seemed to Dr. Gloge.

Sliding his hand under his coat, where the jet gun rested, he moved quickly out into the passage and across it toward Vince Strather. . . .

Even as he pressed the trigger, he knew his nervousness had betrayed him.

The needle tip of the gun had been too far away from Strather; a foot; almost two feet too far. At that greater distance the jet stream, emerging from the needle at nearly a thousand miles an hour, had time to spread and slow down. It caught Strather high up on the shoulder blade and tugged at his skin as it entered. For Strather, the sensation must have been that of a sharp impact. He jumped and

cried out, then stood shuddering, as if in shock—long enough for Gloge to slip the little gun back into its holster and close up his coat.

But that was all. Vince Strather whirled. His hands caught Gloge by the arms, and his angry face glared down into

the doctor's.

"You damn jerk!" he shouted. "What did you hit me with just now? Who the hell are you, anyway?"

For a moment Dr. Gloge felt appalled. Then he tried to twist out of Strather's hard grip. "I don't know what you're talking about!" he said breathlessly.

He stopped. He saw that Vince was gazing past his shoulder. The young man's grip relaxed suddenly, and Gloge was able to free himself. He turned and looked behind him. He felt a stunned, incredulous dismay.

John Hammond was coming along the passage, gray eyes fastened questioningly upon them. Gloge could only hope desperately that he had not been in sight when the gun was being fired.

Hammond came up and said in a tone of easy authority: "Dr. Gloge, what's going on here?"

"Doctor!" Vince Strather repeated, in a startled voice.

Gloge put puzzled indignation in his tone: "This young man appears to be under the impression that I struck him just now. Needless to say, I did nothing of the kind and don't understand what gave him such an idea."

He looked frowningly back at Strather. Strather's gaze shifted uncertainly between them. He was obviously abashed by John Hammond's presence and Gloge's title, but not yet over his anger.

He said sullenly, "Well, something hit me. At least it felt that way! When I looked around, he was standing there. So I thought he'd done it."

"I was passing you," Dr. Gloge corrected him. "You exclaimed something and I stopped." He shrugged, smiled. "And that's all I did, young man! I certainly had no reason to strike you."

Strather said grudgingly, "I guess I was mistaken."

Dr. Gloge said promptly, "Then let's call it an error and forget it!" He held out his hand.

Strather reached out reluctantly and shook it, then looked at Hammond. When Hammond remained silent, he turned away in obvious relief, took one of the boxes from the truck, and disappeared into the storeroom with it.

Hammond said, "I was on my way to your office, Doctor, where I expect to have an interview with you in a few minutes on the Omega project. I presume you were heading in that direction."

"Yes, yes." Gloge fell into step beside the bigger man. He was thinking: Did he see anything?

His companion gave no sign.

A few minutes later, as he gazed across the gleaming desk of his private office at John Hammond, Gloge had the uneasy feeling of a criminal confronted by the law. It had always amazed him that this man—Hammond—could make him feel at very least like a small boy.

Yet the discussion that now developed began with a reassuring statement from the bigger man:

"This is a completely informal conversation, Doctor. I am not representing President Sloan at the moment—even less the Board of Regents. That has been deliberately arranged. It will make it possible for both of us to speak quite frankly."

Dr. Gloge said, "Have there been complaints about my work here?"

Hammond nodded. "You can't have remained entirely unaware of it, Doctor. You've been asked to amplify your project reports, make them more detailed and specific, three times within the last two months alone."

Gloge was reluctantly deciding that he would have to tell some of his data.

He said with apparent openness, "My reluctance to communicate has been due to a strictly scientific dilemma. Things were happening in the experiment, but their meaning was not clear to me until very recently."

"There is a feeling," said Hammond in his steady voice, "that your project is failing."

Dr. Gloge said sharply, "The accusation is unworthy!"

Hammond looked at him, said, "No accusations have been made—as yet. That's why I'm here today. You have reported no successes within the past six months, you know."

"Mr. Hammond, there have been many failures. Within the limited framework of the present stages of the project experiments, that is exactly what should be expected."

"Limited in what way?"

"Limited to the lower, less complicated forms of animal life."

"That," said Hammond mildly, "is a limitation you yourself have imposed on the project."

Dr. Gloge agreed. "True. The conclusions I've been able to form at such lower levels have been invaluable. And the fact that the results of the experiments have been almost invariably negative, in the sense that as a usual result the subject animals evolved into nonviable forms, is completely unimportant."

"As a usual result," Hammond repeated. "Then not all of them died quickly?"

Gloge bit his lip. That was not an admission he had in-

tended to make at this initial stage in the discussion.

He said reluctantly, "In a respectable percentage of the cases, the subject animals survived the first injection."

"And the second?"

Gloge hesitated. But there was no turning back. "The survival percentage drops very sharply at that point," he said. "I don't recall the exact figures."

"And the third?"

He was really being forced to make revelations. Dr. Gloge said, "To date, three animals have survived the third injection. All three were of the same species—Cryptobranchus."

"The hellbender," said Hammond. "Well! A large salamander. . . . Now, the third injection, according to your theory, should advance an animal along the evolutionary line stimulated in it to a point which might be reached through half a million years of natural evolution. Would you say such a result was achieved in these three cases?"

Dr. Gloge said, "Since Cryptobranchus might be considered with some reason to be a species in which evolutionary development is at a practical standstill, I should say that much more was achieved."

"What were the observable changes?"

Gloge had been bracing himself as he made one admission after another. He was striving to decide exactly when he could start resisting the interrogation.

Now! he thought.

He said aloud, trying to appear frank, "Mr. Hammond, I'm beginning to realize that I was in error in not making more positive reports. I can't believe that you are really interested in these superficial accounts. Why not let me summarize my observations for you?"

Hammond's gray eyes were calm and steady. "Go ahead," he said in an even tone.

Gloge outlined his conclusions then. The interesting features were twofold, probably equally important.

One of these was that there remained in all life forms a wide evolutionary choice. For reasons that were not yet clear, the Omega serum stimulated one of these potential developments, and no subsequent stimulation could alter the mutational direction. Most of these developments led to extinction.

"The second feature," said Gloge, "is that the chances for success increase as the life form becomes more highly evolved."

Hammond said, interested, "What you're saying is that when you finally start working with the more active mam-

mals and eventually monkeys, you expect more and better results?"

"I have no doubt about it," said Dr. Gloge firmly.

A secondary aspect—Gloge continued—was that brain areas which controlled the inhibition of simple reflexes often seemed to be the source of new neural growth and of sensory extension. The serum apparently intensified these effort points, increasing their operational flexibility. What went wrong was that all too often such one-sided inhibitory amplification ended in nonsurvival.

However, in *Cryptobranchus*, the roof of the mouth developed small functional gills. The hide thickened into segmented, horny armor. Short, grooved fangs were acquired, and connected to glands that produced a mild hematotoxic venom. The eyes disappeared, but areas in the skin developed sight-level sensitivity to light.

Gloge shrugged, finished: "There were other changes, but these would seem the most dramatic ones."

"They sound sufficiently dramatic," said Hammond.

"What happened to the two specimens which were not dissected?"

Dr. Gloge realized that his diversion had not worked.

"They were given the fourth injection, of course," he said resignedly.

"The one," Hammond asked, "which was to advance them to a point a million years along the evolutionary line they were following—"

"Or," Dr. Gloge said, "to the peak-point of that evolutionary line. The equating of the four stages of the stimula-

tion process to the passing of specific periods of normal evolutionary development—twenty thousand years, fifty thousand, five hundred thousand, and one million years—is, of course, hypothetical and generalized. My calculations indicate that in many species of which we have knowledge in that area the two points might be approximately the same."

Hammond nodded. "I understand, Doctor. And what happened after your evolved *Cryptobranchus* received the fourth injection?"

"I cannot give you a precise answer to that, Mr. Hammond. In appearance it was a very rapid breakdown of the entire structure. Within two hours, both specimens literally dissolved," Gloge answered tensely.

"In other words," Hammond said, "Point Omega Stimulation directs *Cryptobranchus* and, in fact, every species to which it has been applied into one of the many blind alleys of evolution."

Dr. Gloge said curtly, "So far it has done that."

Hammond was silent; then: "One more point," he said.

"It's been suggested that you might consider taking on a sufficiently qualified assistant in this work. Research Alpha probably could obtain Sir Hubert Roland for a project of such interest."

Dr. Gloge said coldly, "With all due respect for Sir Hubert Roland's accomplishments, I would regard him as a meddler here! If the attempt is made to force him on me, I shall resist it."

"Well," Hammond said easily, "let's not make any unalterable decisions at the moment. As I mentioned, this has been a completely informal discussion." He glanced at his watch. "I'm afraid we'll have to terminate it now. Would you have time to see me in my office one week from today at ten o'clock, Doctor? I wish to carry this matter a little further, and that will be my first free time."

Dr. Gloge had difficulty restraining his feeling of triumph. Today was Wednesday. He had selected it as his starting time because he had wanted his subjects to be away from their place of work over the weekend.

Between now and Saturday, he could undoubtedly accomplish the first two injections on the young couple.

By the following Wednesday, the third, perhaps even the fourth shot would have been administered and all strong reaction, either taken care of or the experiment terminated

To cover up his elation, Gloge said in the tone of one making a concession, "As you wish, Mr. Hammond."

Hammond returned to his office. He immediately invited Helen Wendell in, and closed the door. "An unusual coincidence," he said. "Maybe the first clue."

He thereupon described his encounter at 3.15 P.M. in the corridor with Dr. Gloge and Vince Strather; and repeated the accusation Vince had made. "You'll have to admit," he concluded his account, "that in a science complex as large as Research Alpha, for those two to have an interaction has to be a coincidence of a high order."

Helen was awed. "Fantastic is the word," she said. "You say Vince had a feeling that he had been struck. What would produce such a sensation?"

"A fist," Hammond said laconically, "a jab from a baseball bat, the discharge under some circumstances of a gas gun—"

He paused, and eyed her with his bright eyes. "It's beginning to fit, isn't it? Incredibly, all on his own, Dr. Henry Gloge, the Omega serum experimenter, has probably chosen Vince Strather to be an unknowing experimental subject. Under other circumstances," he went on, "we would be obliged to re-examine Gloge's moral qualifications to remain employed with us, but I'm going to guess that he's as much a victim as Vince."

"But-but—" the woman protested, "how could this be connected with William Leigh's chance meeting with these

two and Barbara, and—perhaps more important—how does it fit with the Dreegh situation?"

The man smiled at her tenderly. "Don't forget," he said, "we may not be qualified to answer that. We're witnessing the effects of Great Galactic logic. Let's not be hasty in trying to decide what it means. Let's just notice that we are beginning to be involved, and let's keep our eyes sharp and our wits tuned."

XXV

Dr. Henry Gloge was awake much of the night, vacillating between hopes and fears of what he would find when he went to check on the first results of Point Omega Stimulation in human beings. If they were obviously negative, he would have only one choice.

It could be called murder.

Dr. Gloge approached that subject in a detached, undisturbed frame of mind. He had several tunes in his work secretly carried on a more advanced experiment while, ostensibly, following the step-by-step scientific method. Thus fortified by special knowledge, he had in the past been able to plan lower-step work with the sometimes intuitive insights gained from his unpublicized private investigation.

The importance of the Omega project to him justified a similar expedient. Objectively considered, in the light of such a goal, the lives of the two young people he had chosen for the experiment were of no value. Their destruction, if it became necessary, would be in the same category as the slaughter of other experimental subjects.

With human beings there was, of course, an element of personal risk involved for himself. It was that realization that troubled him, now that he had made the first injection. Time and again, Dr. Gloge awakened out of a nightmare-riddled half-sleep, to quail anew at the knowledge and to lie sweating with anxiety until he slid back into exhausted slumber.

When four o'clock came, it was almost with relief that he arose, fortified himself with several tablets of a powerful stimulant, made a last check of his preparations, and set out across town toward the house where the Ellington girl had a room. He drove in a black panel truck that he had bought and equipped for his experiment.

He arrived at his destination about a quarter past five. It was a quiet residential street, a tree-lined avenue in one of the older sections of the city, approximately eight miles west of the Research Alpha complex. Two hundred yards from the house, Dr. Gloge pulled the small truck up to the curb on the opposite side of the street and shut off the motor.

For the past week, a miniature audio pickup-recorder, inserted under the bark of a sycamore tree across the street from the house, had been trained on Barbara Ellington's second-floor room, its protruding head cunningly painted to

resemble a rusty nail. Dr. Gloge now took the other part of the two-piece instrument from the dashboard compartment of the truck, inserted the plug in his ear, and switched it on.

After perhaps half a minute of twisting the tuning dial back and forth, he felt his face whiten. He had tested the instrument at night on two occasions during the past week. It was quite sensitive enough to pick up the sounds of breathing and even the heartbeat of anyone in the room; and so he knew with absolute certainty that Barbara Ellington's room had no living occupant at this moment.

Quickly, he attached the recording playback mechanism to the little device, turned it back one hour, and put the plug into his ear again.

Almost at once, he relaxed.

Barbara Ellington had been in that room, asleep, an hour ago, breath even and undisturbed, heartbeat strong and slow. Dr. Gloge had listened to similar recordings of too many experimental animals to have the slightest doubt, This subject had moved up successfully, unharmed, to the first stage of Point Omega Stimulation!

The impact of his triumph after the ghastly fears of the night was very strong. Dr. Gloge needed several minutes to compose himself. Finally, he was able to move the recorder by ten-minute steps to a point where the Ellington girl obviously was awake and moving about the room. He listened with absorbed fascination, feeling almost able to visualize from moment to moment exactly what she was doing. At one point, she stood still for some seconds and then uttered a low, warm laugh which sent thrills of delight through the listening scientist. Perhaps a minute later, he heard a door being closed. After that, there was only the empty, lifeless silence which had startled him so badly.

Barbara Ellington had awakened that Thursday morning with a thought she had never had before. It was: "Life doesn't have to be serious!"

She was contemplating this frivolous notion with the beginning of amazement when a second thought came, which she had also never had in her entire previous existence. "What is this mad drive to enslave myself to a man?"

The thought seemed natural and obviously true. It had no general rejection of men in it. She still—it seemed to her—loved Vince . . . but differently.

Thought of Vince brought a smile. She had already noted in one of numerous, quick, darting glances around the room that it was nearly two hours before her usual rising time. The sun was peering through her bedroom window at that almost horizontal angle which, in the past, had seemed to her a horrifying threat that she would be robbed of precious sleep.

Now it struck her: "Why don't I call Vince, and we'll go for a drive before I have to go to work?"

She reached for the phone, then considered and drew back. Let the poor man sleep a little longer.

She dressed swiftly, but with more than usual care. When she glanced at the mirror, it occurred to her that she was better-looking than she had realized.

. . . Very much better-looking! she decided an instant later. Intrigued, for a moment amazed, she went up to the mirror, studied the face in it. Her face, familiar. But also the face of a radiant stranger. Another awareness came, and the bright, glowing, blue mirror-eyes holding hers seemed to widen.

"I feel twice as alive as I ever have before!"

Surprise . . . pleasure . . . and suddenly: "Shouldn't I wonder why?"

The mirror-face frowned slightly, then laughed at her.

There had been a change, a wonderful one, and the change was not yet complete. There was a sense of shifting deep inside her, of flows of brightness along the edges of her mind. Curiosity had stirred, but it was light, not urgent or anxious. "When I want to know, I will know!" Barbara told herself; and, with that, the trace of curiosity was dismissed.

"And now."

She glanced once more around the little room. For over a year it had held her, contained her, sheltered her. But she didn't want shelter now. The room couldn't hold her today!

She decided, smiling, "I'll go and wake up Vince."

She rang Vince's doorbell five times before she heard him

stirring inside. Then his voice called harshly, thickly, "Who is that?"

Barbara laughed. "It's me!"

"Good God!"

The lock clicked back and the door opened. Vince stood staring at her with bloodshot eyes. He'd pulled a robe on over his pajamas, his bony face was flushed and his red hair tangled.

"What are you doing up at this hour?" he demanded as Barbara stepped past him into the apartment. "It's half-past five!"

"It's a wonderful morning. I couldn't stay in bed. I thought I'd get you to go for a drive with me before I went to work."

Vince pulled the door shut, blinked at her incredulously. "Go for a drive!" he repeated.

Barbara asked, "Aren't you feeling well, Vince? You look almost as if you're running a fever."

Vince shook his head. "I don't feel feverish, but I sure don't feel well, either. I don't know what's the matter. Come on and sit down. Want some coffee?"

"Not especially. I'll make some for you, if you like."

"Nah, don't bother. I'm sort of nauseated right now." Vince sat down on the couch of the little living room, fished cigarettes and matches from a pocket of his robe, lit a cigarette, and grimaced. "That doesn't taste too good either!" He scowled at Barbara. "Something pretty damn funny happened yesterday! And I'm not sure—"

He hesitated.

"Not sure of what, Vince?"

"That that isn't why I'm feeling this way." Vince paused again, shook his head, muttered, "Sounds crazy, I guess. You know that Dr. Gloge you worked for once?"

It seemed to Barbara as if whole sections of her mind lit up in brilliance at that instant. She heard Vince start to tell his story. But—except for John Hammond's intervention—it was something she already knew.

Part of a much bigger story. . . .

She thought: Why, that impudent little man! What a wild, wonderful, terrific thing to do!

Excitement raced through her. The paper she had seen lying on Helen Wendell's desk flashed into her mind, every word sharp and distinct—and not only the words!

Now she understood. What they meant, what they implied, the possibilities concealed behind them—for herself, for Vince.

Another feeling awoke. Sharp wariness.

There was danger somewhere here! John Hammond . . . Helen . . . the hundreds of little impressions she'd received all suddenly flowed together into a picture clear but puzzling—of something supranormal, she decided, amazed.

Who were they? What were they doing? In a dozen different ways, they didn't really fit in an organization like Research Alpha. But they had virtually complete control.

Not that it mattered immediately. Yet she was certain of one thing. They were opposed to what Dr. Gloge was attempting through Point Omega Stimulation, would stop it if they could.

"But they can't!" she told herself. What Dr. Gloge had begun was right. She could feel the rightness of it like a song of triumph in every aspect of her being. She would have to make sure that it wasn't stopped at this point.

But she would need to be careful—and act quickly! It

was incredibly bad luck that John Hammond had arrived almost while Dr. Gloge was giving Vince his first shot.

"Do you think I should report it?" Vince asked.

"You'd look a little foolish if it turned out that you were coming down with the flu, wouldn't you?" Barbara said lightly.

"Yeah." He sounded hesitant.

"What does it feel like, aside from the nausea?"

Vince described his symptoms. Not unlike her own—and she'd had a few bad moments before she went to sleep last night. Vince was going through an initial reaction period more prolonged and somewhat more severe than hers.

She was aware of a fond impulse to reassure him. But she decided it would be unwise to tell him what she knew. Until he came out of his physical distress, such information might disturb him dangerously.

She said urgently, "Look, you don't have to go to work until tonight. So the best thing for you is to get a few more hours of sleep. If you start feeling worse, and would like me to take you to a doctor, give me a call and I'll come and get you. Otherwise, I'll phone at ten."

Vince agreed immediately. "I'm really awfully groggy. That's a big part of it. I'll just stretch out on the couch instead of going back to bed."

When Barbara left a few minutes later, her thoughts

quickly turned away from Vince. She began to consider various methods she might use to approach Dr. Gloge this very day.

Gloge reached the street where Vincent Strather lived and was looking for a parking place, when suddenly he saw Barbara Ellington emerge from the area of the apartment building and start across the street ahead of him.

The girl was perhaps a hundred yards away. Dr. Gloge braked the panel truck hastily, pulled it in to the curb, rolled up behind another car parked there, and stopped. He sat there, breathing hard at the narrow margin by which he had avoided being seen.

Barbara had hesitated, glancing in the direction of the approaching truck, but now she was continuing across the street. Watching her swift, lithe stride, the proudly erect carriage of her body—comparing that picture with the frozen awkwardness he had observed in all her movements the day before—Dr. Gloge felt his last doubts resolve.

It was in the human species that Point Omega Stimulation would achieve its purpose.

His only regret now was that he had not arrived even as much as ten minutes earlier. The girl obviously had come to see Strather, had been with him until now. If he had

found them together, examination on a comparison basis could have been made of them simultaneously.

The thought did not in the least diminish the tingling excitement that filled him as he watched Barbara's brown car pull out into the street and move away. He waited until her car was out of sight, then drove the truck down to the alley beside the apartment building and turned in to it. His intention was to give Strather a careful physical examination.

A few minutes later Dr. Gloge watched a pointer in the small instrument he was holding drop to the zero mark on the dial. Pulling off the respirator clamped over his mouth and nose, he stood looking down at the body of Vincent Strather sprawled on the living-room couch.

Vincent Strather's appearance was much less satisfactory than he had expected. Of course, the young man's reddened face and bloodshot eyes might be due to the paralyzing gas Dr. Gloge had released into the apartment as he edged open the back door. But there were other signs of disturbance: tension, distended blood vessels, skin discoloration.

By comparison with Barbara Ellington's vigor and high spirits, Strather looked drab and unimpressive.

Nevertheless, he had survived the first shot.

Gloge straightened, studied the motionless figure again, then went about the apartment quietly closing the window he had opened exactly one minute after releasing the instantly effecting gas. The gas had dissipated now. When its effect on Strather wore off an hour or so from now, there would be nothing to tell the subject that anything had occurred here after Barbara Ellington had left.

Tomorrow he would return and give Strather the second shot.

As he locked the back door behind him and walked over to the panel truck, Dr. Gloge decided that he would have to come back and check both his subjects that night.

He felt extremely confident. It seemed to him that before anyone found out that it had been started, the Point Omega Stimulation experiment on human beings would have run its course.

XXVI

Hammond heard the bell sound as he was shaving in the bathroom of his living quarters, which were located behind his office. He paused, then deliberately put down his razor and activated a hidden microphone in the wall.

"Yes, John?" Helen's voice came.

"Who came in?"

"Why—only Barbara." She sounded surprised. "What makes you ask?"

"The life-range indicator just now registered an over-six

read."

"On Barbara!" Helen sounded incredulous.

"On somebody," said Hammond. "Better have Special Servicing check the indicator out. Nobody else came in?"

"No."

"Well—check it." He broke the connection and finished shaving.

The buzzer sounded in Barbara's office a little later—the signal that she was to report with her notebook to Hammond's office. She went, curious, wondering if he would notice any change in her. Much more important was her own desire to take a closer look at this strange, powerful man who was her boss.

She walked into Hammond's office and was about to sit in the chair he motioned her to, when something in his manner warned her. Barbara made an apologetic gesture.

"Oh, Mr. Hammond—excuse me a moment."

She hurried out of the office and down the hall to the washroom. The moment she was inside, she closed her eyes and mentally relived her exact feelings at the instant she had sensed—whatever it was.

Not Hammond at all, she realized. It was the chair that had given forth some kind of energy flow. Eyes still closed, she strove to perceive what within herself had been affected. There seemed to be an exact spot in her brain that responded each time she reviewed the moment she had started to sit down.

She couldn't decide what the response was. But she thought: "I don't have to let it be affected now that I know."

Relieved, she returned to Hammond's office, seated herself in the chair, and smiled at Hammond where he sat behind his great, gleaming, mahogany desk.

"I'm sorry," she said. "But I'm ready now."

During the half-hour that followed, she took shorthand with a tiny portion of her mind, and with the rest fought off a steady, progressively more aware battle against the energy pressure that flowed up at her in rhythmic waves from the chair.

She had by now decided it was a nerve center that reacted to hypnotic suggestion, and so when Hammond said suddenly, "Close your eyes, Barbara!" she complied at once.

"Raise your right hand!" he commanded.

Up came her right hand, with the pen in it.

He told her to place it back in her lap; and then swiftly put her through several tests—which she recognized as be-

ing of a more important kind.

What interested her even more was that she could let the center respond and monitor the parts of the body that he

named—without losing control. So that when he commanded her hand to be numb and suddenly reached over and stuck a needle into it, she felt no sensation; and so she did not react.

Hammond seemed satisfied. After normalizing the feeling in her hand, he commanded: "In just a moment, I'm going to tell you to forget the tests we've just been doing, but you will remain completely under my control and answer truthfully any questions I ask you. Understand?"

"Yes, Mr. Hammond."

"Very well, forget everything we've done and said since I first asked you to close your eyes. When the memory has completely faded, open your eyes."

Barbara waited about ten seconds. She was thinking: "What roused his suspicions so quickly? And why would he care?" She suppressed an excited conviction that she was about to discover something of the secret life that went on in this office. She had never heard of a hypnotizing chair.

She opened her eyes.

She swayed—an act—then caught herself. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Hammond."

Hammond's gray eyes regarded her with deceptive friendliness. "You seem to be having problems this morning, Barbara."

"I really feel very well," Barbara protested.

"If there's anything in your life that has changed recently," he said quietly, "I want you to confide in me."

That was the beginning of an intensive questioning into her past history. Barbara answered freely. Apparently Hammond was finally convinced, for he presently politely thanked her for the conversation and sent her off to type the letters he had dictated.

As she sat at her desk a few minutes later, Barbara glanced up through the glass and saw Helen Wendell walking along the hall toward Hammond's office, disappear into it.

Hammond greeted Helen: "All the time I talked to Barbara, the life-range indicator showed eight-four, above the hypnotizable range. And she told me nothing."

"How is it registering on me?" Helen asked.

He glanced down at his right to the instrument in an open desk drawer.

"Your usual eleven-three."

"And you?"

"My twelve-point-seven."

"Perhaps only the middle ranges are out of order," Helen said, and added, "Special Servicing will make their check after daytime office hours. All right?"

Hammond hesitated, then agreed that there seemed to be no reason for breaking the rules of caution by which they, operated.

During the lunch hour Barbara experienced a brief return of the dizziness. But she was alert now to the possibilities. Instead of simply letting it happen, she tried to be aware of every nuance of the feeling.

There was a-shifting-taking place inside her.

She sensed a flow of energy particles from various points in her body to other points. A specific spot in her brain seemed to be monitoring the flow.

When the pulsations ceased-as abruptly as they had started-she thought: "That was more change taking place. I grew in some way in that minute."

She sat very still there in the restaurant, striving to evaluate what had changed. But she couldn't decide.

Nonetheless, she was content. Her impulse had been to seek out Dr. Gloge sometime during the day in the hope that he would be wanting to give her a second injection. But obviously, all the changes from the first shot had not yet taken place.

She returned to Scientific Liaison and Investigation.

The bell sound, as Barbara entered, caused Hammond to glance at the indicator. He stared at it for a long moment, then buzzed Helen Wendell.

"Barbara now reads nine-point-two!" he said.

Helen came to the door of his office. "You mean her reading has gone up?" She grew thoughtful. "All other things being equal, it would have to be the instrument is not working."

Hammond said softly, "But all other things are not equal. Could it be that Barbara is another of Gloge's experimental subjects? That's almost too direct and simple, considering the great mind behind all this. And yet it adds up. According to your records she worked in Gloge's office for a while; so he knew her by sight."

"All I'll say to that," said the woman, "is that in my normal experience I've never seen anyone change for the better. There's a slow drop, as they grow older. So, why don't I have the instrument checked, and make sure?"

The strong face was relaxing. "Obviously," Hammond

said, "but since we never take chances, why don't I also keep Barbara with me tonight? Do you mind?"

"It's a nuisance," she said, "but all right."

"I'll give her the conditioning that overwhelms twelve-point-oh and higher. She'll never know what hit her."

XXVII

It was shortly after dark when Dr. Henry Gloge parked his black van near Barbara's home. He promptly tuned in on the audio device attached to the tree and adjusted the volume for pickup.

After thirty seconds of silence, he began to frown. "Not again!" he thought; then, wearily, "Well, maybe she's over at her boyfriend's."

He started the motor and presently drew up at the curb opposite Strather's apartment. A quick check established that the lanky redhead was there—but alone.

The young man was awake and in an angry state. As Gloge listened in, Vince savagely picked up the phone and dialed what must have been Barbara's number, for presently he slammed the receiver down and muttered, "Doesn't she know I've got to go to work tonight? Where can that girl be?"

That, in rising alarm, was a question which Gloge asked himself as the evening wore on. He returned to the vicinity of Barbara's boardinghouse. Until eleven P.M. the phone in her room rang periodically, testifying to Vince's concern.

When it had not rung for an hour, Gloge presumed that Strather had gone off to night duty. It was not a fact that could be left to surmise. He drove back to Vince's apartment. No sounds came from it.

Gloge accordingly returned to the street where Barbara lived.

He was tired now, so he rigged up an alarm system that would buzz him if Barbara entered her room; then, wearily, he crawled onto the cot in the back of the van and quickly fell into a deep sleep.

Earlier, as Barbara sat in her office a few minutes before closing time, she swayed and almost blacked out.

Greatly alarmed, she emerged from her office and reported the feeling to Helen Wendell. She did not question the logic of seeking the help of Hammond's blond aide.

The secretary was sympathetic, and promptly took her in to John Hammond. By this time Barbara had experienced several more brief blackouts. So she was grateful when Hammond unlocked the door behind his desk, led her through a luxurious living room, and into what he called the "spare bedroom."

She undressed, slipped under the sheets, and promptly went

to sleep. Thus, subtly, she was captured.

During the evening, Hammond and Helen Wendell took turns looking in on her.

At midnight the Special Servicing expert reported that the life-range indicator was working properly, and he himself checked the body of the sleeping girl. "I get nine-two," he said. "Who is she? New arrival?"

The silence that greeted his remark abruptly startled him. "You mean she's an Earther?"

"At least," said Helen Wendell after the man had departed, "there's been no further change."

Hammond said, "Too bad she's above the hypnotizable stage. Mere conditioning is actually a sorry substitute for what we need here—truth."

"What are you going to do?"

Hammond did not make up his mind about that until after daybreak.

"Since nine-two is no real threat to us, perhaps we might even use a little ESP on her occasionally."

"Here—at Alpha?"

Hammond stared thoughtfully at his beautiful aide. Normally, he trusted her reactions in such matters.

She must have sensed what he was thinking, for she said quickly, "The last time we used extended perception, about eighteen hundred Earthers tuned in on us. Of course, they thought of it merely as their imagination, but some of them

compared notes. It was talked about for weeks, and some awfully important things were close to being revealed."

"We-1-1-1, okay, let's be aware of her then."

"All right. On that basis I'll wake her up."

As soon as she was in her office, Barbara phoned Vince. There was no answer. Which was not surprising. If he had worked the night shift, he would be dead to the world. She hung up and checked with the photo lab, and was much relieved when the night work list showed that Vince had signed in and out.

As she sat at her desk that morning, Barbara felt extremely grateful to Hammond and his secretary for having been so helpful to her. But she was also slightly guilty. She suspected that she had been affected again by the injection that Gloge had given her.

It was disconcerting to have been so strongly affected.

"But I feel all right now!" she thought as she typed away at the pile of work Helen Wendell had put in her basket. Yet her mind was astir with plans. At ten o'clock Helen sent her out with the usual morning briefcase full of memos and re-

ports.

Elsewhere—

Gloge had awakened shortly after seven. Still no Barbara. Baffled, he shaved with his electric razor, drove to a nearby business thoroughfare, and ate breakfast.

He next went back to the street where Strather lived. A quick check established that the man was home. Gloge triggered his second charge of gas—and a few minutes later was in the apartment.

The young man had changed again to his pajamas, and he lay stretched out once more on the settee in his living room. If anything, the angry expression on his face was more pronounced.

Gloge, needle in hand, hesitated. He was not happy with this subject. Yet he realized that there was no turning back at this stage. Without further pause, holding the point almost against Strather's body, he squeezed the trigger.

There was no visible reaction.

As he headed for his office at Research Alpha, Gloge's thought was on the girl. Her absence was unfortunate. He had hoped to inject the serum into his two subjects at approximately the same time. Evidently that was not going to happen.

XXVIII

A few minutes after he returned to his office, Dr. Gloge's phone rang. His door was open, and he heard his secretary answer. The woman looked up over the receiver.

"It's for you, Doctor. That girl who worked here for a while—Barbara Ellington."

The shock that went through Gloge must have shown as disapproval, for the woman said hastily, "Shall I tell her you're not in?"

Gloge quivered with uncertainty. "No." He paused; then, "I'll take the call in here."

When he heard the clear, bell-like voice of the girl, Dr. Gloge felt tensely ready for anything.

"What is it, Barbara?" he asked.

"I'm supposed to bring some papers over to you," her voice trilled in its alive, vital way. "I'm to give them to you only, so I wanted to make sure you would be there."

.. . Opportunity!

It seemed to Gloge that he couldn't have asked for a more favorable turn. His other subject would now come to his office, where he could fire the second injection into her and deal personally with any reaction.

As it developed, there was no reaction that he could de-

fect. She had turned away after delivering the papers to him, and that was when he fired the needle gun. It was a perfect shot. The girl neither jumped nor swung about; she simply kept going toward the door, opened it, and went through.

Barbara did not return to Hammond's office. She expected a strong physiological disturbance from the second injection," and she wanted to be in the privacy of her own room when it happened. It had cost her an effort not to react in front of Gloge.

So she stayed in her bedroom, waited as long as she thought wise, and then phoned and told Helen Wendell that she was not well.

Helen said sympathetically, "Well, I suppose it was to be expected after the bad night you had."

Barbara answered quickly, "I began to have dizzy spells and nausea. I panicked and rushed home."

"You're home now?"

"Yes."

"I'll tell Mr. Hammond."

Barbara hung up, unhappy with those final words. But there was no way to stop his learning about her condition. She had a feeling she was in danger of losing her job. And it was too soon. Later, after the experiment, it wouldn't matter, she thought uneasily.

Perhaps she had better take the "normal" precautions of an employee. "After all," she thought, "I probably show symptoms." She called her doctor and made an appointment for the following day. Barbara replaced the receiver, feeling a strange glee. "I ought to be in foul shape by tomorrow," she thought, "from the second injection."

What Hammond did when he returned to his office late that afternoon was to sit in thought for a while after Helen reported to him Barbara's situation.

Then: "Gloge must have given her the second injection. Any suggestions?"

The woman shook her head. "Just keep doing what we're doing," she said.

Hammond hesitated no longer. He was accustomed to trusting Helen Wendell. Abruptly he threw up his hands. "All right. She's got the whole weekend to be sick in. Call me when she comes in to work again. Did that report arrive from New Brasilia?"

"It was sent to Manila Center."

"Are you serious? Let me talk to Ram6n. There must be a reason!" Quickly he was absorbed in his new tasks.

Barbara slept. When she awakened, her clock said twelve after seven.

It was daylight, early morning. She found that out in a sensational fashion. She went outside and looked . . . without moving from the bed!

There she was lying in her bedroom; and there she was out in the street.

Simultaneously.

Involuntarily, she held her breath. Slowly, the outside scene faded, and she was back in the bed, wholly indoors.

With a gasp, she started breathing again.

By cautious experimentation, she discovered that her perception extended about a hundred yards.

And that was all she learned. Something in her brain acted like an invisible eye stalk that could reach through walls and bring back visual images to the light-interpretation centers. The ability remained completely stable.

Presently she became aware that a small black van was parked down the street and that Dr. Gloge was in it. She realized that he had an instrument with an earplug with which he seemed to be listening in on her.

His face was intent, his small eyes narrowed. Something of the determination of this little bald-headed scientist seeped through to her, and Barbara suddenly felt uneasy. She sensed remorselessness, an impersonal quality that was entirely different from her own lighthearted participation in his experiment.

To Gloge—she realized suddenly—his subjects were like inanimate objects.

In human terms the viciousness of it was infinite.

As she continued to perceive him, Gloge shut off his instruments, started the motor of his car, and drove off.

Since Vince was again on the night shift, presumably Gloge was heading home.

She phoned Vince's apartment to make sure; when there was no answer, she called the photo lab.

"No, Strather didn't come in last night," the administrative assistant of that department told her.

Barbara replaced the receiver unhappily, recalling that Vince had not responded well to the first shot. She suspected the biologist had given him his second shot also, and that he was not responding favorably to it either.

She dressed and drove over to his apartment. As she came near, she could see him inside, so when he showed no sign of replying to her ring, she let herself in with her key—and found him on the living-room couch, tossing and turning. He looked feverish. She felt his forehead; it was dry and hot to the touch.

He stirred and opened his eyes, looked up with his sick brown eyes into her bright blue ones. She thought unhappily: "I'm so well and he's so ill. What can be wrong?"

Aloud, anxiously, she said, "You need a doctor, Vince.

What's the name of that man who gave you a checkup last year?"

"I'll be all right," he mumbled. He sank back to sleep.

Sitting there on the settee beside him, Barbara felt something in her lungs. Her instant, amazed thought was: "Gas!" But she was too slow.

She must have blacked out, because her next awareness was of lying on the floor, and of Gloge bending over her.

The scientist was calm, efficient, seemed satisfied. Barbara caught his thought: "She'll be all right."

She realized that he was stepping past her to Vince. "Hmmm!" Gloge seemed critical and unhappy. "Still not good. Let's see if a tranquillizer will help him."

He made the injection, then straightened, and there was a strange, hard thought in his mind: "By Monday night, it'll be time for the third injection, and I'll have to decide what to do."

So clear was the thought that came from him, it was almost as if he spoke aloud. What his thought said was that he intended to kill them both, if either failed to develop as he desired.

Shocked, Barbara held herself very still; and at that moment an entirely different growth process occurred in her.

It began with a veritable flood of suppressed information suddenly rising to the surface of her mind.

. . . About the reality of what people were like . . . the dupes, the malingerers, and the weaklings on the one hand, and, on the other, the angry and the distorted, the worldly wise and the cynics. She recognized that there were well-meaning people in the world who were strong, but she was more aware of the destructive at this instant . . . by the million, the swindlers and betrayers—all self-justified, she saw now. But she realized also that they had misread their own bitter experiences. Because they were greedy and lustful and had lost their fear of punishment, earthly or unearthly; because they resented being thwarted in their slightest whim; because—

A forgotten scene flashed into her mind from her own past, of a minor executive in her first job, who had fired her when she refused to come up to his apartment.

All her life she had been taught, and she had tried not to be aware of such things. But now, at some level of neural computation, she permitted all that data to be calculated into the mainstream of her awareness.

The process was still going on a few minutes later when Gloge departed as silently as he had come.

After he had left, Barbara tried to get up and was surprised that she could not even open her eyes. The realization that her body was still unconscious presently enthralled her.

What a marvellous ability!

As time passed, it began to be disconcerting. She thought: "I'm really quite helpless." It was early afternoon before she was finally able to move. She got up, subdued and thoughtful, warmed a can of soup for Vince and herself, and forced him to drink it from a cup.

Immediately after, he stretched out again on the couch and fell asleep. Barbara left the apartment to keep her appointment with her own doctor.

As she drove, she could feel a stirring inside her. More change? She decided it was. Perhaps there would be many such between now and Monday. Yet her intuition was that she would not be able to dominate this situation with the changes from the first and second shots only.

"Somehow," she thought, "I've got to get that third shot"

XXIX

At noon Monday, after he had dictated some letters to a girl from the steno pool, Hammond came out of his office.

"What's the word from Nine-two?"

Helen looked up with her flashing smile. "Barbara?"

"Yes."

"Her doctor called in this morning at her request. He said he saw her Saturday. She appears to have a mild temperature, is subject to dizzy spells and a variety of unmentionable ailments like diarrhea. However, there's one unexpected thing, the doctor said—evidently his own comment. Interested?"

"Of course."

"He said that in his opinion Barbara has had a major personality change since he last checked her about a year ago."

Hammond shook Ms head slowly. "Merely confirms our own observation. Well, keep me in touch."

But about four o'clock, when the long-distance screen was finally silent, he buzzed Helen Wendell. "I can't get that girl out of my mind. It's premonition-level stuff, so I can't ignore it. Phone Barbara."

She called to him a minute later: "Sorry, there's no answer."

"Bring her file to me," said Hammond. "I've got to assure myself I'm not missing something in this unusual matter."

As he scanned the typed pages a few minutes later, he came presently to the photograph of Vince Strather. He uttered an exclamation.

"What is it?" Helen asked.

He told her, finished, "Of course, I didn't connect Barbara with that young man. But this is his picture. Get Gloge's file."

"Apparently the change started when his sister died five months ago," Helen Wendell said presently. "One of those sudden and dangerous shifts in personal motivation." She added ruefully, "I should have watched him on that. The death of a near relative has often proved important."

She was seated in the main room of Hammond's living quarters at Research Alpha. The door to Hammond's private office behind them was closed. Across the room, a large wall safe had been opened, revealing a wide double row of thin, metal-bound files. Two of the files—Henry Gloge's and Barbara Ellington's—lay on the table before Helen. Hammond stood beside her.

He said now, "What about that trip he made back east early in the month?"

"He spent three days in his hometown, purportedly to make arrangements to sell his sister's and his property there. They had a house, complete with private laboratory, untenanted, on the grounds of an old farm. The perfect location for unsupervised experimentation. On primates? Not likely. They're not easy to obtain secretly, and except for the smaller gibbons, they should make potentially quite dangerous subjects for Dr. Gloge's project. So it must be humans he planned to work on."

Hammond nodded.

There was an almost sick expression on his face. The woman looked up at him. "You seem very anxious. Presumably, Barbara and Vince have now had two injec-

tions each. That will take them to fifty thousand years from now on some level. It doesn't seem desperately serious to me."

The man smiled tautly. "Don't forget that we're dealing with one of the seed races."

"Yes—but only fifty thousand years so far."

He stared at her sympathetically. "You and I," he said, "are still far down on the ladder. So it's hard for us to conceive of the evolutionary potential of the genus *Homo galacticus*."

She laughed. "I'm content with my lowly lot—"

"Good conditioning," he murmured.

"—but I'm willing to accept your analysis. What do you intend to do with Gloge?"

Hammond straightened decisively. "Even if this is Great Galactic overlap, we will be expected to take account of the realities of the situation. And my normal reaction tells me that when a man has murder intent, we should keep an eye on his potential victims. And, as nearly always, prevention is the best cure."

He continued: "Call Ames and have him put special security men at every exit. For the next hour, don't let Gloge out of this building. And if Vince or Barbara try to enter the complex, tell him to hold them. When you've done that, start cancelling my appointments for the day and evening."

Helen said, "Are you going to stop the experiment?"

"I'm going to try," said the man. "But I'm beginning to have a faint glimmer of what Barbara's intended role is in all this, and so I doubt if we can do anything at this stage except protect her and Vince."

He disappeared into his bedroom, came out presently dressed for the street.

Helen Wendell greeted him with: "I called Ames, and he says 'Check!' But I also phoned Gloge's office. He left about an hour ago, his secretary says."

Hammond said quickly, "Sound a standby alert. Tell Ames to throw a guard around the homes of both of those young people!"

"You're going where?"

"First Barbara, then Vince. I only hope I'm in time."

A look must have come into Helen's face, because he smiled tensely and said, "Your expression says I'm getting too involved."

The beautiful blond woman smiled with understanding, said, "Every day on this planet thousands of people are murdered, hundreds of thousands are robbed, and countless minor acts of violence occur. People are struck, choked, yelled at, degraded, cheated—I could go on. If we ever opened ourselves to that, we'd shrivel away."

"I kind of like Barbara," Hammond confessed.

Helen was calm. "So do I. What do you think is happening?"

"As I see it, Gloge gave them the first injection last Wednesday and the second on Friday. That means the third one should be given today. That, unless they are responding well, I should stop."

He departed hastily.

XXX

Gloge had become nervous. As Monday wore on, he kept

thinking of his two specimens; and what bothered him was that he did not have them under observation on this last day.

What a ridiculous situation, he told himself. The greatest experiment in human history—and no scientific person watching it through to a conclusion of the key second injection.

There was another feeling, also.

Fear!

He couldn't help but remember the young man. It seemed to Gloge that he had seen too many animals show in their fashion the symptoms he had observed in Vince. Failure to respond well to the serum, the signs of internal malaise, the sick appearance, the struggle of the cells visibly reflecting defeat in the efforts and chemistry at the surface of the skin.

And there was—he had to admit it—a further anxiety.

Many of the unsuccessful animal specimens had developed

tough fight-back characteristics. It would be wise to be prepared for emergencies of that nature.

He thought grimly: "No use fooling myself. I'd better drop everything and take another look at those two."

That was when he left his office.

He took it for granted that Barbara was all right. So he drove to Vince's apartment, and first checked with his audio pickups to make sure he was there and alone.

He detected at once movements; the sound of labored breathing, an occasional squeak of the springs of the couch. These noises came screeching through the hypersensitive receiver, but Gloge had the volume on them turned down so that they were not actually painful in his ears.

Gloge's spirits had already dropped even more, for the sounds he was hearing confirmed his fears.

Suddenly, all the justified scientific attitude that had motivated him until now came hard against the reality of the failure that was here.

By his previous reasoning, he would now have to kill Vince.

And that meant, of course, that he would also have to dispose of Barbara.

His state of funk yielded, after what must have been many minutes, to a strictly scientific thought: Mere sounds were not enough data for so basic a decision, it seemed to him.

He felt intense disappointment.

Now he must go and make his decision from an actual

meeting with Vince. It would be improper to dispose of his two human subjects without a face-to-face interrogation.

As Gloge climbed out of his car and headed for the apartment building, Vince had a dream.

He dreamed that the man—what was his name?—Gloge, with whom he had quarreled a few days before in the corridor at Research Alpha, was coming here to his apartment, with the intention of killing him. At some deep of his being, anger began. But he did not awaken.

The dream—product of his own disturbed, strange evolutionary development—continued.

From some vantage point, he watched Gloge approach his back door. He felt no surprise when the small bald-headed man produced a key. Tense with fear, Vince watched as

Gloge stealthily inserted the key into the lock, slowly turned it, and quietly opened the door.

At that point, Vince's body was impelled by Ms extreme anxiety to defensive action. Millions of tiny, shining, cream-colored energy bundles were emitted by his nervous system. They resembled very short straight lines. And they passed through the wall that separated the living room from the kitchen, and they struck Gloge.

Great masses of the energy units unerringly sought out nerve ends in Gloge's body and darted in their scintillating fashion up to the man's brain.

The energy units were not the result of conscious analytical thought. They were brought into being solely by fright, and carried pressor messages. They pushed at Gloge mentally, urging him to leave, to go back to where he had come from.

Dr. Gloge came to his senses with a start. He was back in his van. He remembered running in precipitant flight. He had a vague recollection of complete panic.

He sat now, trembling, breathing hard, trying to recover from the most disgraceful act of fear that he had ever experienced in his whole life.

And he knew that he had to go back.

Twice more, the sleeping Vince emitted enough energy bundles to compel Gloge to run. Each time the power available was less and Gloge retreated a shorter distance before stopping and forcing himself to go back again to the apartment.

On Gloge's fourth approach, the brain mechanism in Vince was able to manufacture only a small energy discharge. Gloge felt the fear rise in him, but he fought it successfully.

He moved silently across the kitchen floor toward the door of the living room.

He still did not realize that the sleeping body and he had fought a battle—which he had now won.

Moments later, Gloge looked down at the exhausted form of his male subject. The sleeping body had perspired excessively. It trembled and moaned, and, as Gloge watched, jerked fitfully.

Unmistakably—Gloge decided—a failed experiment.

He wasted no time. He had come prepared. He pulled a pair of handcuffs from his pocket, carefully slipped one over Vince's farthest-away arm, and softly clicked it shut. He lifted the arm as carefully toward the other wrist and clicked that handcuff on also.

Gloge next successfully tied Vince's legs together, and then lashed together the hands and feet.

The victim continued his restless, feverish sleep.

Gloge brought out a gag. As he had anticipated, forcing it into the closed mouth was more disturbing. Under him, the body grew rigid. Wild eyes flicked open and glared up at him.

In a single, convulsive effort, Vince tried to bring up his arms and simultaneously struggled to get to his feet.

But Gloge had done his preliminary work well. The victim's intense effort subsided. Dr. Gloge realized that his control of this situation was complete. He removed the gag and said: "What I want to know is, how do you feel?"

The half-crazy, rage-filled eyes snapped with the impulse to violence. Vince cursed in a shrill voice. He kept this up for several minutes. Then he seemed to realize something.

"Y—you did something to me last week."

Gloge nodded. "I injected you twice with a serum designed to accelerate cellular evolution, and I've come to find out how you are."

His gray eyes were steady; his bald head gleamed in the reflection of the light he had turned on. His face was serious. "Why not tell me exactly how you feel?" he asked earnestly.

This time Vince's cursing subsided after about a minute. He lay, then, staring at his captor, and something about the pale, tense face of the scientist must have convinced him. "I feel—awful," he said uneasily.

"Exactly how?" Gloge persisted.

Slowly, by dint of determined questioning, he drew from his reluctant victim the fact that he felt weak, exhausted, and numb.

It was the fateful combination that had so often shown in the animals; and Gloge knew that it was decisive.

Without another word, he bent down and started to force the gag into Vince's mouth. Vince twisted, wiggled, turned his head, and several times tried to bite. But inexorably Gloge pushed the gag all the way into the other's mouth and knotted it firmly behind his head.

He now went outside and drove the van into the driveway opposite the back door of Vince's apartment. Wrapping the young man's body in a blanket, he carried him boldly outside and into the van.

A few minutes later he was heading for the home of one of his subordinates. The man was on loan to an eastern laboratory, and his house and yard were unoccupied.

If he had paused, if he had stopped moving, if he had even taken his foot off the accelerator, Gloge might have faltered in his grisly plan. But his only slowdown was when he finally brought the car to a stop at his destination. And that, in its real meaning, was a continuation of the plan.

Its final moments.

Laboriously, he dragged the gagged, handcuffed, and bound Vince across the sidewalk, through a gate, and over to the deep end of the swimming pool. And still without pausing, he shoved the tense body over the edge and into the water.

He straightened from his terrible act, stood there gasping for breath, exhausted, watching the trail of bubbles that roiled the dark surface. Abruptly terrified that he might be seen, he turned and staggered away.

As he half-fell, half-crawled into his car, the first opposing thought came, as much a feeling of horror as an idea: "My God, what have I done?"

But there was no opposing motion in that reaction. He did not go back. Instead, he sat there, bracing to the realization that a few feet away a man was still in process of drowning.

When there was no longer any doubt, when the subject of his experiment was by all laws of life dead, Gloge sighed and stirred. There was no turning back. One gone, one to go.

Next—the girl!

From a phone booth a few blocks away, Gloge dialed Barbara Ellington's boardinghouse. The voice of an elderly woman answered and told him Barbara had gone out.

The voice added, "She certainly is a popular girl today."

Gloge said uneasily, "How do you mean?"

"Several men came by a little while ago and asked for her, but of course I had to tell them also that she wasn't here."

A sharp fear struck through Gloge. "Did they give their names?" he asked.

"A Mr. Hammond," was the reply.

Hammond! The chill of that froze Gloge. "Thank you," he gulped, and hung up.

He returned shakily to his car, torn between two impulses. He had intended to return after dark to the pool, fish

Vince's body out of it, take off all the bindings, and dispose of it. He had a strong feeling now that he should do that at once. On the other hand, he had a desperate conviction that he must return to his office and remove the rest of the serum from the safe there.

That last suddenly seemed the more important thing to do, and the safest at this hour. The sun had gone down below the western hills, but the sky was still bright blue. The dying day had too much light in it for the gruesome task of getting rid of a dead body.

XXXI

At ten minutes past seven, Dr. Gloge unlocked the door that led directly from the corridor to his office in the biology section of Research Alpha. He went in, closed the door behind him, walked quickly around the big, bare desk in the center of the room, and stooped down to unlock the desk drawer where he kept a key to one of the safes.

"Good evening, Dr. Gloge," a woman's voice said behind him.

For an instant Dr. Gloge seemed unable to move. The words, the tone, sent an electrifying hope through him. He could scarcely believe his luck: that the second person he had to dispose of had come to where he could best deal with her.

He straightened slowly, turned around.

Barbara Ellington stood in the open door to the adjoining library, watching him, face serious and alert.

At no time in what followed did Gloge have any other conscious awareness than that this was Barbara Ellington.

But the very instant that he saw the girl, at some depth of his being neural readjustments took place. Millions of them. And from that instant, subconsciously, she was his dead sister. But she was not dead anymore. She was reassuringly alive in the person of Barbara.

A look passed between them. It was one of complete

understanding. It occurred to Gloge that it was scientifically wrong to kill this successful experimental victim. He even had a feeling that she was on his side and would cooperate with him. He suppressed a fleeting impulse to pretend not to know why she was here.

He said matter-of-factly, "How did you get in?"

"Through the specimen room."

"Did any of the night workers see you?"

"No." Barbara smiled slightly.

Gloge was examining her with quick evaluative looks. He noted the way she stood, almost motionless, but lightly and strongly balanced—a pose of contained, absolutely prepared energy. He saw in her eyes bright, quick intelligence.

The thought came to him: Nothing quite like this was ever on Earth before!

Barbara said suddenly, "You took a long chance on us, didn't you?"

The words that burst from Dr. Gloge surprised him: "I had to do it."

"Yes, I know." Again she spoke matter-of-factly, moved forward into the room. Dr. Gloge felt a surge of alarm, a sharp, cold prickling of the skin. But she turned from him to the left, and he watched silently as she sat down in a chair against the wall and placed the brown purse she carried on the armrest of the chair. She spoke first.

"You must give me the third injection of the serum immediately," she told him. "I'll watch you do it. Then I'll take the instrument and a supply of the serum to Vince. He—"

She paused, blue eyes kindling with abrupt comprehension as she studied Dr. Gloge's expression. "So you've drowned him!" she said. She sat there, thoughtful; then: "He's not dead. I sense him to be still alive. Now, what is the instrument you use? You must still have it with you."

"I do," Dr. Gloge admitted hoarsely. "But," he went on quickly, "it is advisable to wait till morning before administering the third shot. The chances of a further favorable development would be increased by doing it. And you must stay here! Nobody should see you as you are. There should be tests . . . you will tell me . . ."

He halted, realizing he was stammering. Barbara's eyes hadn't turned from his face. And in the same way that her knowledge of Vince's fate had not disturbed him—somehow, he took it for granted that she realized and appreciated why and what he had done—so now her expression reassured him.

She said quietly, "Dr. Gloge, there are several things you don't understand. I know I can assimilate the serum. So give me the shot—and the serum—at once."

Barbara Ellington arose and started over toward him. She said nothing, and her face revealed no emotion, but his next awareness was of holding the jet gun out to her on his open palm as she came up.

"There's only one charge left."

She took the gun from his palm without touching him, turned it over, studied it, laid it back in his hand. "Where is your supply of the serum?"

Dr. Gloge nodded at the entrance to the library behind her. "The larger of the two safes in there."

Her head had turned in the direction he indicated. Now she remained still for a moment, gaze remote, lips parted, in an attitude of intent listening; then she looked back at him.

"Give me the injection," she told him. "Some men are coming."

Dr. Gloge lifted the gun, put the point against her shoulder, pulled the trigger. Barbara drew her breath in sharply, took the gun from him, opened her purse, dropped the gun inside, and snapped the purse shut. Her eyes shifted to the office door.

"Listen!" she said.

After a moment, Dr. Gloge heard footsteps coming along the narrow corridor from the main laboratory.

"Who is it?" he asked anxiously.

"Hammond," she said. "Three other men."

Dr. Gloge made a stifled sound of despair. "We've got to get away. He mustn't find either of us here. Quick-through there." He waved toward the library.

Barbara shook her head. "This place is surrounded. All passages are guarded." She frowned. "Hammond must think he has all the evidence he needs against you—but don't help him in any way! Admit nothing! Let's see what I can do with my—" As she spoke, she moved back to the chair on which she had been sitting. She settled into it, her face composed. "Maybe I can handle him," she said confidently.

The footsteps had reached the door. There came a knock.

Gloge glanced at Barbara. His thoughts were whirling. She nodded, smiled.

"Come in!" Dr. Gloge said harshly, too loudly.

Hammond entered the room. "Why, Mr. Hammond!" Bar-

bara exclaimed. Her face was flushed; she looked embarrassed and confused.

Hammond had stopped, as he caught sight of her. He sensed a mental probing. His brain put up a barrier, and the probing ceased.

Their eyes met; and there was a flicker of consternation in hers. Hammond smiled ironically. Then he said in a steely voice: "Stay where you are, Barbara. I'll talk to you later." His voice went up. "Come on in, Ames!" he called.

There was threat in his tone; and Dr. Gloge sent a quick, desperate, appealing glance at Barbara. She gave him an uncertain smile. The look of earnest, fumbling innocence with which she had greeted Hammond had left her face, leaving it

resigned but alert.

Hammond gave no sign of being aware of the change.

"Ames," he said to the first of the three men who came in through the library from the specimen room—Dr. Gloge recognized Wesley Ames, the chief of Research Alpha's security staff—"this is Barbara Ellington. Take charge of that handbag she's holding. Allow no one to enter this office. Miss Ellington is not to leave and is not to be permitted to touch any object in this room. She is to stay in that chair until I return with Dr. Gloge."

Wesley Ames nodded. "Understood, Mr. Hammond I" He glanced at his men, one of whom went to the office door and locked it, while Ames turned to Barbara. She handed him her purse without comment.

"Doctor, come with me," Hammond said curtly.

Dr. Gloge followed him into the library. Hammond closed the door behind them.

"Where's Vince?" he said in an inexorable voice.

"Really, Mr. Hammond," Gloge protested. "I don't—"

Hammond stepped toward him abruptly. The movement seemed a threat. Dr. Gloge cringed, expecting to be manhandled. Instead, the bigger man firmly caught his arm and pressed a tiny metal object against his bare wrist.

"Tell me where Vince is!" Hammond commanded.

Gloge parted his lips to deny any knowledge of Barbara's boyfriend. Instead, the confession of what he had done poured forth from him. As he realized what he was admitting, Gloge tried desperately to stop himself from talking. He had already divined that the metal touching his skin was some kind of a hypnotic device, and so he tried to pull his arm from Hammond's grasp.

It was a vain effort.

"How long ago did you drown him?" Hammond asked.

"About an hour ago," said Dr. Gloge hopelessly.

At that instant shouts came from the adjoining office. The door was pulled open. Wesley Ames stood there, ashen faced.

"Mr. Hammond—she's gone!"

Hammond darted past him into the office. Dr. Gloge hurried after, legs trembling. As he reached the door, Hammond already was coming back into the office with one of the security men from the hall on the other side. Ames and the other men stood in the center of the office, looking about with stupefied expressions.

Hammond closed the door, said to Ames, "Quickly, now! What happened?"

Ames threw his hands up in a gesture of furious frustration.

"Mr. Hammond, I don't know. We were watching her. She was there in the chair; then she was not there, that's all. He"—he indicated one of the men—"was standing with his back to the door. When we saw she was gone, he was sitting on the floor next to the door! The door was open. We ran into the hall, but she wasn't there. Then I called you."

"How long had you been watching her?" Hammond asked sharply.

"How long?" Ames gave him a dazed look. "I had just taken my mother down the hall to the elevator—"

He stopped, blinked. "Mr. Hammond, what am I saying? My mother's been dead for eight years!"

Hammond said softly, "So that's her little trick. She reached to that deep of the heart where the pure, unsullied dead are enshrined. And I thought she was only trying to read my mind!"

He broke off, said in a clear, commanding voice: "Wake up, Ames! You three have been gone from the world for a couple of minutes. Don't worry about how Miss Ellington did it. Get her description to the exits. If she's seen approaching by a guard, tell him to keep her at a distance at gun point."

As the three hurried from the office, he indicated a chair to Dr. Gloge. Gloge sat down, senses swimming, as Hammond took a pencil-shaped device from his pocket, pressed it, and stood waiting.

On the fifth floor of the Research Alpha complex, Helen

Wendell picked up the small private phone at the side of her desk, said, "Go ahead, John."

"Switch all defense and trap screens on immediately!" Hammond's voice told her. "Gloge's drowned Strather—as an experimental failure. But the other one's awake and functioning. It's hard to know what she'll do next, but she may find it necessary to get to my office as a way of getting out of this building fast."

Heln pressed a button. "Not this way she won't!" she said. "The screens are on."

XXXII

Outside, it grew darker on that tense Monday night.

At eight-eighteen, Helen Wendell again picked up the small phone purring at the side of her desk in the Research Alpha complex, glanced over at the closed office door, and, said into the receiver, "Go ahead, John."

"I'm here at the pool," John Hammond's voice told her. "We've just fished his body out. Helen, the fellow is alive. Some reflex prevented any intake of water. But we'll need

an oxygen tent."

Helen's left hand reached for another telephone. "You want the ambulance?" she asked, starting to dial.

"Yes. You have the street number. Tell them to pull up at the side gate. We have to act swiftly."

"Police uniforms, also?" Helen asked.

"Yes. But tell them to stay in the cab unless needed. We're out of sight, behind a high fence. And it's dark. I'll come back with them. Has Barbara been apprehended?"

"No," Helen said.

"I really didn't expect she would be," Hammond said. "I'll question the guards when I get there."

Barbara had allowed Ames to escort her to the nearest elevator, while she continued to have him think that she was his mother.

Once in the elevator, she pushed the up-button and came out presently on the roof. As she had already perceived, a helicopter was scheduled to take off. And though she was not an authorized passenger, the pilot took her along believing her to be his girl friend. Her sudden arrival seemed perfectly logical to him.

A little later, he set her down on the roof of another building. And that, also, seemed the most natural act to him, her reason for going there obvious.

He flew off and promptly forgot the episode.

The hasty landing was an urgent necessity for Barbara. She could feel the new injection beginning to work. So in her scanning of the buildings flitting by below, she perceived one in which the upper floors were unoccupied.

"I'll try to make it down to some office," she thought.

But she didn't get beyond the top floor. She actually began to stagger as she went down the first steps from the roof. And there was no mistaking the out-of-control state of her body. To her left, a door opened into a warehouse-like loft. She weaved through it, closed it behind her, and bolted it. Then she half-lowered herself, half-fell to the floor.

During that evening and night she never quite lost consciousness. Blackout was no longer possible for her. But she could feel her body changing, changing, changing—

The energy flows inside her took on a different meaning. They were separate from her. Presently they would be controllable again, but in another fashion entirely.

Something of Barbara seemed to disappear with that awareness.

"I'm still me!" the entity thought as it lay there on the floor. "Flesh, feeling, desire—"

But she had the distinct realization that "me" even in these early stages of the five-hundred-thousand-year transformations was ME PLUS.

Exactly how the self was becoming something more was not yet clear.

The slow night dragged by.

XXXIII

Tuesday.

Shortly before noon, Helen Wendell came along the hallway that led from John Hammond's quarters to the main office. Hammond was sitting at the far side of her desk. He glanced up at her as she approached.

"How are the patients?" he asked.

"Gloge is role-perfect," Helen said. "I even allowed him to spend part of the morning talking to his assistants here. He's already had two conversations by Telstar with Sir Hubert about his new task overseas. I've put him to sleep again, but he's available. When did you come in?"

"Just now. How's Strather?"

Helen tapped the recorder. "I checked with the MD machine on him twenty minutes ago," she said. "It gave me its opinion in detail. I took it all down. Do you want to hear it?"

"Sum it up for me."

Helen pursed her lips; then: "The MD verifies that he didn't swallow any water, that some newly developed brain mechanism shut off breathing and kept him in a state of suspended animation. Vince himself has no conscious memory of the experience, so it was evidently a survival act of the lower brain. MD reports other developments are taking place in Vince, regards them as freakish in nature. It's too soon to tell whether or not he can survive a third injection. He's under sedation."

Hammond looked dissatisfied. "All right," he said after a moment. "What else do you have for me?"

"A number of transmitter messages," Helen said.

"About Gloge?"

"Yes. New Brasilia and Manila agree with you that there are too many chances of a revealing slip-up if Dr. Gloge remains at Research Alpha any longer than is absolutely necessary."

"You said Gloge is role-perfect."

Helen nodded. "At the moment. But he is a highly recalcitrant subject, and naturally I can't give him the kind of final conditioning he'd get at Paris center. That's where they want him. The courier, Arnold, will take him aboard the

Paris-jet at five-ten tonight."

"No!" Hammond shook his head. "That's too early! Gloge is our bait to catch Barbara. His experiments indicate that she won't be able to function until sometime this evening. I calculate that somewhere around nine o'clock will be a good time to let Gloge out from behind the defense screens."

Helen was silent a moment, then said, "There seems to be a general feeling, John, that you're overestimating the possibilities of any really dangerous evolutionary developments in Barbara Ellington."

Hammond smiled tautly. "I've seen her. They haven't. Mind you, for all I know, she may be dead or dying of the effects of the third shot by now. But if she's capable of coming, I think she'll come. She'll want that fourth injection. She may start anytime looking for the man who can produce the serum for her."

By Tuesday a new awareness had come to Barbara.

She had developed brain mechanisms that could do things with space—do them on an automatic level, without her conscious mind knowing what, or how. Fantastic things. . . .

As she lay there, a new nerve center in her brain reached out and scanned a volume of space 500 light-years in diameter. It touched and comprehended clouds of neutral hydrogen and bright young O-type stars, measured the swing of binaries, took a census of comets and ice asteroids. Far out in the constellation of Ophiuchus a blue-white giant was going nova, and the new, strange linkage in Barbara's mind observed its frantic heaving of spheres of radiant gas. A black dwarf emitted its last spray of infrared light and sank into the radiationless pit of dead stars.

Barbara's mind encompassed it all, and reached farther . . . reached out effortlessly until it touched a specific Something . . . and withdrew.

Brimming with ecstasy, Barbara cried out in her mind, What did I touch?

She knew it had been something the brain mechanism was programmed to search for. But no conscious perception was involved. All she could be sure of was that the nerve center seemed satisfied, and ceased its scanning.

But she sensed, in an intensely happy way, that it remained aware of What it had contacted.

She was still savoring the joy a while later when she became aware that the shifting energy flows inside her had resumed.

Gradually, then, she permitted her body and mind to sink into a receptive state.

Midsummer heat built up over the city throughout the day. In the locked room on the vacant top floor of the

multistoried building three miles from Research Alpha, the heat grew stifling as the sun shifted overhead, began to beat in through closed, unshaded windows. Barbara, curled on her side on the dusty floor, did not move. Now and then she uttered a moaning sound. Sweat ran from her for a long, long time, as the heat increased; then the skin of her face dried and turned dirty white. She made no more sounds. Even a close study would not have been able to prove that she still breathed.

By four o'clock the sunblaze had shifted past the windows, and the locked room lay in shadows. But it was another hour before the temperature in it gradually began to drop. About six, the curled figure moved for the first time.

She straightened her legs slowly, then, with a sudden convulsive motion, rolled over on her back, lay flat, arms flung loosely to the sides.

The right half of her face was smeared grotesquely with thick dust caked in drying sweat. She breathed—lay quiet again. Several minutes later, her eyelids lifted. The eyes were a deep, brilliant blue, seemed oddly awake and alert, though they remained unfocused and did not shift about the room. After a while, the lids slowly closed and remained closed.

The day darkened; the city's lights awoke. The empty warehouse stood silent. More than an hour passed before the figure in the room on the top floor moved again.

This time, it was motion of a different order. She rose suddenly and quickly to her feet, went to the nearest window, and stood looking out through the dirt-stained glass.

The towering Research Alpha complex was a glow of white light to the west. The watcher's eyes turned toward it. ...

A second of time went by. Then the mind that directed the eyes moved on an entirely new level of extended perception.

Night-shift activities in the research complex were not essentially different from those of the day; but there were fewer people around as the awareness that was Barbara drifted along familiar, lighted hallways, about corners, dropped suddenly to a sublevel which contained the biology section. Here she flicked through the main laboratory and up a narrow corridor, pausing before the door to Dr. Gloge's office.

She moved through the door, paused in the dark and silent office, then moved on into the library. She remained a minute or two above the big safe in a corner of the library. Then she knew.

The safe was empty—and trapped.

The awareness flicked out of the library, shifted to the fifth floor of the complex, drifted toward a great black door showing the words: Scientific Liaison and Investigation. She stopped before it.

Minutes passed as she slowly and carefully scanned the outer walls of John Hammond's offices and living quarters. Here was something new . . . something that seemed very dangerous. Within the walls and doors, above the ceiling, below the flooring of this section, strange energies curled and crawled like twisting smoke.

She could not pass through that barrier.

But though she could not enter, her perceptions might, to some extent.

She must avoid, she decided, both the front entry door and the secret elevator which led directly to Hammond's living quarters in the rear of the section. As the most obvious points for an intruder to consider, they were also the most formidably shielded.

She shifted back along the hall to a point some twenty feet away from the massive black door, well back from the wall between her and the front office. She waited. Gradually a picture began to form...

This was an unfamiliar room, the inner office of the section. There was no one in it, nothing of interest except a closed door across from the one which opened on the corridor.

The inner office disappeared . . . and what came next was no picture, but a surge of savage, demanding hunger.

Startled, shocked, already feeling the pull that in a moment would hurl her into the murderous barriers about the

section, the searching awareness instantly broke the thread of visual perception, went inactive to allow herself to stabilize.

Nevertheless, she now knew where the serum was—in a strongroom of Hammond's quarters, heavily screened, seemingly inaccessible.

Perception cautiously opened again. Another section of the living quarters appeared, hazy with hostile energies. The other—the male counterpart—was here. Alive.

Here, but helpless. Here, but unconscious, in a cage of dark force which permitted no more than barest identification by the searcher. She was very glad he had been rescued.

Minutes later, she knew there was no one else in Hammond's locked quarters. She withdrew visual perception from there, and let the picture of the main office develop. The blurred image of a woman—Helen Wendell—now seemed to be speaking into an instrument connected with the apparatus before her.

A second band of perception opened, and voices became indistinctly audible.

Ganin Arnold, the New Brasilia courier, was making his final call from the city jetport, nine miles south of the Research Alpha complex.

"The doors are being secured," he said. He was speaking into a disguised microphone clamped over his mouth and nose, which had the appearance of the tranquillizing respirators many of the other jet passengers were using now in the last moments before lift-off. Even to anyone within inches of him, his voice would have remained completely inaudible. In John Hammond's office, it emerged clearly from the device on Helen Wendell's desk.

"Lift-off for the nonstop jet to Paris," Arnold went on, "will follow"—he glanced at the watch on his wrist—"in two minutes and thirty seconds. All passengers and every member of the crew have passed at least once through the measurement radius. Nothing which may have preceded or followed myself and our biologist aboard registers life-energy levels significantly above the standard Earther range—that is, of course, below six.

"To sum it up, we definitely are not being accompanied to Paris by any abnormally high human evolutionary form. Dr. Gloge's behavior has been excellent. His tranquillizer has begun to take effect, and he is showing signs of drowsiness. Undoubtedly, he will sleep soundly throughout the trip."

Arnold paused, apparently waiting for comment. When there was none, he resumed, "As soon as the lift-field goes on, communication by this means, of course, will be impossible. Since nothing is likely to go wrong from this moment on, I suggest, if it's satisfactory to Mr. Hammond, that I end my report now."

Helen Wendell's voice, seeming to speak from a point just within the left side of the courier's skull, told him pleasantly, "Mr. Hammond prefers you to remain alert and available, for final instructions until the lift has begun."

In the locked room on the top floor of the empty warehouse a few miles east of Research Alpha, the woman-shape standing at the window stirred suddenly out of the tranced immobility it had maintained for the past minutes. The head lifted, gaze sweeping the softly glowing night sky above the city. A hand moved, touching the thick window-pane probingly. The glass fell away like a big drop of melting ice.

Dust swirled as cool air rushed in.

Barbara waited, then moved closer to the opening.

Her gaze swung to the west again, remained there. She listened. The myriad noises of the city were clear and distinct now. Overlying them was a thin fountain of sky-sound as, every thirty seconds—at this hour—a jet lifted vertically from the city port, cut in its engines, and vanished up into the night with a whistling shriek. Her head shifted quickly, briefly following the changing pattern of the sound. Then it steadied.

Her gaze rose slowly, slanting to the north, following a moving, distant point in the night, eyes narrowed with intentness.

On board the Paris jet which had left the city port a few minutes before, Dr. Henry Gloge now had a very curious experience. Drowsily, almost on the verge of sleep, he had been contemplating the pleasant significance of his assignment today to Sir Hubert Roland's Paris project. Suddenly, then, there was a sensation of coming partly awake.

He gazed around him with a rising sense of alarm, looking first of all at his seat companion.

The fellow was big, heavily built. He looked like a police detective, and Gloge knew that the man was his guard. The curious thing was that he was slumped back in the seat, head lolling forward, eyes closed . . . typical indications of a tranquillized stupor.

Gloge thought: "Why is he asleep?" He had a strong conviction that it was he who should be unconscious. There was a clear memory of a device—an instrument totally unfamiliar to him—which the Wendell woman had used to implant a complete, compelling set of delusions in his mind. He had come willingly aboard the jet. And he had, at the suggestion of his guard, inhaled enough tranquillizing gas from the seat respirator to have kept him somnolent until the jet touched down in Paris.

Instead, minutes later, he had come awake, the delusions of the day slipping from his mind!

There must be an explanation for these apparently contradictory events.

The thought ended. A feeling of blankness held him for a moment. Then came a churning wave of terror.

Somewhere a voice had said: "Yes, Dr. Gloge—there is an explanation for this!"

Slowly, against his every inclination, but completely unable to withstand the impulse, Dr. Gloge turned, looked back. There was someone in the seat behind him.

For an instant, it seemed to be a complete stranger. Then the eyes opened. They fixed on him, glowing brilliant demon-blue, even in the muted light of the jet.

The woman spoke, and it was the voice of Barbara Ellington. "We have a problem, Dr. Gloge. There seems to be a group of extraterrestrials on this planet, and I still do not have any clear idea of what they are doing here. That's our immediate task—to find out."

"You are where?" Helen Wendell said sharply.

Her hand flicked to the right, snapped a switch. A small view-screen on the right side of the desk lit up. She said, "John—quick!"

In the inner office, John Hammond turned, saw the lit screen on the desk behind him. An instant later he was listening to the words tumbling hoarsely from the telephone

speaker on his left. He said to Helen's tense, pale profile in the screen to the right, "Where is he?"

"At the Des Moines jetport! The Paris jet put down for emergency repairs. Now nobody seems to understand just what was wrong with it or what repairs are needed. But the passengers have been disembarked, are to be transferred to

another jet. Arnold's in a state of confusion and shock. Listen to him!"

"—there was a woman with him," the courier's voice babbled. "At the time, I thought it was one of the passengers who had come off the jet with us. Now I'm not sure. But I simply stood there and watched the two of them walk out of the hall together. It never occurred to me to ask myself Why this woman was with Gloge, or to stop them, or even to wonder where they were going. . . ."

Hammond twisted a dial, dimming the voice. He spoke to Helen Wendell. "When did the jet come down?"

"From what Arnold said first," Helen told him, "it must have been over half an hour ago! As he puts it, it didn't occur to him to call us about it until now."

"Half an hour!" Hammond came to his feet. "Helen, drop everything you're doing! I want an off-planet observer sitting in on this, preferably within minutes."

She gave him a startled look. "What are you expecting?"

"I don't know what to expect."

"She hesitated, began: "The Wardens ..."

"Whatever can be done here," Hammond said, "I can do myself. I don't need anyone else for that. The defense screens on the northern side will go off for exactly forty seconds. Now move!" He snapped off the screen, reached under the desk, threw over another switch.

In the main office, Helen Wendell stared at the blank screen for a moment. Then she jumped to her feet, ran across the room to the entry door, pulled it open, and slipped out into the hall. The door swung shut behind her.

Some moments later, John Hammond entered the room behind his private office where Vincent Strather lay enclosed by a trap screen. Hammond went to the wall, turned the trap controls there halfway to the off point.

The screen faded into smoky near-invisibility, and he stared for a few seconds at the shape stretched out on the couch within it. He asked aloud, "There have been no further internal changes?"

"None within the past two hours," the MD machine's voice said from the wall.

"This form is viable?"

"Yes."

"He would awaken if I released the screen?"

"Yes. Immediately."

Hammond was silent a moment, then asked, "You have calculated the effects of a fourth injection of the serum?"

"Yes," the machine said from the wall.

"In general, what are they?"

"In general," the machine said, "there would be pronounced changes, and at an again greatly accelerated rate. The evolutionary trend remains the same, but would be very much advanced. The resultant form would stabilize within twenty minutes. It would again be a viable one."

Hammond turned the trap-screen controls full over to the left. The screen darkened once more into a dense, concealing shroud.

It was too soon to make the decision to give the fourth shot. Perhaps—mercifully—it could be avoided altogether.

XXXIV

At half-past ten, the long-distance signal sounded from the telephone screen. Hammond glanced around from the portable control box on the desk, simultaneously pressed the answer button and the stud which would leave him unseen if the caller's instrument was equipped with a view-screen, and said, "Go ahead!"

The screen remained dark, but somebody made a gasping sound of relief. "Mr. Hammond!" It was a reedy, quavering voice, but it was distinctly the voice of Dr. Gloge.

There were two sharp clicks from one of the instruments lying on the desk—a signal from Helen Wendell, in the observer boat standing off Earth, that she was recording the conversation.

"Where are you, Doctor?"

"Mr. Hammond . . . something terrible . . . that creature . . . Barbara Ellington—"

"She took you off the jet, I know," Hammond said. "Where are you now?"

"My home—in Pennsylvania."

"She went there with you?"

"Yes. There was nothing I could do."

"Of course not," Hammond said. "She's gone now?"

"I don't know where she is. I took the chance of phoning. Mr. Hammond, there was something I didn't know, didn't remember. But she knew. I..."

"You had some Omega serum in the laboratory?" Ham-

mond asked.

"I didn't think of it as that," Dr. Gloge's voice told him. "It was an earlier experimental variant—one with impurities which produce a dangerously erratic reaction. I was under the impression I had destroyed my entire stock. But this being knew better! It brought me here, forced me to give it what was left of the serum. The quantity was small—"

"But enough for a standard fourth shot of the series?" Hammond said.

"Yes, yes, it was sufficient for the fourth injection."

"And she has now taken it as an injection?"

Dr. Gloge hesitated; then he said, "Yes. However, there is reason to hope that instead of impelling the evolutionary process in what I now regard as a monstrous creature on to its next stage, the imperfect serum will result in its prompt destruction."

"Perhaps," said Hammond. "But almost since you first launched Barbara Ellington into this process, she appears to have been aware of what was possible to her. I can't believe she's made a mistake now."

"I . . ." Dr. Gloge paused again, went on: "Mr. Hammond, I realize the enormity of what I've done. If, in any way, I can help avert the worst consequences, I shall cooperate to the fullest extent. I—"

There was a sharp click as the connection was broken; a pause, then Helen Wendell's voice whispered into Hammond's ear, "Do you think Barbara let him make that call, then cut him off?"

"Of course."

Helen made no further comment, simply waited; and presently, softly, Hammond continued: "I think she wants us to know that she's coming here."

"I think she's there now," said Helen. "Good-bye."

XXXV

John Hammond glanced at the control box on the desk and saw the flickering indicators. He also saw a wholly unexpected reaction: a condition of nonenergy that actually canceled energy.

"Helen," he said. "This woman has gone up somewhere out of our reach! What you're seeing is energy trying to maintain itself against antienergy. I received recognition drilling on such things, but I've never seen it before in an actual situation."

Helen Wendell, eyes fixed on a duplicate check screen in the distant observer boat, did not reply. A shifting electronic storm was blazing through the check-screen indicators; it showed that the defensive forces enclosing Hammond's office and living quarters were coming under a

swiftly varying pattern of attack . . . presently that they were being tested almost to the limit.

It held that way for over a minute—every reading almost impossibly high, barely shifting.

"John Hammond!" the desktop said softly to Hammond.

He jerked slightly away, eyes flicking down to it.

"John Hammond!" the chair whispered beside him.

"John Hammond!" "John Hammond!" "John Hammond!"

"John Hammond . . ."

His name sprang at him from every part of the office, in a swirling, encircling pattern. Because of his special supervisory position, Hammond knew the pattern and its danger. It had never been considered probable, but nevertheless they had taken the possibility into account, and so he had outside power available to deal with this emergency.

He looked hurriedly about on the desk for an instrument he had laid down among the others there. For an instant he seemed unable to recognize it, and there was an icy touch of panic. Then he realized he already held it in his hand.

He ran a knob up along its side with his thumb, locked it into place, laid the instrument back on the desk.

A rasping came from it. Not only a sound, but a vibration, a rough, hard shuddering of the nerves. The voice-ghosts sank to a whisper, flowed from the room. Helen Wendell's tiny, distant voice stabbed at Hammond's ear like a needle: "The check screen! She's leaving!" Hopefully.

"You're certain?"

"Not really." Alarm whipped at him through Helen's voice. "What does your screen show?"

"A subjective blur at the moment. It's clearing."

"What happened?"

"I think she felt above us, and so she took it for granted that she could walk all over us. Accordingly, she's just had the surprise of her brief existence as a subgalactic superwoman. She didn't realize we represent the Great Ones."

"Is she damaged?"

"Oh, I wouldn't say that. She's learned too much. But . . . details later." Hammond blinked at the check screen, swung around toward the door of the adjoining room, pulled it open.

"Administer the final injection to the subject!" he said sharply into the room. "Acknowledge!"

"The fourth and final injection of the Omega Stimulation series will be administered to the subject," the machine replied.

"Immediately!"

"Immediately."

Helen's voice reached Hammond again as he drew the floor shut and came back to the desk. "At moments," she said, "the antienergies were holding the ninety-six point of overload. Within four of the theoretical limit. Did she get to you at the energy balance?"

"Very nearly," Hammond told her. "A very high-energy, pseudo-hypno trick that didn't quite work. And she'll be back. I still have something she wants!"

On his desk, the telephone screen blurred. When he turned it on, the voice of Dr. Gloge sounded in his ears.

"We were cut off earlier, Mr. Hammond." The biologist's voice was strongly even and controlled.

"What happened?" Hammond asked warily.

"Mr. Hammond, I have finally analyzed what evolution really is. The universe is a spectrum. It needs energies in motion at all levels. This is why those at the higher levels

do not interfere directly with individual activities at the lower. But this is also why they are concerned when a race reaches the point where it can begin to manipulate large forces."

Hammond said steadily, "Barbara, if the purpose of this call is to find out if I'll let you in, yes, I will."

A pause, then a click. Then there was a tiny, momentary flickering in one of the check-screen indicators. Then, in a different section, another.

"What's happening?" Helen asked tautly.

Hammond said, "She's coming through the screens, with my permission."

"Do you think it's a trick?"

"In a way. For some reason, she hasn't let herself reach that theoretical, final million-year point on Dr. Gloge's evolutionary scale. That may come a little later."

"And you're actually letting her in, believing that?"

"Of course." Helen did not answer him.

A minute went past in silence. Hammond shifted so that he faced the door, moved a few steps away from the control box and the desk, and stood waiting.

A small light burned red in a corner of the check screen. Something had come into the main office.

The heavy silence continued for some seconds. Then, on the hard flooring at the far end of the corridor, Hammond heard footsteps.

He couldn't have said what he had been expecting . . . but certainly nothing so commonplace as the sound of a woman's high-heeled shoes coming briskly toward the inner office.

She appeared in the doorway, stopped there, looking at him. Hammond said nothing. All outer indications were that this was the Barbara Ellington he had seen sitting in a chair in Dr. Gloge's office the night before. Nothing had changed either in her looks or in her clothing; even the brown purse she held in one hand seemed the same. Except for the air of radiant vitality, the alertness of her stance, the keen intelligence in her face, this also was, in fact, the awkward, overanxious, lean girl who had worked in the outer office for about two weeks.

And therefore, Hammond thought it was a phantom! Not a delusion; he was protected now against any attempt to tamper with his mind in that manner by barriers which

would break only if he died. The shape standing in the door was real. The instruments recorded it. But it was a shape created for this meeting—not that of Barbara Ellington as she was at this hour.

He was unsure of her intention in assuming it. Perhaps it was designed to throw him off guard.

She came into the room, smiling faintly, and glanced about. Hammond knew then that he hadn't been mistaken. Something had come in with her . . . something oppressive, spine-tingling; a sense of heat, a sense of power.

The curiously brilliant, blue eyes turned toward him; and the smile deepened.

"I'm going to have to test why you're still here," she said carelessly. "So defend yourself!"

There was no sound; but a cloud of white light filled the air between them, enveloping them; faded; flared silently; faded again. Both stood unmoving, each watching the other. Nothing in the office had changed.

"Excellent!" the woman said. "The mystery behind you begins to reveal itself. I know the quality of your race now, John Hammond. Your science could never control the order of energies that are shielding you mentally and physically here!

"There should be other indications than that in extreme necessity you are permitted to employ devices created by beings greater than yourself—devices which you do not yourself understand. And where would such devices be found at the moment? . . . Over there, I believe!"

She turned toward the door of the adjoining room, took three steps, and halted. A rose-glowing haze had appeared before the door and the surrounding sections of wall and flooring.

"Yes," she said. "That comes from the same source! And here—"

She turned, moved quickly toward the control box on the desk, checked again. A rose haze also enveloped the box now.

"The three points you must consider vital here!" she said, nodding. "Yourself, the being in that room, and the controls of the section. You may safeguard these at the expense of revealing a secret you would otherwise least want to reveal. Now I think it is time for us to exchange information."

She came back to Hammond, stopped before him.

"I discovered suddenly, John Hammond, that your kind

are not native to Earth. You are superior to Earth's humanity, but not sufficiently superior to explain why you are here. You have an organization on this world. But it is a curious organization. It does not appear to serve the purposes of conqueror or exploiter. . . . But let's leave it at that. Don't try to explain it. It doesn't matter. You are to release the human male who was to have received the series of serum injections with me. You and the other members of your race stationed here will then remove yourself promptly from this planet. We have no further use for you!"

Hammond shook his head.

"We might be forced off the planet," he said. "But that would make Earth an active danger spot. The Great Galactics whom I represent do have servant races who carry out military assignments for them. It would not be to your advantage if such a race were to occupy or quarantine Earth to make sure that the seedling race here continues to receive the necessary degree of supervision."

"John Hammond," the woman-shape said, "whether the Great Galactics send military servants to Earth or come here themselves is a matter that does not concern me in the least. It would be very unwise of them to do either. Within hours from now, the Omega serum will be available in limitless quantities. Within days, every man, woman, and child of Earth will have gone through the full evolutionary sequence. Do you think Earth's new humanity could still be supervised by any other race?"

"The Omega serum will never be used again," Hammond said. "I'll show you why. . . ."

Hammond turned, went to the control box on the desk. The rose haze faded before him, appeared behind him again. He threw a switch, and the haze vanished. He turned away from the controls. "The energy fields that kept you out of that room are being shut off," he said. "In a moment, the door will open. So see for yourself—the barriers are off."

Except for the blazing blue of the eyes, her face was a cold mask. Hammond thought she must already know what was there. But she turned, went to the open door, and stood looking into the room. Hammond moved to the side of the desk where he could look past her. . . .

The energy trap enclosing the couch in the room had vanished. The dark thing on the couch was just sitting up.

It shook its head dazedly, rolled over, and came up on all fours.

Its huge, dull-black eyes stared at them for an instant; then it straightened, rose to its full height....

To a full height of twenty-two inches! It swayed unsteadily on the couch—a hairy little figure with a wide-mouthed, huge-eyed goblin head.

Its eyes blinked in vague recognition. The mouth opened. It cried in a thin, bleating voice: "Bar-ba-ra!"

XXXVI

The woman wheeled, turning away. She did not look back at the grotesque little figure. But a faint smile touched her lips as she gazed at Hammond. "All right," she said, "there goes my last tie with Earth. I accept what you said. I gather that the Omega serum is a unique development and that it hasn't shown up elsewhere in the galaxy."

"That is not a literal truth," said Hammond.

She nodded toward the adjoining room. "Then perhaps you can tell me what went wrong."

Hammond told her Gloge's twofold theory: that at this stage of man's evolution many possibilities remained for evolvment, and that apparently the serum stimulated one of these and thereafter was bound by natural law to follow that line of development.

As he talked, he was watching her, and he was thinking: "This problem isn't resolved. How are we going to deal with her?" The alternative: "Could my intuition about last intended role be correct?"

He sensed an almost incredible strength, an actual, palpable force. It poured from her in a steady stream of power.

He continued tensely: "The Great Galactics, when planting their seed on a new planet, have never interfered with the basic characteristics of the various races that live there. They interject selected bundles of their own genes by grafting into thousands of men and women on every continent.

As the generations go by, these bundles intermix by chance with those that are native to the people of the planet. Apparently, the Omega serum stimulates one of these mixtures and carries it forward to whatever it is capable of, which, because of the singularity factor, usually leads to a dead end."

"The singularity factor—?" Her words were a question.

Men, Hammond explained, were born of the union of a man and a woman. No one person carried more than a portion of mankind's genes. As time passed, the interaction

and interrelation of all the genes occurred; the race progressed because billions of chance intermixings of different bundles took place.

In Vince, one such bundle had been stirred, been whipped up to its ultimate point by repeated Omega Stimulation—but evidently that particular bundle had strictly limited possibilities, as would always be the case when a single person was bred, so to speak, with himself—the singularity factor.

And that was what had happened to Vince and herself. They were products of the most fantastic inbreeding ever attempted—life surviving through one line, a kind of incest carried to some ultimate sterility, fantastic, interesting, freakish.

"You are wrong," said the woman-shape softly. "I am not a freak. So what has happened here is even more improbable than I have realized. In myself, it was the galactic seedling bundle of genes that was stimulated. Now, I understand what it was I contacted out in space. One of them. And he let me. He understood instantly."

She added, "One more question, John Hammond. Omega is an unusual term. What does it mean?"

". . . When man becomes one with the ultimate, that is Point Omega."

It seemed to Hammond that, even as he finished speaking, she was growing remote, withdrawing from him. Or was it that it was he who was withdrawing? Not only from her, but from everything—drifting away, not in any spatial sense, but, in some curious fashion, away from the reality of the entire universe? The brief thought came that this should be an alarming and disturbing experience. Then the thought itself was forgotten.

"There is something occurring," her voice was telling him. "In the small thing behind the door, the Omega evolutionary process is completed, in its fashion. In me, it is not

completed. It's completion depends on someone else. That being I contacted—

Suddenly, she was excited. "Mr. Hammond, what you said about being born of man and woman has another, greater meaning. When the right man and the right woman achieve togetherness they simultaneously achieve fulfillment and the final expansion of being. That is the real completion."

Her whole manner changed. She actually looked up, as if she were seeing something: "William Leigh," she said in a piercing voice, "do you have any final message for John Hammond?" Pause. Then she nodded. Then she said to Hammond, "Wish us well—together?"

"Does he need me ... for that?"

"There's a final barrier. Your emotion, your disturbance."

Hammond drew a deep breath. "Barbara," he said, "to

you and to William Leigh, I wish ... a perfect marriage."

XXXVII

He was nowhere and nothing. New word impressions, new thought impressions, came suddenly and swept through him like the patter of rain.

The impressions took form. It was later in time. He seemed to be standing in the small room next to his office, looking down at the lanky, redheaded young man sitting groggily on the edge of the couch holding his head.

"Coming out of it, Vince?" Hammond asked.

Vincent Strather glanced uncertainly up at him, ran his hand over the jagged rent in the sleeve of his jacket.

"I guess so, Mr. Hammond," he muttered. "I ... what happened?"

"You went for a drive tonight," Hammond told him, "with a girl named Barbara Ellington. You'd both been drinking. She was driving . . . driving too fast. The car went off a highway embankment, turned over several times. Witnesses dragged you to safety minutes before the car

burst into flames. The girl was dead. They didn't attempt to save her body. When the police informed me of the accident, I had you brought here to Research Alpha."

As he spoke, he had the stunning realization that everything he was saying was true. The accident had happened late that evening, in exactly that manner.

"Well . . ." Vince began. He broke off, sighed, shook his head. "Barbara was an odd girl. A wild one! I was pretty fond of her once, Mr. Hammond. Lately, I've been trying to break off with her."

Hammond received the impression that much more had happened. Automatically, he looked back through the open door as the private telephone in the inner office signaled.

"Excuse me," he said to Vince.

As he flicked on the instrument, Helen Wendell's face appeared on the phone screen. She gave him a brief smile, asked, "How is Strather?"

Hammond didn't reply at once. He looked at her, feeling cold, eerie crawlings over his scalp. Helen was seated at her desk in the outer office. She was not in a spaceboat standing off the planet.

He heard himself say, "He's all right. There is very little emotional shock.... How about you?"

"I'm disturbed by Barbara's death," Helen admitted. "But now I have Dr. Gloge on the phone. He's quite anxious to talk to you."

Hammond said, "All right. Put him on."

"Mr. Hammond," Dr. Gloge's voice said a moment later, "this is in connection with the Point Omega Stimulation project. I've been going over all my notes and conclusions on these experiments, and I'm convinced that once you understand the extraordinary dangers which might result if the details of my experiments became known, you will agree that the project should be closed out and any records referring to it destroyed at once."

After switching off the phone, he remained for a while at the desk.

So that part of the problem also had been solved! The last traces of the Omega serum were being wiped out, would soon linger only in his mind.

And for how long there? Perhaps no more than two or three hours, John Hammond decided. The memory pictures were paling; he had a feeling that sections of them al-

ready had vanished. And there was an odd, trembling uncertainty about what was left . . ." thin, colored mind-canvas being tugged by a wind which presently would carry it off.

He had no objections, Hammond told himself. He had seen one of the Great Ones, and it was not a memory that it was good for a lesser being to have.

Somehow, it hurt to be so much less.

He must have slept. For he awoke suddenly. He felt vaguely bewildered, for no reason that he could imagine.

Helen came in, smiling. "Don't you think it's time we closed up for the night? You're working too long hours again."

"You're right." Hammond nodded,

He got up and went into the room next to the office to tell Vincent Strather he was free to go home.

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Epilogue

On Jupiter's moon, Europa—

On the desk of the Port Authority lay the report on the illness which had affected 193 persons. Among other data, the report stated:

It develops that these people were all individuals who during the past fifteen years have taken advantage of a certain low I.Q. person named Steve Hanardy. As almost everyone in Spaceport is aware, Hanardy—who shows many evidences of mental retardation—has year after year

been by his own simple-minded connivance swindled out of his entire income from the space freighter, ECTON-66 (a type classification)—which he owns and operates.

In this manner so much money has been filched from Hanardy that, first one person, then another, then many, set themselves up in business at their victim's expense. And as soon as they were secure, each person in turn discarded the benefactor. For years now, while one human leech after another climbed from poverty to affluence, Hanardy himself has remained at the lowest level.

The afflicted are slowly recovering, and most are in a surprisingly cheerful frame of mind. One man even said to me that he had a dream that he was paying a debt by becoming ill; and in the dream he was greatly relieved.

There's some story around that Hanardy has married the daughter of Professor Ungarn. But to accept that would be like believing that everything that has happened has been a mere background to a love story.

I prefer to discount that rumor and prefer to say only that it is not known exactly where Hanardy is at present.