

THE DAY OF THE STAR CITIES

by JOHN BRUNNER

When the figure came into the restaurant everything stopped. Only for one moment was a man's high-pitched voice raised into the appalling silence, closing a bargain with a woman for the night. And then nothing. The remembered sound of chattering and music hung in the air like dust.

His mere presence was a slap in the face. To look at him was to know what he was, and recall that all humanity was disgustingly insulted. Not the masquer of the Red Death, not Naaman white with leprosy, could have chilled the company instantly as this man did.

Ripped, his clothes hung from him like the bannered rags on a scarecrow made of poles. Dirty brown mud glistened wet on his face, chest and legs. He left muddy footprints as he walked out across the restaurant floor.

Seconds passed. There were a few half-hearted screams, but it was clear from the focused intensity of the man's burning glare, from the straight-line course he was following, that he was concentrated on one individual among those present. For what? Vengeance? You could not know. In this Age of Miracles, you could not know.

He has someone in mind, Den Radcliffe thought. It seemed vaguely silly, like something realized during a dream full of absurdities. *Me. He's coming toward me.*

The tick-tock of heartbeats told him that time was passing; so did the foot-dragging approach of the stranger. Nothing else did. As though sunk in a block of transparent plastic, he sat rigid beside his companions at the table. The width of the table, at least, was between himself and the intruder.

The distance narrowed to twelve paces, ten, eight. Suddenly the girl on his left—he knew her only as Maura—screamed and leaped to her feet, and others followed. The spell broke. Den Radcliffe could move, could do

something to drive away this horror—break it, smash it, this thing walking like a man!

He snatched up what his hand encountered on the table: a heavy glass jug full of water. He hurled it, and it struck the muddy patch on the man's face, jolting back his head, making him check his stride for a second.

A bottle, caught around the neck for a club. On his feet now, Den Radcliffe felt all his nerves sing back to life, stinging as a limb stings when circulation returns after tourniquet-like cramp. Bottle raised, the liquor in it spouting from the neck and flowing down his sleeve, he waited.

The man spoke. His nauseous screeching voice filled the room like air rushing into a collapsing vacuum. "Damn you!" he said. "Damn you damn you *damn* you. You did this to me, you bastard!"

Superstition, against his will, shattered the self-control which Radcliffe had already weakened with drink. He swung the bottle and let it go. It broke on the man's forehead, gashing it, scattering with a tinkle across the floor, and then there was the long-repressed panic.

Chairs crashed over, tablecloths were dragged unheeded by scrambling, fighting, crazy-milling men and women, shedding cutlery and plates ringing and breaking. The waiters went with the rest; so did the musicians, using their instruments as clubs, and they had got well toward the door before the manager turned on the panic sprays in the ceiling and oblivion came sifting down like snow.

Still the ghastly figure stood facing Radcliffe. He hurled things at it like wooden balls at carnival dummies—bottles, glasses, whatever his hands chanced on. The table-knives would not throw; their handles were too heavy. A plate caught the air and swung aside, like a badly-aimed discus.

He heard the hissing of the panic sprays, and terror seized him. For all he knew, the *other* confronting him might not breathe, might not draw in air and be immobilized by the gas. He snatched his own last lungful before the gas came down, hooked his hands under the table and lifted it with insane violence from the floor. As it came up, he somehow got another purchase below its rising edge so that he leaned forward into it and turned it, brought it slamming down on the impassive, hate-auraed figure, and fell on its underside, triumph coloring his slide into unconsciousness.

II

“The history of the last years of the twentieth century,” Waldron said under his breath, “is going to be the story of how nothing happened.”

“What was that?” Across the desk, Canfield—suspicious, touchy—stiffened, sure he was being snidely insulted.

“Nothing,” Waldron said. “Go on.”

That is, he added without even moving his lips, *if anyone bothers to write history again.*

Canfield was still staring at him with his dark, hostile glare. Abruptly unable to bear it any longer, Waldron snapped, “Go on, damn it! You came to give a report, so give it!”

Canfield grunted and turned back the leaves of his notebook. He said, “I took a crew down to the *City of Angels* as soon as the call came. It was a shambles, but the manager had turned on the panic sprays. According to him, the weirdo just appeared on the dais inside the entrance and walked straight across the room toward one particular table.” Canfield paused, frowning. “Of course, it’s ridiculous that the weirdo should have just *appeared*. I questioned the bouncers, naturally; either they’re lying or they panicked when they saw him.”

“Canfield,” Waldron said, leaning back in his chair and closing his eyes, “what state was this weirdo in when you pulled *him* out from under the table?”

His train of thought broken, Canfield hesitated. “Filthy,” he said at last “Smearred with wet mud, ragged, bruised –but some of that was due to things being thrown at him.”

“A man in such a state wouldn’t be let into the *City of Angels* through the main entrance,” Waldron said. “I’m not asking for speculation from you. Just tell me what you found when you arrived.”

Canfield shut his notebook and got to his feet, his mouth working and his Adam’s apple bobbing on his neck. He said, “What are you trying to do—make me angry enough to give you an excuse for throwing me off the force?”

“Shut up and sit down,” Waldron said. “Or if you don’t want to go on, give me your notebook and I’ll get the details out of it myself.”

Canfield took another few moments to boil. Then he threw the notebook on the desk in front of his chief—it made a noise like an open-handed slap—and strode out, slamming the door. The ill-fitting windows rattled in

their frames; the pencils on the desk rattled against each other.

It seemed suddenly very dark in the room, although the high swinging light-bulb was new and free of dust. Waldron sat a while without moving, looking at the oblong of the notebook in front of him.

The story of how nothing happened... That was what was going to break James Arnott Waldron: the hysterical pretense that this was the same world. One day he was going to scream at some idiot like Canfield and say, "How the hell dare you claim that you are Man, the lord of creation? You're a rat, an insect, a dirty little crawling thing scavenging after the angels—a dung-beetle rolling your ball of muck and fooling yourself that you're running behind the sun!

What am I doing here?

His eyes drifted from the oblong of the notebook to the oblong of the map on the wall—not the city map, but the hemisphere map. The additions had been made by hand; you couldn't get a commercial or even a government-issue map which showed the world as it really was. Consequently he was not altogether certain that the map was accurate. But it was as accurate as he could make it. Not from masochism. From honesty.

You couldn't explain that to Canfield.

The pock-mark gaps in the neat mesh of human symbols—the devastated areas, the fallout zones, into which the lines of highways and railroads led like footsteps over precipices—*had* to be included on the printed map; it would be beyond self-deception to pretend that Omaha, for instance, still existed. (Though, of course, you didn't have to state aloud that the city had gone.) But the heavy black border isolating the tongue-shaped area in the center of North America, the other similar border around a kidney-shaped zone in Western Brazil, and the patches of silver foil-like distorted pentagrams which symbolized the alien cities—those Waldron had added by hand the day after he'd grown tired of the popular fiction that governments in Washington and Ottawa still held sway over the whole of their former territories.

"One day," Waldron declared to the air, "I'll wire up a bell and some flashing lights. And a sign under the map saying DONT KID YOURSELF. And fix it so that it comes on when the door is opened."

But he knew he wouldn't go that far. It was all very well to say loudly that people must face the facts; it would take more than talking to bring the result about.

He was as scared as anyone else. He was as ready to hide from reality as anyone else. All he had as margin was a kind of shame. Keeping the shame up to its original force was already straining his nerves; otherwise he wouldn't have snapped at Canfield.

He drove himself to take up the notebook at last, and flipped through the pages, seeing Canfield's familiar short-hand, as clear and easy to read as ordinary print. At the *City of Angels* there had been this extraordinary intrusion. (Words like "extraordinary" were losing their force, lately, you no longer even heard people say, "The Age of Miracles is not past." Now they said, with a wry shrug, "A of M!" –and that was its own explanation.) Canfield had come in and found people heaped on and around the low dais leading up to the main exit, where the gas from the panic sprays had caught them. And the weirdo, crushed under a table. And on top of the table the man the manager had believed to be the object of the weirdo's interest. And on the floor nearby two girls and a man who had completed the party at this particular table. The name of the man lying above the weirdo was Dennis Radcliffe.

Waldron frowned. The name seemed familiar, but he couldn't place it. He spent no time trying to puzzle it out—he could have the records checked easily enough.

The manager said Radcliffe had gone wild and started to hurl things: bottles, knives, crockery. But he hadn't seen what had happened after that because of the rush for the exit and the need to turn on the panic sprays.

So Canfield had closed the place, of course, and brought here the people most directly involved: the manager, the bouncers lie suspected of lying, the rest of the party at Radcliffe's table, the weirdo, Radcliffe himself, and half a dozen people picked at random to give corroborative evidence. A thorough job. Now it was 3:10 a.m., and Waldron felt his vitality at such a low ebb he hated the idea of sifting through the material Canfield had meticulously provided.

But it was going to have to be done.

Where the hell do you start on a thing like this?

He shut the notebook and thumbed switches on his desk phone in the hope it might have started working again by itself. It hadn't, and no one would be in to fix it before nine. He repressed the urge to throw it at the wall and got out of his chair.

The basement, white-tiled and forbidding, always put him in mind of a

public toilet. There was something of the same smell about it, too, when the cells were full.

Under harsh lights some of those arrested tonight moaned in their sleep; others, thinking even to sleep was futile, sat on hard benches and stared at nothing, eyes rimmed red with tiredness. The people from the *City of Angels* were still unconscious and lay like morgue-delivered corpses on the benches and floors in the end three cells.

At Waldron's entrance, the men at the desk facing the cells stiffened and glanced up. There were Rodriguez, the duty sergeant, Dr. Morello, one of the regular police surgeons, and Canfield.

Controlling his movements deliberately, Waldron walked down the last few steps and held out the notebook. He said, "I'm sorry I snapped at you, Canfield. Tired, I guess." He put an elbow on the corner of the desk.

Canfield took the notebook and didn't say anything.

"Well, doc?" Waldron went on, his voice brittle. "Was it the *City of Angels* affair that brought you down here?"

Morello, whose eyelids were puffy and whose hair was uncombed, scowled. He was writing out a report form with the stylo chained to the desk in front of Rodriguez, and the chain was hampering. Not looking up, he said, "They dragged me out to look at this weirdo. Could have waited till morning. Any fool could have seen he was dead."

Waldron frowned at that. "I didn't realize he was *dead*."

"He wasn't when we got him here," Canfield said. "He died about ten minutes before I came to see you. I'd have told you."

Waldron turned back to Morello. "What killed him? The things Radcliffe threw? The table falling on him?"

The doctor shrugged. "Contributory, maybe. But I doubt if you have a murder charge. Cerebral hemorrhage, far as I can tell. A whole slew of ruptured blood vessels. His eyes are like cherries. My guess when they open up the skull at the autopsy, his brain will look like it was stirred with an eggbeater." He uttered the similes with gloomy relish.

Uncomfortable, Waldron noticed that a woman in the cell directly opposite the desk was listening, her mouth slack, her eyes wide, and that now she was shuddering and licking her lips like a spectator at a *grand guignol* show. He avoided looking at her again.

"All right," he said. "Who was he? Anything known?"

"No papers on him," Canfield said. "Nothing. Wearing rags. Looked like

he'd been through hell."

"More or less." Morello spoke through a yawn. "Body covered in contusions a day or two old—fresh ones probably due to what Radcliffe threw at him."

"Better take prints, then," Waldron said. "Have him cosmeticized and get some as-in-life pictures. Any chance of photographing the retina pattern, doc?"

"Take the retinae out at the autopsy," Morello said. "His eyes are too messy to do a proper job through the corneas. Like cherries."

"A lot of trouble," Rodriguez grumbled. "For a weirdo!"

Waldron didn't comment.

"Shouldn't be too much sweat." Morello yawned again, more widely. "Got one unusual thing about him. Mirror image layout. Heart on the wrong side, large lobe of the liver on the wrong side, all the way down the line. Shouldn't be surprised if he's one of a pair of identical twins."

"Ah-hah!" Waldron said. "Got that, Chico?"

"It's in the doc's report," Rodriguez grunted.

"All right, that's finish for me," Morello said. He picked up his bag from beside the desk. "Don't bother me too early in the morning. He's in freeze; he won't suffer till the afternoon. And I'm short on my sleep."

When his footsteps had died away on the echoing staircase, Waldron beckoned Canfield and walked over to the cells where the unconscious people from the *City of Angels* were lying.

"Which is Radcliffe?" he asked.

"That one." Canfield pointed out a dark-haired man in very expensive clothes lying in the middle of the floor. His face, even in his drugged stupor, wore a look of remembered terror. Waldron spoke to avoid thinking about the reason for that expression. "We know something about him, don't we?"

"He's Den Radcliffe. Not a nice guy. Trader, spends most of his time over with Governor Grady. They told us from the West Coast he'd been seen out of Grady's territory."

Not a nice guy. Hell of a mealy-mouthed way to put it! And anyway, what right had a Canfield to dismiss such a man like that? More gutsy than a Canfield, at least; not content to lie down under the universal cheap pretenses...

“Want we should start with him?” Canfield proposed—eagerly, perhaps to shift this human reminder of the state of the world from under the roof they presently shared. Waldron had intended to leave Radcliffe till later anyway; hearing Canfield’s tone, he felt the decision gilded with a layer of malicious pleasure.

“No. I’ll start with the manager and the staff, and the people you picked up for corrobs. I’ll have Radcliffe at the end—no, not right at the end: Radcliffe, then the people who were with him at the same table.”

For a moment he thought Canfield was going to say something. But he merely scowled and called Rodriguez to open the cell.

III

Walked in. Headed straight toward Radcliffe. Said something. Things were thrown. Panic. And oblivion. No, never seen him before. No idea who he might have been. Anyway, how could you tell with his face plastered with mud?

By the time he had picked through the substantially identical stories, Waldron was regretting his petty wish to extend Canfield like a man on the rack. When Radcliffe was finally shown into the office he looked at him with unconcealed curiosity. Radcliffe returned it with interest, his gaze lingering a long while on his hand-altered map pinned to the wall before he obeyed Waldron’s instruction to come and sit down.

“You’re Dennis W. Radcliffe—that right?” Waldron said.

“Right.” Radcliffe crossed his legs. “Mind if I smoke?”

“Go ahead,” Waldron turned the pedestal mike on the desk a little more toward the other. “This interview is being—”

“Recorded and may subsequently be used in evidence,” Radcliffe interrupted wearily. “I’ve had the law on me before.”

“Have you had the full treatment?” Waldron countered “The man you threw the table at is dead.”

For a moment a wary flicker showed in Radcliffe’s face. It was gone, and he was shrugging. “So? The panic sprays were on. Between inhalation and unconsciousness there’s a period when a man isn’t necessarily responsible for his actions.”

Neat. Waldron took a cigarette for himself, wondering what set a Radcliffe so far apart from a Canfield.

“Are you making a charge?” Radcliffe added.

“Not yet. Do you want legal representation?”

“Why should I, before you make a charge?”

“Yes or no, please!”

“Not yet—and I quote.” Radcliffe grinned without mirth.

Waldron let it go at that. “Particulars, then. Age, birthplace, current address, permanent domicile, profession.”

“Born Minneapolis. Age forty. Hotel White Condor, suite 215. And I’m a free trader with a permanent domicile just outside Gradyville, but I don’t believe you recognize the existence of such a place.”

Defiance flavored the last words. Waldron put out his hand. “Documents?”

“They impounded them at the desk downstairs.”

Waldron cursed inwardly. *Must have done that to save time on the written report. I can’t complain.* “Okay, let’s get straight to the point. What’s your version of this affair?”

It dovetailed exactly with the other accounts he’d heard—but it included one significant addition.

“He spoke to me,” Radcliffe said. “He sounded crazy-mad. He said something like, ‘Damn you, you did this to me!’ I formed the opinion that he was insane and probably dangerous.”

“Are you qualified to pass judgment on a man’s sanity?”

“I deal with a wide and varied cross-section of people in my profession,” Radcliffe said, without the bat of an eye.

“Go on.”

“He made a move toward me which after his seemingly insane verbal attack I interpreted as hostile. To forestall an assault I threw a water-jug at him.”

A pause. “Is that all?” Waldron asked.

“When he kept coming, I threw something else—I forget what, because it was about then that the panic sprays came on. I started to raise the table as a barrier between us, but I lost consciousness while doing so. I woke up when I was revived in the cell downstairs.”

Waldron probed further, but Radcliffe was too cagy to qualify what he had said. He switched the line of his approach.

“Who was this man? Had you seen him before?”

“Not to my knowledge. Of course, he was a weirdo, so—”

“What makes you so sure?”

“Jesus! I’ll lay a bet that people in the restaurant who’d never before been within a mile of one pegged him as soon as they saw him. And I’ve seen plenty.”

Waldron hesitated. He said, “You described yourself as a free trader. Define the term.”

Oddly uncomfortable for a moment, Radcliffe said, “I buy and sell, uh, rare artifacts.”

“In the vicinity of the so-called alien city?”

Radcliffe lifted his chin half an inch. “Yes.”

“That’s where you’ve seen weirdos before?”

“Of course.” Radcliffe had apparently expected the questioning to turn overtly hostile; recognizing he was wrong, he sounded puzzled. “That’s why I say I hadn’t seen this character ‘to my knowledge’. I didn’t recognize him, I don’t know his name or anything about him, but conceivably *he* may have seen me—uh—”

“On Grady’s Ground?” Waldron supplied softly. His superiors wouldn’t like that in the official record, but the hell with them. “What were you supposed to have done to him?”

“Heaven knows!”

“Okay. So you’d never knowingly seen him before, you don’t know and won’t guess what he had against you, he made a crazy-sounding verbal attack on you which you thought was to be followed by a physical one, and you’d tried to forestall this when the panic sprays went on and you fell on him with the table. That correct?”

“That’s the size of it.”

Waldron studied the other for a few seconds, then gave a noncommittal grunt. “How about the other people at your table? Who were they?”

“Man’s called Hyson—Terry Hyson. A business contact of mine. I don’t know anything about the girls. Terry laid them on for the evening. A blonde called Sue and a brunette called Maura. I guess he got them from a supply company.”

“They charge?”

“Two-fifty.” Radcliffe shrugged.

They would, of course. Someone like Radcliffe wouldn't get it any other way outside his home ground. As though Grady's dirt, rather than his own guts, were the significant thing. Abruptly Waldron found himself feeling angry on Radcliffe's behalf. He said, “All right, I guess that's enough. If we want you again we'll trace you through Hyson or at your hotel. When do you plan to leave the city?”

“Not before the weekend, as things stand.” If Radcliffe was surprised that the interview had been easy, he didn't show it.

“Okay, you can go.” Waldron moved pencils randomly on his desk.

But Radcliffe didn't leave at once. His gaze roamed the office, coming to rest briefly on the map before he spoke. He said, “You haven't got it quite right.”

“What do you mean?”

“This.” Radcliffe rose and approached the map, laying his finger on the western edge of the black tongue-shaped outline defining Grady's Ground. “Goes forty-fifty miles further west here.”

“Thanks for the information,” Waldron muttered.

Radcliffe cocked his head. “You been out that way?”

“No.”

“You should.” He gave a crooked smile. “Some time when you get tired of making phony gestures in this smelly office, come out and see me.”

How the hell did he know? For a short eternity Waldron saw nothing but Radcliffe's eyes, and then heard himself say, “I guess—yes, maybe I will. Maybe I will.”

When the door closed, Waldron found he was sweating. His teeth were going to chatter if he didn't set his jaw hard. He looked toward the window. Dawn was coming over the city.

He was kidding himself, worse than the Canfields of this world. Radcliffe had seen right through him in a few minutes. Sticking a map on his wall and thinking that was as far as honesty needed to go...

The door opened and the first girl came in. She was very pretty, with sleek dark hair braided to the back of her head with gold wire, but she

looked peaked with cold. She wore a synsilk nightsuit of dark red tassels on net covering her left arm and breast, her belly and buttocks, and her right leg. *Two-fifty*, Waldron thought. *At that price she can afford to shiver.*

“Sit down,” he said. “Name?”

“Maura Knight” She dropped into lie chair. “Got a cigarette?”

“No. Particulars?”

When she gave her her profession as “secretary,” he pounced. “Secretary? What are you charging Radcliffe— overtime?”

She waved her hand. “All right, overtime!” she snapped. “If you know girls who don’t charge, they’re probably rich.”

Waldron started a retort, then sighed and changed his mind. True enough. It all boiled down to the same thing—only the price, and the energy expended in return, differed.

“Let’s have your version of the story,” he said.

Once more it dovetailed exactly, up to the point at which the weirdo spoke. And then a little life seemed to come into her; she sat forward on the chair, looking past Waldron at the memory, and her voice rose from its previous colorless level to an almost passionate pitch.

“And then he said something like, ”You did this to me, damn you, you bastard!“ I looked at Den—I mean Radcliffe. I’ve never *seen* such a look! He was scared and mad, all at the same time. He picked up this heavy jug off the table and threw it, and that wasn’t enough. The weirdo just stood there rigid as a dummy, his eyes full of hate. And Radcliffe threw a bottle, and it *smashed* on his head!“ She closed her eyes and sank back; staring at her with amazement, Waldron saw her swallow as though fighting a need to vomit.

“I tell you, I saw the bottle break on his head. And then he threw anything he could find—like a lunatic. Plates, knives, anything. As though he’d gone completely out of his mind. He was trying to throw the whole damned *table* when the sprays came on! Listen, why did he want to do that?” She opened her eyes very wide, as though in wonder. “This weirdo looked awful, but—but—oh, I don’t know much about these things, but I always thought a weirdo gets that way because he doesn’t just sit like everyone else letting us be treated as vermin by the... whatever they are. He’s someone who’s gone in there and done something, even if he has wound up crazy. I think he was telling the truth. I think he really meant to get back at Radcliffe for something. How do the ‘free traders’ get their

stuff, anyway? Do they really scavenge for it, or do they bargain for it? Do they get it by selling out people who—?”

“Shut up,” Waldron said coldly. He hadn’t meant to let her go this far, but he was so taken aback to hear statements on this level from her that he half-wanted her to continue. Even to talk about defiance was better than ignoring reality.

“How long have you known Radcliffe?” he demanded.

“Since yesterday evening,” she answered sullenly.

Then you’d better think twice before making slanderous accusations, hadn’t you?”

She was ice-calm suddenly. “Weren’t you trying to insinuate me on your record as a professional prostitute?” And added savagely, “After an even shorter acquaintance!”

He was in acute danger of losing his temper, Waldron realized—and over questions he didn’t give a damn about. He told her to go.

When he had spoken to Hyson and the other girl, Susan Vey, he felt physically and emotionally ruined. He could risk dozing for the rest of his shift if Canfield had nothing else for him—but to find out if this was so, he would have to go down to the basement again. *Damn* that phone.

As he turned the corner of the stairway and came in sight of the cells, the fact that some of the prisoners had broken out of their normal apathy and were staring toward the desk told him something must be wrong. He hurried down the next half-dozen steps, and could then see for himself: Canfield and Rodriguez each held Radcliffe by one arm, while facing him, her face very white, her lower lip puffy and a trickle of blood creeping out of the corner of her mouth, Maura Knight still held her hand up defensively as though to ward him off.

IV

Waldron checked his stride for a heartbeat of time; then, feeling as though the world were throwing events at his head the way Radcliffe had bombarded the weirdo, he continued to the floor.

“All right, what’s all this?” he said.

Canfield and Rodriguez let Radcliffe go. The trader took a step back and shrugged his coat into place around his shoulders, his expression stormy. Canfield jerked a thumb at him.

“I imagine Radcliffe is going back in the cage,” he said. “I never saw a man hit a woman like that before. Did he break any teeth?” he asked, turning to Maura.

She shook her head numbly. Feeling the blood on her chin, she wiped at it with the back of her hand.

“What for?” Waldron said, obliquely addressing Radcliffe.

“Do you think I got anything for my two-fifty?” Radcliffe snarled. “She didn’t expect to find me waiting for her—she was trying to slip out of the place and get home.”

“You can have the money!” the girl cried. “You—”

“I want what I paid for,” Radcliffe said. “You can come across, or I’ll help myself. It’s up to you.”

“Be quiet!” Canfield snapped. “I don’t know what the hell you do on Grady’s Ground, and I don’t care. But what you’re going to do here is head back to the cage when she says the word.”

“Listen, you wooden-headed angel-chaser!” Radcliffe began, balling his fist.

“Hold it!” Waldron said sharply. “You! What’s your name –Maura! You want to swear out an assault charge?”

“I don’t want to have to see him again, even in court. He can take his dirty money. Now that I have some idea of how he gets it I’d rather be rid of it before I catch—”

“Chico!” Waldron said, and Rodriguez clamped down on Radcliffe’s arm before it could swing. “All right, take her money, Radcliffe. Count yourself lucky she doesn’t want to make anything out of that punch in the face—free traders aren’t any too popular.”

The anger appeared to leave Radcliffe all at once. He relaxed, eyes on Waldron. “I guess you’re right at that,” he admitted. “Take the money from her, then—if I go any closer I’m liable to forget my good manners.”

Waldron nodded at Canfield, who held out his hand to Maura. Where the hell could she be carrying money in that outfit, anyway? Oh: the gold-braided hair on the back of her head was a chignon. She lifted it off, produced the two-fifty bill; Canfield passed it on to Radcliffe.

“Now—out,” he grunted. “And remember what the lieutenant said. You’re *damned* lucky.”

“Aren’t you going to give me a head start?” Maura said. “You heard him say he didn’t want the money, and he’s going to take what he paid for.”

Radcliffe grinned. Waldron caught the look as it came and went, but he couldn’t be sure whether it was wry or—or what? Vicious? He passed his hand across his face.

“Send her home in a squad car, God damn it!” he ordered. “Anything for the sake of peace and quiet!”

Back in his office, he put his head on the desk and tried to doze away the last hour of his shift, but the attempt was a failure. He lit another cigarette, hearing the signs that the building was coming to daytime life—office-cleaning machines going up the service racks between floors, coffee-and-rolls wagons rattling down the corridors for the overnight staff.

The coffee wagon stopped at his door and hooted. He went and got his ration. Sipping it, he stared at the map. Radcliffe had said to move the western boundary forty or fifty miles further out. If he complied, nobody would notice. Or—well, they might, but they’d think of it as a gibe, not an attempt to face the truth. *De jure*, they’d say, the USA is still the USA, Canada still Canada. *De facto*, of course—but that’s not exactly our doing, is it?

Where would we be if the aliens hadn’t come?

He remembered the beginning with fearful vividness, With casual simultaneity, all fissionable material on the planet had been exploded with an efficiency varying from eight to eighteen percent conversion. Every missile and bomber base, every bomb in flight, every nuclear power station and every refinery where the stocks exceeded a couple of kilograms had mushroomed into fire. It was a day and a half before the survivors knew it wasn’t war.

During that time something became clear which all the official and semi-official warnings and studies had omitted to point out. Modern industrial society was like a watch; to drop a single pinch of sand into the works was to ruin it. And this was no pinch of sand—it was a truckload. (The anti-missile missiles, ranked in their sets of forty per million population, naturally did most damage; each had a warhead designed to knock down an enemy rocket on a seven-mile near miss. The bombers and ICBM’s were in comparatively isolated districts, and the city-wreckers in

particular, underground, wasted their blast on their own silos.)

It wasn't the blast, nor the gigantic fires—worst on the West Coast, where they swept thousands of square miles at the end of a dry summer—nor even the fallout which caused the disruption of North America. It was the people who fled from the fires; the plagues which ran through refugee camps when city-dwellers drank bad water; the local militia and hastily sworn-in armed deputies who fought pitched battles to turn back swarms of metropolitan fugitives, made mindless by terror, on the outskirts of smaller towns. In Europe, rumor said, things were infinitely worse because the giant opposed armies had gone into battle like machines turned on by the nuclear explosions, and ravaged both Germanies, most of Czechoslovakia and parts of other countries before it had been possible to turn them off.

There was a time—according to what event one took for its ending, one said it lasted weeks or months—during which the planet churned like an overset beehive, and no one seemed able to think far enough ahead to restore any organization. It was during this period that the alien cities were built.

One said: “alien city.” And was no wiser.

Bewildered governments brought their immediate problems under control, arranged emergency food supplies, drafted doctors to the sudden rash of refugee camps, charted the fallout zones, and learned with relief and dismay that the calamity was as world-wide as the distribution of fissionables. It was in Israel and India, Chile and China. (Inevitably, though, the countries where weapons had been readied suffered worst.)

Also they learned that in the north Middle West of the USA almost touching the Canadian border, in western Brazil, in Russia a short distance east of the Urals, in Australia's Nullarbor Plain, and in the Antarctic, there were... strangenesses. From the air they were seen as distorted five-pointed stars, glowing translucent, vaster than any city yet seeming to be single buildings—if they were buildings. There was energy there; the radio bands crackled with static, electrical storms gathered around them, and occasionally a shattering noise was heard, though such phenomena dwindled and eventually ceased. Within the boundaries of these places—misty, sometimes nearly opaque and sometimes glass-clear—could be discerned shining entities. Question mark.

People thought: invasion. And within a few more weeks, they moved against the intruders. It was still impossible to assemble more than two or three kilograms of fissionable material anywhere; it was tried and proved.

But they sent armies with conventional bombs and rockets, and thought in terms of seige, and then there was the madness.

What it was due to—poison gas, telepathic bombardment, mass hypnotism, a virus—no one knew. But the armies sent against the shining cities would reach a certain point which might not even be within sight of their target, and then they mutinied and turned back. They raved across the countryside, wrecking, looting, burning—fire gave them special pleasure, and they would stand watching a haystack blaze till it was almost all ash, then pour gasoline on it to enjoy another few minutes of flame. Overhead, planes released their bombs anywhere but on the alien cities, then sought a funeral pyre in a city or, most favored, an oilfield.

It became impossible to pretend to the continuance of national government anywhere near the shining cities. You couldn't tell if the army battalion which came to invest your town was under orders from Washington—or Moscow, for that matter, for the terror reigned everywhere—to protect you, or was waiting with lunatic glee for night to fall so the town might be set ablaze with maximum spectacle.

Little by little, things settled toward a semblance of normality. No further assaults were made on the shining cities. It was in their vicinity that chaos lasted longest; no government dared send in troops to reestablish authority, for fear of adding to the number rendered insane. A few men saw their chance, and snatched at it. In Russia, the man who came out as ruler of no-man's-land was called Buishenko; in Australia it was Villiers-Hart; in Brazil, Neveira; and in North America the self-styled "Governor" Grady.

These had fought less astute rivals to seize the reins of effective power in the lull between the extremity of crisis and the present. Like peasants farming the slopes of a volcano, greed gave others a reason to join them and endure their arbitrary rule.

For there were what Radcliffe had called "rare artifacts"—the garbage, perhaps, of the non-human beings who had descended on Earth. They hinted at fantastic new principles, unconceived laws of nature, and instantly commercial and governmental interests set to squabbling and bargaining for them. Nominally, they had all been decreed Federal property, but the decree was a nullity. So, trading like vermin on the refuse of a higher species, Grady and his counterparts enjoyed a tenuous security.

But it took guts, didn't it, to stay there on the volcano's lip, trying to snatch meager clues to the nature of the invader?

His musing was broken into. The door opened to reveal Canfield, extremely weary. He said, “About the weirdo—”

“Yes?” Waldron stirred. “Have you identified him?”

“Not exactly. But you remember what Morello said—he might be one of a pair of identical twins. On the off-chance, I reversed the picture of his prints, since the rest of him is reversed, and I seem to have found his twin. A guy called Corey Bennett. In the government scientific service. The match-up of the prints is *exact*.”

He dropped enlarged pictures in front of Waldron, who stared at them. A cold shiver was invading his spine. He said, “But not even twins...”

“Not even twins,” Canfield echoed grimly. “I don’t know what we’ve got. But it belongs to Washington, not us. Shall I pass the data on?”

V

“Are you *sure* it isn’t a trap?” Jespersen said again.

Orlando Potter glanced around. All lights were out on the bridge of the jet-driven Coast Guard launch, except for the shaded lamp over the navigation table, but the northern summer sky was bright enough to show faces. Not for the first time he regretted bringing along the rangy Swedish-born physicist as “scientific adviser”—hell, what use was human science where the aliens were concerned? Irritation making his voice brittle, he said, “I’ve *told* you! We do at least know they’re desperate. Isn’t that proved by what they did for Congreve?”

Not turning his head, but continuing to stare across the smooth shield of the sea, Congreve gave a cynical grunt. “I sometimes think you’ve stopped regarding Russians as human beings, doctor! They’re as capable of being frightened as you and I, and believe me, they *are* frightened.”

Improbably out of place in the masculine, almost warlike setting—blonde hair hanging loose, makeup impeccable—Greta Delarue tossed in one of the innocent-seeming questions which often made it impossible even for Potter, whose mistress she had now been for six months, to tell which way her mind was running.

“Obviously, Mike! But—of the aliens, or of Buishenko?”

Congreve didn’t reply immediately. During the pause Potter found

himself studying the spy for the latest of many, many times, struggling to discern from some outward clue whether his original loyalty had been undermined.

Congreve was still in Russian clothes: the battledress-like blouse, the pants with elasticized cuffs and baggy calves which had been fashionable at the last period when there had still been fashions to engage the attention of Russia's prosperous new class. His Moscow-styled hair was growing out of its intended neatness, but since his return he had hardly had time for such minor problems as getting it trimmed.

By their tens of thousands, Potter thought, men in such clothes are falling under Buishenko's sway. He's gobbling up Russia like a new Kahn of the Golden Horde. Did he get to Congreve?

"I wish," Congreve said finally, "people would give up this *contempt* for spies! I'm a damned good spy, and proud of it; I've been in and out of the East Bloc for more than eight years, and they weren't sure I was a foreigner even when they decided to make their approach. They took a gamble. I spent a full week checking before I came into the open. And they sent me out through Austria by one of their own routes, on a government pass with ten thousand rubles and the message. And in my judgment they're equally scared of both the aliens and Buishenko. You haven't seen what he's doing to Russia. I have!"

He turned away from his contemplation of the sea at last. "This isn't like Grady's Ground, for God's sake—it's not just a kind of make-believe Wild West enclave. It's a cancer of barbarism running wild and spreading like a plague."

"I only wish"—Potter heard his own voice with vague surprise—"that we knew exactly what we're supposed to be waiting for."

"It could be any of half a dozen things," Greta Delarue said, shrugging. "My guess is an alien device in operating condition, and if I'm right, it would be worth a much bigger gamble than the one we're actually taking."

"If!" Jespersen snapped. He was a tall man, and anxiety had wasted him till his skin hung loose on his bones. His hair, which had been light brown before the coming of the aliens, had gone to silver and started to fall away almost by the handful. "Going on what they told Congreve, we can't be certain of anything."

"They wouldn't give me details," Congreve muttered. "And I didn't feel I could insist. They told me they'd got wind of some secret which was giving Buishenko at least part of his mysterious power; they knew where it was, they had plans to steal it, and all they wanted was the chance to get it out

of Buishenko's reach. They couldn't take it anywhere inside Russia because Buishenko could get it back; they couldn't take it out westwards because Central Europe is impassable on land and there was no chance of getting a plane, but they did think they could get it out through Vladivostok and if I could arrange safe custody for it on delivery they'd make the attempt." His voice was tinged with weariness. Potter wondered how often he had already made this recital—under hypnosis, under drugs, his mind probed to its roots in search of any hint of treason.

The radio mounted over the navigator's table came to life, and the naval commander seated there, not taking his eyes from the radar screen, answered.

"Harlequin, Harlequin—pawn to rook four?"

"Columbine," the distant voice said. "Queen to queen one, check."

"They're coming!" Potter said under his breath, and moved to peer over the commander's shoulder. At the helm, the captain demanded to know whether they had a fix yet.

The commander shut off the radio briefly to say he had a blip at the extreme limit of range, but nothing definite, and relayed similar information in verbal code to the headquarters ship referred to as Columbine. It was a curious makeshift fleet they had mounted to carry out this operation; after the world wide destruction of fissionables, the Navy was left without its aircraft-carriers, without its cruisers and destroyers, without its nuclear submarines. "Columbine" had been a lowly pre-atomic sub-chaser, cocooned and due for scrapping.

An eternal pause followed, during which all their eyes fixed achingly on the commander's face, eerily lit by the shaded yellow lamp above, the green glow of the radar below.

"Harlequin," he said finally— "Discovered check. Uh—king's knight to king five."

"If anybody's listening," Jespersen grumbled, "they'll be damned sure we're not just playing chess to pass the time!"

"It's a real game!" Congreve snapped. "Not a good one, but the moves fit. I played it through myself to make sure."

Jespersen scowled but didn't reply.

"What the hell is it?" the commander at the navigation table said, half to himself. "Either there's something wrong with the radar, or—"

"What's eating you?" the captain demanded.

“The range is closing on every sweep, and the speed’s around— uh—” The commander took a few seconds to check a printed list pasted alongside the radar screen. “Christ. It says sixty-five knots.”

The captain blinked. “Mr. Congreve! Have you *any* idea what we’re expecting?”

“What sort of vessel, you mean?” Congreve gave a mirthless grin. “Sorry. My specialty was diplomatic affairs, not naval and military.”

“But do you know of anything the Russians have which could be capable of such a speed?” Potter asked, more to prevent another silence congealing than because he expected information.

“Can we have quiet, please?” The commander interjected, and without delay resumed his coded contact with the headquarters ship.

The voice from Columbine muttered, “uh—now what the... ? Oh yes. Castle king side, check and double-check on the next move. With the queen’s knight. Better watch—

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Jespersen growled.

“They’re being followed,” Potter said. “Right, Congreve?”

The spy nodded, gazing anxiously up into the twilight sky.

Their own vessel’s “counter-move” Potter failed to catch; that didn’t seem to matter, for the next statement from headquarters was about pawn taking pawn, and from somewhere astern a string of half a dozen glowing objects crossed the zenith like shooting stars in reverse. Tension grew. Then—

“Got them!” Greta said with uncharacteristic excitement. Something red on the horizon shone briefly and faded away.

“What was it, do you know?” Potter asked the commander in a hushed voice.

“Must have been air pursuit,” the officer answered equally quietly. “We have conventional-missile ships standing out that way for surface-to-surface intervention, and the shots came from astern. But what kind of pursuit—” He shrugged.

“Guard your queen!” Columbine said sharply, and at the same moment Jespersen let out a muffled exclamation.

Even without glasses. Potter was aware of something peculiar about the oncoming vessel as soon as its movement attracted his eye. “What in the name of—?” he blurted.

“I think it’s a *Whale*,” Congreve said.

Potter struggled to make sense of an incongruous form half in, half out of the water. “What’s a *Whale*, for God’s sake?”

“Hydro-aerofoil,” Greta said unexpectedly. “Four gas turbines, two underwater foils, two wings. Experimental. Meant for high-speed transit in the China Sea. If it’s only doing sixty-five knots it’s loafing. It can do a hundred and ten.”

“Aren’t you well informed!” Congreve said with a mocking bow.

“Shut up!” the captain ordered, and Potter realized they must have missed some vital exchange with Columbine, for the whining of the engines had sharpened noticeably.

The commander gave a nod, and the captain’s hand shot to the power control. He said harshly to his passengers, “Hold onto something— *here we go!*”

They all grabbed at the metal rails which ringed the bridge, and in the same second the pursuit launch took off: bump-bump-slap on three consecutive waves and then up on the foils and dead steady, like a limousine on a concrete road. The plume of the jets stretched astern for a hundred yards.

“Something wrong?” Potter asked.

“Very,” the captain said. “There’s a copter up there with infra-red and an electron-multiplier. Pilot reports one wing shot off the Russian vessel, one engine stopped to balance the drag, and a nose-down attitude. Must have been hit before they took out the pursuit planes.”

“I can see it!” Jespersen burst out. “How is it still afloat?”

Potter seized a pair of binoculars from the navigation table. For once Jespersen was right. Not only was one wing of the awkward craft missing—there was a hole in the hull, and the water was slapping up toward it.

The radio emitted an abrupt blast of frantic Russian. Congreve was translating before he was asked.

“They’re in great danger—at this speed the hydrofoils hit a critical resonance and make the hull shiver—if they reduce speed theyll drop and water will come through the hole—if they go faster they’ll tip over because of the missing wing! They have to ditch as soon as possible! If we can get close and pick them out of the water please flash a light three times.”

Instantly the captain hit the main deck light switch; the whole of the

boat stood out in sudden glaring whiteness.

“Look!” Greta whispered.

The monstrous, misshapen Russian vessel had suddenly swung broadside in a terrific swirl of spray. Something detached from it—a jettisoned hatch, leaving a bright oblong on the hull. A figure tumbled out. Another. Another. Like toys.

“But why on the turn like—?” the captain said, to no one in particular. And then: “Oh of course. Centrifugal force —toss them clear of the wake.”

“Whoever’s at the helm knows his business,” the commander said soberly.

The captain dropped the launch back to slow ahead. A searchlight from the launch’s bow swept the water and picked up the bobbing heads in quick succession.

The *Whale* completed a hundred-and-eighty-degree turn and slammed back on its original course. One more doll-like figure dived out—and a heartbeat later the craft dipped, dug its nose in, and shattered to pieces with a grinding

“Made it!” Potter cried, beside himself with uncontrollable excitement.

“The hell you say,” Greta snapped. Potter gave her a blank stare. She repeated, “The hell you say! Whatever they were bringing, they didn’t get it out through the escape hatch, did they? I only saw men go into the water, not taking anything with them—which means the reason for all our trouble is at the bottom of the Pacific!”

VI

For the next several minutes there was no chance to reflect on the depressing implications of what Greta had said. With the four widely scattered survivors to drag out of the water, far too much was happening to permit quiet thought.

Luckily, the survivors must have put on life-jackets well in advance of ditching; although one of them appeared to be unconscious, they were all afloat and there was no need for excessive haste. Potter stood by on the afterdeck as muscular sailors operated a sort of cross between a grapnel and a lasso, designed to catch a floating body in a padded ring.

First to be rescued was a grossly fat man whose life-jacket would barely fasten over his chest. He was coughing helplessly from a lungful of water, and had still not recovered from his convulsions when the second followed: a pale man with a spade-shaped brown beard salted with gray.

This one was in sufficiently good shape to stand unaided as he reached the deck, and even to bow his thanks to the men who had saved him. Congreve addressed him in Russian and at once the man clasped his hands fervently.

“What does he say?” Potter whispered.

“His name’s Alexei Zworykin. Medical doctor. Says he was never so glad in his life as when he saw us flash our lights.”

“What’s his reason for being along?”

“I haven’t asked that yet.” Congreve resumed his questioning.

Number three to be fished up was the unconscious one. The instant he came into view at the gunwale, limp as a dead fish, Zworykin forgot everything and dashed forward with an oath. Dropping to his knees, he checked the newcomer’s pulse and rolled back his eyelids. He uttered an impatient demand to Congreve.

“We must get him below at once,” the spy relayed. “He has a very frail constitution.”

“I can believe that,” Potter agreed. He stared at the white impassive face above the collar of the life-jacket. It was somehow—wrong. Deformed. The features were in a false relationship; forehead too low, eyes too far apart, mouth slack and idiotic.

“He’s diabetic,” Congreve said. “Also has a skin disease and something else—a medical term—I can’t remember the English for.”

“If he’s here, presumably he’s important,” Potter grunted. “Get them below and see that the doctor’s given whatever he needs.”

He turned to look at the fat man, and found Greta and Jespersen in halting conversation with him, their Russian badly accented and full of struggling pauses. Even so, Potter—who had not even a nodding acquaintance with the language—felt envious. “Who is he?” he inquired.

He had meant the question for Greta, but it was Jespersen who replied, with thinly veiled contempt. “Don’t you recognize him? Pavel Abramovitch, their Minister of Science!”

Of course. Potter damned himself for not looking more closely at the man—but somehow, even after what Congreve had reported, he hadn’t

expected anyone of this eminence to be with the party. Abramovitch was no chair-polishing career politician, either: he had already been an Academician of the USSR with a noteworthy research record when one of the periodical Kremlin reshuffles had brought him into the Supreme Soviet.

He was about to suggest a formal introduction, when there came an exclamation from behind, and he swung around.

Number four of the survivors was coming aboard without the aid of rescue apparatus. Sleek black hair running-wet framed the Slavic face; against the shallow skin red lips showed in stark contrast. A *woman*? Well—unmistakably!

In excellent English she said, “Thank you very much. I was hoping we could get all the way under our own power, which was why we asked for a jet-propelled boat to meet us and ride to port together. But it was hard to evade the attacks, because sea-water is not my usual element!” She bestowed a sunny smile on everyone in view.

There was a moment of enduring astonishment, Potter ended it by moving forward, hand outstretched.

“Ah—I’m Orlando Potter,” he said. “Theoretically I’m in charge. Deputy chairman of the Congressional Committee on Emergency Countermeasures, if that means anything to you.”

“It would be like our commission on—” The girl snapped her fingers. “Oh, I don’t know the English for that! I am Natasha Nikolaevna.”

Her self-possession impressed Potter tremendously. He said, “You were the—the pilot of the ship?”

“I was steering it, yes.” A wry grimace. “But it was not what I am used to, you understand. I am a cosmonaut.”

Before Potter could frame a suitable comment, Greta had come tapping him on the shoulder. “Orlando, you must come and speak to Abramovitch. He has something important he won’t tell anybody below government level.” There was a suggestion of irritation in her voice. Potter started to excuse himself from the Russian girl and comply, but she shot an urgent question at him.

“How is Pitirim? Is he all right?”

“The sick boy? He’s below with the doctor, being looked after.”

“Thank God,” the girl said. “Any of the rest of us could have been lost, but I was afraid for Pitirim.”

Why? What could make a mere boy more important than the Minister for Science? But Potter had no chance to ask before the captain leaned out of the door of the bridge.

“Mr. Potter, get everyone below, will you? We’re getting under way, and even if we can’t hit a hundred and ten knots there’ll be a slight breeze out here on deck.”

A slight breeze, Potter thought sardonically. The launch was slicing the night at about seventy-five knots now, and the wind-noise and the yammer of the turbines permeated the entire hull, making conversation in the cramped quarters amidships a matter of slow, well-articulated shouting.

Potter caught Natasha’s eye. “Please explain to Mr. Abramovitch who I am. I believe he’s reluctant to speak to anyone not in a position of authority, so tell him too that Dr. Jespersen is Associate Professor of Physics at the University of British Columbia, and Miss Delarue is a senior executive of our Federal Scientific Service.”

The girl complied. Waiting for her to translate a reply, Potter found himself glancing at Greta. He was unable to decipher the expression on her attractive face. It couldn’t possibly be jealousy, could it?

Yes, it could. For on reflection he realized it had made its appearance as they had been coming below: the captain had called from the bridge to compliment Natasha on her skilled handling of the *Whale*.

She must be quite a girl, this Natasha... Of course, it isn’t surprising to find a female space-pilot; there was what’s-her-name—Tereshkova—and the other one, and we had a spacewoman in training ourselves.

But it would be a long time before there was another Space-flight from this ravaged planet.

“He finds it difficult to talk because his throat hurts,” Natasha said, turning back to Potter. “He asks you to put what questions you wish for me to answer, and then when his throat is rested he will explain what I cannot. Is this okay by you?”

Now, imperfections were beginning to show in her otherwise astonishing English—that faintly archaic phrase was one. Nonetheless, her accent was superb. Potter shaped his first query and was forestalled by Greta in a voice bitter as aloes.

“Isn’t the whole purpose of your trip wasted after all?”

Surprise plain on her face, Natasha responded, “I don’t think so—but it remains to be seen.”

“Greta, save it, will you?” Potter snapped. He was still bothered by the point she had raised, but there was nothing in the Russians’ demeanor to suggest they considered their venture a failure. “Miss, ah, Miss Nikolaevna: we ought to start with the full background to the story, you know. What Mr. Congreve was told didn’t make it at all clear.”

She checked rapidly with Abramovitch; on a confirmatory nod, she leaned back and crossed her legs.

“Very well! First, you know what it is like in Russia now—there is Buishenko, who has risen like a mad dog to the top of a pile of mad dogs, and his saboteurs and criminals are breaking up the organization of our state and fighting over the pieces. It is like a jungle! First there was only the part around the—the alien city, I think you call it in English. We would say ‘energetic phenomenon,’ as near as I can translate,

“It spread like a fire, you see. But we could not understand why he gained so much support. We have done much for our people, and we believed them mainly loyal. Of course, he began with the remnants of the maddened leaderless armies we had sent against the—the aliens, and there were many thousands who had survived. Also, many people joined him through fear, or for bribes, or to save their skins from his terrorist forces. But this could not be the whole of the story. There were still—still gaps, you follow me? So we spied, and we sent commando forces into his territory, and we questioned those we captured in battle against him, and it came out.

“Everyone said: Buishenko has some secret. The aliens came and they spat on our petty achievements, and the government could do nothing, but Buishenko found some clue, some key, to the secrets of the aliens, and with this claim he was able to accrete—no: to augment his supporters.”

“You mean—” Greta began. Potter waved her silent, and she gave him a murderous glare.

“It is understandable,” Natasha murmured, glancing from one to other of them. “In face of this terrible alien threat to wish to follow a leader who makes such a claim is natural.

“So we plan to steal his secret. It can be done: his headquarters is in an emergency government center in the Urals, under the ground, and we have all the plans of it and we can get into it and bring away whatever he has. But where could we take it? Soon, no part of Russia will be safe from Buishenko—”

“We’ve heard all that!” Greta broke in. “So what became of it? Is it at the bottom of the sea?”

“At the—?” Natasha was incredulous for a moment. Then she threw back her head and pealed with laughter. “I see! You think it is some strange gadget we bring, yes? I should have explained to you. At first, we too thought that what Buishenko had was a machine of the aliens, or something similar, but this was not so. What we found was that he had in his control a person who in some peculiar way understands the forces operating now on Earth. And we have brought him safely away—Pitirim!”

There were long seconds of silence while they contemplated the memory of the pasty-faced boy dragged unconscious from the sea. At last Jespersen said faintly, “Him? But—but what can he do?”

Natasha shrugged. “Have we had time to find out?” she countered. “But he can do something—Buishenko had him guarded like gold and jewels, and we lost eight of the men who went to capture him. And if Buishenko was able to learn what Pitirim can do, and make such use of it, surely we together can do the same. That man is a wild animal caring for no one but himself. I think—I hope—we are caring for everybody on Earth.”

VII

Crooning to himself, clutching his prize tightly in both dirty hands, Ichabod scurried crabwise along the dusty path, now and again chuckling and shaking back straw-fair hair from his bulging forehead. He paid no attention to the people coming and going around the shacks of scrap timber, plastic or salvaged bricks mortared with clay which he passed, and correspondingly they ignored him. Everyone knew Ichabod—a little odd, but harmless, unlike some of the other kids.

The path wound randomly. He followed it as automatically as a trained rat in a maze. At one corner he stopped to relieve himself against a post, not letting go of what he held, and his crooning took on the words he had heard every Sunday, and sometimes weekdays as well, since he had learned to talk.

“Praise the Lord for he has sent
Angels from the firmament!”

(He knew exactly what the firmament was. It was a big town up near

the stars. You couldn't go to it—though some people had impiously tried to—but you didn't have to. Not now.)

“Sinners he will likewise throw

To the raging fires below!”

(He knew what that would be like, too. His father had shown him by throwing a frog in the fire.)

Hardly waiting for the last drop to fall, he went on down the path. When he came close to his home, though, he went cautiously. It was one thing to have got hold of something which had belonged to the angels; it was another to keep it to himself. If luck was with him, he might be able to slip indoors and hide it in his bed.

No. He couldn't get in. Peeking around the corner of the fence, he could see his parents in the frame of the downstairs window. They were arguing as usual. Ichabod accepted such arguments as a fact of life. He would just have to wait until one or both of them went out.

Squatting down against the fence, he wondered if he dared risk another look at his treasure. Nobody was in sight. He opened his hands and gazed down with wonder and fascination. Between his hands the stone glowed red, green, blue—and when he held it up to the light it was dazzling!

“Hello, son. What have you got there?”

Gasping, Ichabod snatched the stone down between his legs, a wave of terror going through him. He had been so absorbed he hadn't noticed the cat-footed approach of the man who had spoken. It was a stranger—and he had been told that “stranger” almost beyond doubt also meant “sinner.” He tried to huddle himself against the fence so small that he would vanish from sight.

The man—he was medium-tall, but to Ichabod's frightened vision he seemed a giant—dropped on his hunkers and leaned forward cajolingly, “Show me what you got, son. It's pretty, isn't it?”

“You leave me alone!” Ichabod commanded fiercely.

The man rocked back, feeling in the pocket of his neat, unmended pants. “Show me, son! I might like to buy it off you. You ever had this much money, son?” He shook a dozen jingling coins in his outstretched hand.

“No! No! No!” Ichabod yelled, jumping to his feet and dashing up on the noisy planking of the veranda in front of the house. The door slammed open as he charged toward it, and he went full tilt into his mother's

apron-front. Behind her he saw his father coming more slowly, his dark face set in a threatening frown which Ichabod for once found welcome.

“Make him go away!” he shouted.

His father and mother exchanged glances; then his father strode over to the stranger, who had risen to his feet and stood calmly on the path.

“A’right, mister—what’ve you been doing to my kid?”

“Nothing.” The stranger smiled. Ichabod didn’t trust people who smiled like that—to order. “My name’s Corey Bennett. I do a little trading in rare artifacts. Do you have any idea what that thing your boy is holding might be worth in the right hands?”

“What thing?” His mother glanced accusingly at Ichabod and shot out her arm. He tried desperately to cling to his treasure, but fingers like steel claws pried apart his grip and revealed the gorgeous polychrome glitter of the relic.

“Ichabod!” she snapped. “Where did you snatch this?”

“I found it!” Ichabod wailed. “It’s mine—give it here!” He stretched after it; his father gave him a sharp cuff above the ear, and he turned aside, blubbering to himself, while his mother held him by the shoulder to stop him running off. After a thoughtful study of the flowing colors, she spoke up.

“Excuse my being uncivil, friend. I’m Martha Sims; this is my man Greg. You know what this thing is?”

“I reckon I might, if I could take a closer look.”

“Here, then.” She held it out. Bennett got up on the veranda; after turning it between his fingers, he nodded.

“Now wait a second!” Sims said. “That from the city?”

“Looks like,” Bennett agreed.

“That’s a holy thing, then!” Sims stepped forward. “Martha, are you going to sell a holy thing to a sinner? It rightly belongs like all of its kind to—”

“You’d do well to talk less and work more, Greg Sims!” the woman broke in. “Can you eat it? Can you keep warm at night with it?”

“You sell that, you sell your soul!” Sims raised his hand. “Bring the money-changers back to the temple, would you? I’ll beat sense into you first!”

“Lay a hand on me and I’ll lay a pole on you—I’ve done it before! At most

I'll tithe it, but that's all, you hear?"

Bennett's shrewd dark eyes lifted for an instant from the gem and flickered over the faces of the couple. He gave a discreet cough and held the gem out as though to return it.

"If it means something special to you, I wouldn't cause dissension," he said. "And the boy seems to set store by it."

He was pleased to see the light of cupidity gleam now in Sims' eyes as well as his wife's.

"Got no business setting store by anything in this world." Sims growled. "Lay up your treasure in heaven—hear me, you little sinner?" He lifted a fist toward his son, who cringed away. "Maybe the lesson he'll learn if it's taken—a lesson against avarice—maybe it'll outweigh the strain of passing it to a sinner."

"I'm no sinner!" Bennett objected. He made a quick pass with his hands; he had learned many such and found them useful here. "In my view, this is what the relics are for. Don't we draw from them the profit which enables us to survive, an island of faith in a sea of unbelief? Doesn't the apostle say, 'To the pure all things are pure'? Money's not an evil in itself, but the lust for it is."

Sims drew puzzled brows together. "Who do you follow, then?"

"Brother Mark, of course." Bennett didn't wait for further comment, but rolled the stone around his palm; it was shaped like a long, thin egg. "I don't know that this thing is *more* than pretty, though... Well, someone should buy it for a gem. For the sake of feeding and clothing honest folk I'll take the chance. A hundred dollars."

He could see his pointed remark about lust for money had sunk deep in the minds of the Sims couple. Without making himself look dishonest, Sims couldn't argue the price up; his wife was only too well aware that if she tried to haggle, her husband's righteousness might reassert itself and prevent any agreement. Ichabod had settled to a dull meaning.

While they were still hesitating, he made it a hundred and twenty, and closed the deal.

A genuine free trader—the notorious Den Radcliffe, for instance, or one of Grady's own buying staff—secure in the knowledge of a minimum thousand percent profit, might have paid twice as much and then sold it for jewelry before a Federal agent could take it off him. Bennett was

almost limp with relief and excitement as he picked his way out of the shantytown toward the highway.

And his heart sank when he saw a patrolman in one of the local peacock-gaudy uniforms standing beside his car.

There was nothing to do but walk up with an innocent expression. He did so, mopping his brow, while the dark glasses shielding the patrolman's eyes from the glare fixed him with a basilisk stare.

"Documents," the man said, one elbow on the car's roof, the other hand outstretched. Bennett produced them.

"Free trader," was the neutral comment. "Okay, what have you got?"

In a split second Bennett made his decision. He was a comparative newcomer here, but already he had put through some deals which were profitable to Grady's tax-collectors, and the "Governor" depended too heavily on his trade in rare artifacts to risk offending a skilled bargainer.

He shrugged. "In that overgrown garbage pile? Those people won't trust anyone they haven't known at least a year. I just thought I'd ask around—but clams aren't in the same class with them for keeping their mouths shut."

It was at least half true, and the patrolman knew it. Bennett could see him thinking it over. Imperceptibly he tensed, because if the man decided on a search he would have to risk jumping him. He had been searching for weeks to find what he had in his pocket; he had been prepared to hunt for a year if he'd had to, but now, suddenly, his excitement had conquered his patience.

"Okay," the patrolman said, and handed back the documents. "Better luck next time. Show your face around more, is my advice. Get with one of their nutty religious groups. I could live the rest of my life on what I could get for the stuff they keep locked up in their tumbledown churches."

"Let me sell it for you, and you'll be able to afford two lifetimes instead of one," Bennett suggested, smiling. The patrolman cracked a faint grin in response and stood back from the car.

It cost Bennett all his self-discipline not to touch the pocket where he had put the previous object, to reassure himself it was still there. But he managed it, and when he was well down the road found he had been holding his breath.

He had almost failed to recognize the thing when he'd seen it in the crippled boy's hand. The shape had seemed familiar, but the shining colors were so extraordinary he had thought he was confronted with some

entirely new type of artifact.

This, though, was what he had been seeking. He had seen six or eight similar ones, all broken, all dull and colorless; this one was intact. He formed the words to himself: *in working order!* (Did that have a meaning? Did the aliens' products *do* anything, in the ordinary human sense?)

Piece by painfully gathered piece, the first complete alien "machine" to fall into man's possession was being assembled here under the very nose of Grady, to whom what he carried would be only a gewgaw for sale to some fat and wealthy woman in New York. The machine had cost two lives already, to Bennett's certain knowledge: once when a man had tried to rob the store of a local church for a coveted part, once when Grady's patrols had caught a man trying to smuggle something away. Now it was within sight of completion; *one more part—?*

"And it's here in my pocket!" he whispered, trying to make the idea seem real. "What's it doing? It's processing energy, that's for sure. What kind of energy? How much? *How?* Will I be able to tell without breaking it open and ruining it?"

And the worst question of all, of course, was this: what would the finished device do—this mysterious apparatus that he, third in line of succession, now seemed fated to perfect? Like a three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle, it had been compiled from many sources. Suppose, after such effort, after such loss of life, it was something a human mind could never understand?

VIII

It was as though humanity had fled in two directions through time from the catastrophe accompanying the arrival of the aliens. This was how it struck Orlando Potter when he had time to ponder the situation in which the race found itself.

Some small part had exploded toward the future, in the sense that national boundaries had collapsed; here he was in Victoria, after all, on the southern tip of Vancouver Island, and nobody was raising objections about an American government official requisitioning Canadian facilities and having his temporary office tied by phone and teleprinter to the surviving nuclei of the government of the United States. Of course, in the

immediate post-disaster period rules, regulations and traditions had been slashed apart, and in any case the Canadian Parliament had been transferred here...

But by far the majority of the human race had exploded toward the past, not the future. Remembering the civil wars in miniature that had been fought so bloodily south of here, especially in California, when panic-crazed city-folk had clashed with small-town militia determined to keep what they still had. Potter felt his mouth twist as if he had bitten a putrescent fruit.

That was a scattering backward through time, surely: to the days of closed peasant communities, suspicious of any stranger; worse, to the days of feudalism—for what after all was Grady but a feudal lord of the manor, governing his followers as arbitrarily as a medieval baron had ruled his serfs?

So now, rat-fashion, men squabbled and quarreled among the ruins of their once-proud civilization, and here and there a few of them toiled to assemble the broken pieces.

Can we coexist with the aliens? The question was the eternal one. Can we simply draw back from where they have set their cities, and be our own masters everywhere else?

Probably not. Potter wished achingly that the solution could be so simple, but he knew it would never happen. Two things formed insuperable obstacles to the easiest course; first, it was unknown whether the aliens intended to spread further across the planet; second, it wasn't in the monkey-curious nature of man to ignore a challenge of this order.

He stared unseeing through the window of his temporary office toward the sea. The summer sky was clear and blue, but he would have much preferred it to be storm-dark, as more suited to his mood.

He was here because of Pitirim. The plan had been merely to land the survivors here, as the nearest usable seaport; the whole of the far northwest of the USA was a fallout zone following the immense explosions of the ICBM sites there, and anti-missile missile bases had created comparable havoc around the major conurbations further south when they had been detonated.

But on landing, Zworykin had forbidden them to take the sick boy any further. The psychologist who had joined him in working on the case now said that Pitirim must have suffered some traumatic damage to his already fragile mind when he'd been roughly kidnapped from Buishenko's base below the Ural range, and the final shocks of being shot at by the

pursuit planes and then unceremoniously dumped in the Pacific had driven him into fugue. Life was easily, though precariously, maintained in his feeble body; calling back an aware personality from such a retreat would be far more difficult.

So: a temporary headquarters. “Operation Pantomime” was his responsibility. He had pressed its approval on the Committee on Emergency Countermeasures, and to go back without something as evidence either of success or of unavoidable failure was a prospect he dared not consider. His confidence was badly enough undermined already.

His head was beginning to ache from his long staring at the bright sky. With an effort he brought his mind back to the tasks at hand, and took up the topmost of the many sheets of paper in the “In” tray at his left. For a long moment he failed to make sense of it, and thought this was because his vision was swimming with afterimages of the sunlit window. Then words penetrated—something about a policy on the life of a ship’s captain—and he realized he was looking at the wrong side of the paper. Even in this world, it had become necessary to use both sides of the sheet to cope with the shortage.

The other side bore the usual brief daily summary from the doctors working on Pitirim’s battered mind. It could have been summed up in three words: “Only minimal progress.”

Heaven’s name, how long was this all going to take? He thrust the paper blindly at the filing basket and took up the next report.

He was only halfway down the first of its ten paragraphs when he stiffened and began to read with absolute concentration—so total, indeed, that it was a shock when he looked up at the end of the text and found that the door had opened and Greta had come in. She was sitting facing him with a deep scowl marring her attractive face.

“Yes?” he said—more abruptly than he had intended, because his mind was still half taken up by the implications of what he had just read.

“I think we’re being made fools of,” Greta said. Potter blinked. “What’s the point of *that* crack?” he asked.

“Didn’t you hear it right? I’ll say it again. We’re being made fools of. I don’t believe for one moment that this idiot child they’re fussing over in the hospital is more than simply an idiot. I think Buishenko may very well have stumbled across some clue to the employment of the aliens’ powers. I further think that these damned Russians who are putting us to such trouble are feather-brained incompetents who’ve deluded themselves into believing they too know what this secret of Buishenko’s is. And it’s not

Pitirim.”

There was a long silence after this passionate outburst. She must have been bringing herself up to pressure while he'd been studying the alarming report, Potter told himself.

He leaned back with a sigh. “My immediate reaction,” he said coldly, “is that you are crazily jealous of Natasha.”

“I—*what?*” Greta nearly jolted to her feet under the impact of the words.

“ ‘Didn't you hear me right?’ ” glibed Potter. “Shut up and hear me out! Sometimes I wish I'd known you in the days before—all this.” He waved a hand to encompass the world. “I'd have been much surer of my opinion if I'd seen you in a more normal context—”

She cut in angrily: “I've had just about as much as I can stand of your parlor psychology, Orlando! If you want someone to foist your diagnoses on, go down the hospital and try them on the idiot kid!”

Potter let the blast blow by him. He resumed as though there had been no interruption.

“I was saying, however: I've seen a side of your character lately that's completely different from the one I thought I knew. I was very impressed when you were first assigned to my staff. Why not? A young woman looking like a fashion model in spite of the circumstances, who turns out to have a Bachelor of Science degree and a responsible post in the Scientific Service—remarkable! Out on the boat that night when we made the rendezvous, I remember feeling a kind of jealousy because you could string a few dozen words of Russian together, as well as all the rest, and the best I manage is to order a meal in Spanish. Then I saw you looking at Natasha. And I began to wonder what you were running away from.”

She had become like ice now. He chipped at the frozen facade.

“ ‘Anything you can do'... isn't that the size of it? She's a trained space-pilot; she's a first-rate engineer; she speaks English as well as you or I though she's never been in an English-speaking country before. It adds up to a total to make your B.Sc. seem worthless. You don't like *her* for it. You take out your resentment on me, on Abramovitch, and on Pitirim most of all because the claims that are made for him are ones he can't stand up and prove correct.”

“Produce me one shred of evidence” she said between her teeth, “and I'll write out what I've said and eat the paper. Until you do, I'll say again and again that we're being made fools of and you're behaving like the worst fool of all.”

“Ever heard of weirdos?”

The question, apparently out of rational context, took her with the intended continuance of her tirade against Potter, and the result was an insane nod.

“Define the term as you understand it,” Potter said.

“I— They’re supposed to be people who make some sort of progress toward a comprehension of the aliens’ techniques, who allegedly display some—some peculiar powers. But the most we’ve ever been able to track down is that they’re peculiarly filthy, peculiarly hostile to normal people, and generally schizoid.”

Potter let the name hang like a wisp of smoke on the air. Greta didn’t stir to disturb it for long, long seconds. At last, with infinite weariness, she said, “Damn you, Orlando—you’re a clever son of a bitch. You’re a power-hungry man with the one talent that can give you the power: you can make people feel naked just by throwing insults at them. You find the weakness, you *lean* on it And you don’t even pretend to be nice about what you’re doing.”

“We’ve all got weaknesses,” Potter said harshly. Too damned many of them. We could get along when there was no competition except other human beings. But the aliens aren’t mere people. If we’re even going to survive in their company, we’re going to have to know ourselves more intimately than ever before in history. Will you grant me that?”

“I guess so,” she admitted.

“Okay. Now that that’s cleared up, I want you read this report. And then go pack your bags.”

Hand poised to take the paper Potter was offering, she checked. “So you *have* decided to replace me!” she accused, and color flared in her cheeks. “God, you’re the most egotistical bastard I ever met! Nothing short of a space-pilot is fit for you, is that it?”

Potter gave a weary sigh. “No. No, in fact on the whole and in spite of there never having been much affection between us, I’ll miss you and hope you get back soon. But we have to send someone with scientific training to Grady’s Ground. When you came in you were complaining about wasting time on a fool’s errand here, so you should be glad to get this chance. The affair is loaded to the brim with the kind of concrete evidence you’ve been demanding.”

Numbly, she took the sheet of paper and scanned it. Potter went on, “We have a good protective cover for you, if you can persuade one key man

to cooperate, which should make it possible for even such an attractive woman as you are to act with reasonable freedom when you get there.”

“Thank you,” she murmured. But he couldn’t tell if it was for the assignment or for the compliment.

IX

Tonight it was unpleasantly hot. Restless, Waldron paced his apartment.

He stopped before the small table under the main window, and for perhaps the hundredth time picked up what lay alone on the varnished wood. What *was* this damned thing? A stubby rod, eight and a quarter inches long, of something which was not glass but had cracked irregularly down the center, with spiny quasi-crystals embedded in its clear substance. From each quasi-crystal, threads thinner than hairs wound out toward the surface—not in any formal pattern, but with a symmetry like that of a living organism.

A bit of garbage, tossed aside by a higher race. He had bought it nearly a year ago; it had cost him eight hundred dollars, and that had been the lowest price paid at the auction sale for any of the items offered. Most of the other bidders had been speculators, as usual frantically seeking something from which a fortune might be made on resale to the government or to one of the corporations which still had research facilities operating. He had only wanted an object made by the invaders, as a barb for his mind.

Now, as occasionally before, the useless thing sparked his memory. Of course—he was neglecting the most important of his self-imposed tasks, the keeping of a journal which he had begun when he’d realized there was bitter truth in his habitual gibe about no one bothering to write history.

He picked up his recorder and carried it to his most comfortable chair. He poured a drink, then sat down and thumbed the control knob to recording position. He gave the date, hesitated, and suddenly uttered words he had not thought over.

“I have a mental picture of Washington. A pillar of smoke by day and a pillar of fog by night. A solid week now since Bennett walked into the *City of Angels* and died there. Within hours of our reporting his suspected

identity, they'd descended on us. I wasn't there, because I'd had the night shift and was home trying to sleep. When I got back, they'd sucked his body into the Washington fog and given strict orders not to mention the name Bennett to anyone. And a day later I received a call from a man who didn't give his name, Just a departmental reference—I traced it to the Scientific Service—commending me for not arresting Radcliffe and making it harder to hush this affair up.

He didn't say 'hush it up'. But that was what he meant.

"For God's sake, what's become of us? Bennett didn't walk in the front door of the *City of Angels*, past those bouncers—he must have taken some other route. Where from? Clear from Grady's Ground, where Radcliffe said he's seen so many weirdos? I'd have said this was a matter worth getting excited about. But I guess I don't understand the big thinking. I guess it's 'not expedient' to trace Bennett's movements. I guess not even his brother has been told he's dead.

"If he has a brother."

He stopped abruptly. This was the point past which, ever since the chilling moment when Canfield had brought him the pictures of the reversed identical prints, he had not dared to push his thinking.

A of M! The Age of Miracles is not past!

Into his moment of blankness the sound of the door buzzer broke like an axe. His hand flew to turn off the recorder. Who in the devil's name could that be? He didn't want to be interrupted. Let the caller wear out his patience and go away.

But the caller had more patience than Waldron had expected. After the third buzz he leaned on the button and waited. Waldron jumped to his feet with an oath and stormed to the door.

The sight of the elegantly dressed woman outside, drawing her hand back from the buzzer, brought one instant assumption to his mind. He said harshly, "I'm not interested! And watch who you pick on—there are still laws against soliciting, and I'm in a position to enforce them." He started to slam the door.

"Hold it," she said. She had colored a little, but betrayed no other reaction. "Are you Lieutenant Waldron?"

That shook him. If she knew his identity, clearly she was not just working her way around the bachelor apartments in search of a job for the night. Wondering, he nodded.

"Then I want to talk to you. About the death of Corey Bennett."

The words seemed to rest on the surface of his mind for a moment, as stones might rest on ice before breaking it. He looked her up and down. She was slender, almost as tall as he was; her face was rather thin, and jade-dust makeup lent her complexion a luminous pallor. Her fair hair was shoulder-long, gathered by a comb to the left of her head so that it emphasized the delicate molding of her skull. She wore a dark green bolero and rust-red tights patterned with silver.

The ice cracked and the stones sank. He heard himself say, “*Corey Bennett? Who in hell are you, anyway?*”

She zipped open the change pocket on her bolero and took out a small yellow card bearing her photograph. It identified her as Greta Delarue, B.Sc, Office of the Federal Scientific Service, Washington, DC.

“Come to commend me for keeping my mouth shut?” Waldron suggested scathingly. “All right, come on in.”

He waved her to the chair he had been using, picked up his drink, and sat on the edge of a table facing her. There was a brief silence. Eventually he had to make an impatient gesture. “So talk to me! You said you wanted to.”

She looked once around the room; her eyes lingered for a few seconds on the alien artifact. She said, “From the way you said ‘*Corey Bennett?*’ I imagine you’ve already worked out much of what I was going to tell you as background.”

“Could be,” Waldron grunted. “If you’re worried that I might have broadcast the news, though, I haven’t done so.” He made the words sharp, but a tremor of apprehension underlay them, and she didn’t miss it.

“Out of discretion? Or because you’re tired of trying to make people listen to you?” She didn’t wait for a reply. “Well, as you’ve apparently deduced, Corey Bennett is an only child. Organic death was well advanced by the time the body was brought under expert scrutiny—your police surgeon, by the way, isn’t very competent—but it was possible to establish his identity. He—”

Waldron broke in. “What happened to him, then, to— to turn him around the way he was?”

“All in good time. Lieutenant. I was going to say—”

“*What happened to him?*” Waldron slammed his glass down on the table beside him, and it broke into shivering fragments. He stared at it stupidly for as long as it took the pieces to stop rocking.

“I’m sorry,” he muttered. “I’ll get the disposall.”

“Look, why don’t you sit down? You’ve obviously been under a strata, and I don’t blame you for being nervous. But it would make things a lot clearer if I could come to my point.”

“Then *get* to it instead of dancing all around it!” Waldron flung the words over his shoulder as he unhooked the disposall from its bracket and ran the nozzle over the table.

“Corey Bennett has been with the field branch of the Federal Scientific Service since June last year,” Greta said. “He was assigned two months ago to a purchasing mission on what I gather you insist be called by the slang name of Grady’s Ground. And at present he is there and making good progress; his last report came in during the small hours of yesterday morning.”

“*What?*” The disposall thumped to the floor; he kicked the power switch off before it could ingest the carpet, and spun to face her.

“I’ve been checking up on you, Mr. Waldron. Apparently you like to maintain that nothing is being done about the –well, the aliens. Under the kindest interpretation, this must be a form of compensation—you, like everyone else with a conscience, naturally chafe under the necessity of seeming to do nothing. We are fairly certain that if they cared to, the aliens could sterilize the planet; we could have abolished rats and mice by now if we’d sunk all our efforts into the job, and the most flattering assessment of their and our relative intelligences puts us on the rat-level.

“But we do what we can, and right now we have a problem which demands the most intensive investigation –with an incredibly small number of workers who think it worth the trouble.

“Corey Bennett is dead. His body is in one of our labs, being taken to very small pieces like a delicate machine. And Corey Bennett is at the same time probably engaged in the course of action which led to his death.”

The following silence sougled through the room like a cold wind. In memory Waldron heard something which Maura Knight had said about weirdos. He moved to a chair. When he sat down he found his hands were shaking.

In an inexorable voice Greta resumed. “We can’t warn him. He’s a condemned man. But we know what is going to happen, and for the first time ever we are going to be able to watch an alien process. I’ve been assigned to do so. Alone if necessary. We’re at the end of our human resources.”

“You’re not going to make any attempt to save his life?”

“Do you think we dare?” she countered.

He shook his head numbly. Having to swallow before he could speak, he said, “But how was he—is he going to be —hell, I’ve been thinking about this till I’m dizzy! What twists him?”

“We’re hoping we’ll find out. Think of a Mobius tube, for instance—that could do it. A closed tube of triangular cross-section twisted through a hundred and twenty degrees. Among the few things we do know about the aliens is that they’re capable of intense local distortions of the continuum.”

“Why are you telling me this? What does it have to do with me?”

“As much as you want it to.”

“What do you charge for straight answers?” he snapped.

“I’m sorry.” She glanced down at her slim hands. “What first drew our attention to you, as you know, was your fortunate decision not to arrest Radcliffe for murder. I doubt if you did it for the right reasons, but it was very lucky for us. That, plus the fact that you apparently talked his hired girl out of an assault charge against him for the punch he gave her, left him with a small debt to honor sometime. Out on Grady’s Ground, they tell me, you become careful about such matters. And after the formal conclusion of your interview with him, we found something else on the tape—not very well recorded, because I imagine he was away from the intake cone of the microphone, but comprehensible with a little work. He actually invited you to go out and claim his help in his home territory. Now she looked him full in the eyes. ”Your tone when you answered suggested you were already half-decided to take up the offer.“

Waldron felt sweat creep down his neck. “That was then! I was angry with myself for something!” He paused and continued in a calmer tone. “I guess I was giving Radcliffe, as a free trader, a specious artificial glamor. But I promise, there’s no risk of my quitting my job and heading for Grady’s Ground to join him.”

“Very well, then.” Greta started to her feet. “I’d hoped you might feel otherwise, but since you’ve made your mind up—”

“Wait.” Waldron felt a stab of puzzlement. “I seem to have missed something.”

She stood by the table at the window, letting her hand fall to the stubby cylinder which was not of glass. Shrugging, she said, “I told you. I’m assigned to watch Bennett do the things that led to his—his arrival in his

own past. But on Grady's Ground it's difficult for an unattached woman to preserve her independence. It seemed to us that if you were sincere in your complaints about people's general apathy, you might be willing to use your good standing with Radcliffe to provide me with a cover – after all, I'm making some kind of an effort to hit back at the aliens. It would make it a hell of a lot easier to get on the Ground at all; they're fierce with strangers, and to be vouched for by Radcliffe would be a safe-conduct."

There was a roaring in Waldron's ears now. He felt as though the room were afloat on a rough sea; his stomach churned and his palms were wet.

Dear God! whispered some far-distant part of his mind. *It wasn't enough to talk about it. Something has to be done, sooner or later. And now I've got to be the one to do it. I didn't mean to get trapped, but I am trapped—I was never so frightened in my life and I don't want to say yes and I've got to say it, got to, got to...*

His voice, however, was perfectly calm as he spoke. "Sit down again. Have a drink. And tell me exactly what it is you see me doing for you."

X

After Floodwood, neither of them spoke for twenty hot miles; they sat, sweating and apathetic while US 2 went reeling under the wheels like an endless humming tape. The country, for some distance now, had looked neglected. They met almost no other traffic. When there were people to be seen, they went timidly, looked dirty, wore patched shabby clothing. In every small town after Floodwood there were ruins burned by the mad armies—charred beams poked up from mounds of rubble, dark stains washed down by rain, seedlings sprouting atop the mess.

A tilted sign stood by the road, its painted face chipped by bullets to let the cancerous rust eat at the metal: DANGER FALLOUT ZONE. From the anti-missile missiles around the Lakes, presumably; the wind would have carried a lot of the dust this way. But the count would have dropped to a safe level long ago.

The people had fled from the fallout zone, of course— not officially evacuated, just panicking away. Where had they ended up? Shot down on the Canadian border, maybe, or killed by plague, or trapped by despair in some refugee camp southward—whatever had become of them, they hadn't returned.

Beside him Greta reached to the switch of the radio, and a sentimental ballad—pre-catastrophe—with a backing of lush strings oozed on the hot summer air. Waldron uttered a wordless objection: *Do we have to endure this garbage?*

“It’s in character,” Greta said. “We’ll have to pass a border check somewhere soon.”

“Already?” Waldron asked, astonished.

She gave a twisted smile. “I thought you were the man who kept a map of Grady’s Ground on his office wall.”

“Stop needling me!” Waldron said savagely. Now that the Journey was nearing its end, all his half-formed fears were clamoring in the back of his mind again. He spoke aloud to silence the mental uproar: “I was told that Grady controls North Dakota, part of South Dakota and Montana, and a narrow strip of Minnesota—plus a wedge of Manitoba. Hell, we’re not through Grand Rapids!”

“Not Grady’s border post. Ours.”

“What?”

“You haven’t heard of anything of the kind. I know.” She spoke with exaggerated weariness. “Christ, Jim, do you think the government publicizes the fact that we’ve had to set up border posts on our own territory? They masquerade as forward defense posts, cordoning off the areas dominated by the aliens, but they’re border posts and that’s the bitter truth.”

Waldron was silent for a moment. The sickly singing from the radio galled him. He said abruptly, “If you must have it playing to fit your role, at least pick another station!”

The record ended. An unctuous voice said something about Lampo Products being better than.

“Can’t,” Greta said. “It’s Grady’s station. Has a monopoly. He sabotaged every other station for almost two hundred miles and took in parts to his own. Now it’s the most powerful west of Chicago.”

“Grady’s? You mean he gets commercials?”

“Why not? There are a hell of a lot of people anxious to sell things to the richest community in the whole of North America.”

“The richest?” Waldron felt like an idiot, parroting the succession of questions.

“Oh hell!” Greta said. “Haven’t you figured anything out for yourself?”

Don't you know what you're letting yourself in for?"

"I thought I was supposed to be helping you with a government project to watch a man go to his death," Waldron sighed. "Apart from that, nobody's bothered to tell me anything."

"I was assuming you'd work a little of it out on your own," she countered. "All right, what do you want to know? Better hurry with the questions—we can't have you pumping me for information once we get on the Ground, or somebody may get suspicious."

Waldron looked sidelong at her. He couldn't determine what else the makeup experts had done to her besides coarsen the line of her mouth and rinse her hair in some chemical to make it look bleached even though it was naturally fair, but the result was unmistakable. Here, any man would assume, was a selfish, pampered woman, losing her looks and afraid of it, but too spoiled not to be excessively fond of gin, cigarettes and late nights.

She was supposed to be his mistress. It didn't say much for his taste or his sex appeal, Waldron felt, but there was no use complaining; reports said this was the commonest kind of woman now moving into the Ground, and so Greta Delarue was now Greta Smith, mistress.

Hanging around her was going to be the worst part of this trip, Waldron told himself. Aloud, he said, "Border check. I wanted to know why you expect it so soon."

"There's a no-man's-land. The border posts are on the line where the maddened troops were first affected—some of them got closer before turning back, but none were initially affected further away. The order was on no account to cross this line. When they eventually countermanded it, Grady was there and happy with it. He likes having a big moat around his territory, so that smugglers can be run down at his convenience. Uses Dobermanns and helicopters."

The announcer cut short the record that had been playing and read another commercial. Greta turned down the volume.

"Tell me, Jim: what kind of—of analogies do you have in mind for the situation on Grady's Ground? Any?"

It was going to take him a long time to get used to her using his first name so—*maritally*. Waldron shrugged.

"I thought I had some ideas. You're torpedoing them."

"They must all have been wrong, then. Get this through your head: this is gold-rush territory. Grady has a monopoly for this continent on the potentially most valuable commodity in history, and he's sewed it up tight.

He runs the Ground on police-state lines, except that the major crimes aren't political—they're financial. Smuggling, for instance. Failure to tithe alien artifacts, or pay a redemption fee in lieu. Everything is taxed, on top of being inflatedly expensive, and Grady is the tax-collector. Of course, he does maintain the public services: the utilities which escaped the catastrophe, a certain amount of public transportation, sewage... in short, the bare necessities of an organized community. But do you know how much he's got to do it with?"

Waldron shook his head.

"The Revenue people calculate that the income accruing to the Ground from the sale of alien artifacts last year topped one and a half billion dollars."

She took a cigarette from her pocket and pressed the dash lighter home. "Grady, his staff, the top free traders, and a few others who've made themselves indispensable to the Governor—about a thousand in all—are dripping money all over the Ground and hardly know what to spend it on. Like one of those oil-rich sheikhs out in the Persian Gulf. Gold-rush territory!"

The lighter popped out and she applied it to the cigarette.

"When are they going to close him down?" Waldron said.

"Grady?" She made a helpless gesture. "How? Send in another army and have this one mutiny and run riot across the countryside, like all the others? Heaven knows how the aliens discriminate between an organized body of men and the riffraff they tolerate on their very doorsteps, but they manage it somehow. We have a hundred and thirty million people left to cope with. Grady's going to have to stew till the rest of the continent is reorganized."

And there it was: the border.

The road had been widened by the addition on either side of a large flat concrete pan. Concrete blockhouses with machinegun slits commanded the road and the pans, and barbed wire encircled the whole area, leaving only a gap on the roadway wide enough for a single vehicle and closed by heavy timber gates. In either direction stretched a line of watchtowers with searchlights and radar on top. An army helicopter was parked alongside the nearest blockhouse. There were also six trucks parked here, two of which were heavily armored; the others, each with a trailer in tow, numbered two flatbacks and two gasoline tankers. They were painted dull

gray.

“That’s luck,” Greta said softly, turning up the volume of the radio a little. “A convoy.”

“So I gather. Why?” Waldron took his foot off the gas, letting the car coast toward the gate barring the highway.

“Someone’s private fleet of trucks, bringing in household supplies, I guess. The no-man’s-land is rugged and full of lakes; hijackers sometimes work it, and the wealthiest of the residents on the Ground take a lot of precautions.”

A voice boomed from a loudspeaker, ordering them to halt. As soon as the car stopped, a sergeant and two privates, all with slung carbines, appeared to raise the gate and wave them through. The gate having dropped again, the sergeant came to Waldron’s side with a bored expression.

“Read this and signify that you understand it,” he said, proffering a much-stained printed form pasted on a card. Waldron scanned it: now entering a zone defined as an emergency zone by Federal Emergency Regulation number so-an-so, act of proceeding implies recognition that the government is no longer responsible for, etcetera. *A polite way of saying you’re leaving the United States*, Waldron translated.

He gave the card back. The sergeant beckoned the nearer private, who took out a notebook and scribbled down the license number of the car before coming to take their names.

“Okay, wait there,” he said. “May take awhile.”

Greta put on a sour expression. “We have to sit out here scorching to death? What for?”

The private gave her a grin full of stained teeth, “For all I know, sugar, you and your boyfriend murdered grandma and pawned the family jewels, hm? Or maybe it’s a hot car, and I don’t mean from the sun.” He grinned again and went into the blockhouse. The remaining private stood staring at Greta with his gun leveled and his jaws working rhythmically on a wad of gum.

Waldron’s hand went to his pocket and began mechanically to finger his alien artifact, which he had picked up just before setting out. *As an amulet? Have we become that irrational?*

Time passed. From the blockhouse emerged two men in sweat-damp overalls, guns belted at their waists; one of them was stuffing a wad of paper into a satchel. They must have been going through some kind of

clearance procedure, Waldron decided. The first to catch sight of Greta nudged the other and rounded his lips in a mocking whistle. They both came toward the car.

“Waiting got you down, sweetie?” the first man asked, bending to the passenger’s window. “Ride along with us, why don’t you? We’re pulling out now.”

“If you stick with your chum,” the other supplied, “you’ll be baking all day. Got a criminal face, hey, Rick?”

Rick stared at Waldron. “Sure he has! With a mug like his they’ll check every wanted file in the country.”

Waldron tried to sound bantering. “I’ll bet *you* got through quickly because every police force in the Union was glad to see you off their territory!”

“Rick?” guffawed the other man. “Never! He’s as—”

“Shut up,” Rick said unexpectedly. His smile vanished as he studied Waldron more intently. “Police... Say, your name isn’t Waldron, is it? From New York?”

Waldron stiffened. He said, “That’s right, but—”

“Jesus!” Rick straightened. “Bill, get in there and tell that damn fool of a soldier to quit messing around and clear this car to ride out with the convoy. This here is our new security chief—the boss said he might be arriving soon!”

Waldron and Greta exchanged astonished glances. In an agony of apology, Rick mumbled excuses for not having recognized them, and Waldron dismissed them with half his mind while the other half wondered why in the world Radcliffe should have spread this story around. After all, he hadn’t even had a message to warn him of their coming.

XI

Den Radcliffe sat under an awning on the upper level balcony of the house he had had built specially for him.

There was a private lake. There were fortifications on nearby hilltops. There was a self-contained nuclear power plant in the basement; it operated off one point one kilos of fissile material, a small enough quantity

to escape the effects of whatever process the aliens used to detonate such devices.

Gradyville was just out of sight over the hills. So was the alien city. When there were low clouds, the light from the latter could be seen reflected in the sky. That was the one regret Radcliffe felt when he considered the wisdom of his choice of home.

A phone buzzer sounded. He said to the air, "Get that!" and went on wondering whether he should go down to the lake for a swim or merely have another beer brought.

He was feeling very pleased with himself. He had put over on Grady the slickest piece of trickery anyone had ever managed against the big greedy slob. He had come back from his recent trip around the States to hear from his apologetic staff that the greater part of a convoy of goods he had dispatched from California to his home had been the prey of hijackers. The total value of the missing goods was some hundred thousand dollars, on which he would have had to pay an import duty—received by Grady—amounting to ten percent.

He had stormed and reprimanded and dismissed, left and right; he had threatened to fire his security chief, and let it be known that he had the precise replacement in mind—a lieutenant of police from back East, called Waldron, to whom he had sent an invitation at once.

Meanwhile, he had quietly sold off the goods under Grady's very nose, making a handsome profit of some twenty-five percent *and* escaping the duty. The hijackers had been a team of his own men—not his estate staff, but his private army, about which Grady knew merely that it existed.

Radcliffe had built it up by slow, cautious degrees. It came in handy for deals like mock robberies; it was destined to oust Grady quite soon, and install Den Radcliffe as his successor.

"It's Rick Chandler," the girl who had taken the phone call reported. "The convoy is just leaving the Ball Club post now. They're bringing in the new security chief with them."

Radcliffe nodded approval. On this convoy, of course, he'd have to pay the duty meekly, but to have got even one load—

"*What* was that?" His head snapped around. The dark-haired girl stood there, just inside the double glass doors, holding the phone. She was naked. He liked to have naked women around him, and this one was hardly likely to object. "What was that about a new security chief?"

"I think—" A frown creased the tanned forehead under her dark hair;

she found remembering things rather difficult. “I think it’s the policeman from New York, the one who looked after the matter of the weirdo... ?” The rather flat, characterless voice died away uncertainly.

“Give me the phone!” Radcliffe barked.

Frightened, the girl came running with it, almost tripping on the extension cord. Radcliffe cursed her for a clumsy idiot, and she dropped the instrument at his side and ran.

Bringing in Waldron? Incredible! But Rick Chandler, the crew boss of the ten-man team running the convoy, blandly confirmed the statement.

“I remembered you saying you had this guy Waldron in mind and maybe we’d see him turn up soon. So when I spotted the New York plates on this car of his, and then I heard something like in his voice—get me? A cop sort of voice, he has, and easy to recognize. So I asked him is he Waldron, and he is.”

“When you get here, bring him straight up to see me,” Radcliffe ordered.

“Yessir. And his girl friend too?”

“He’s not alone?”

“No, he has this blonde along. Dye and paint job and not so young as she once was.”

“Is he in the cab with you?” Radcliffe demanded.

“No, we’re convoying the car.”

“Get one of the other men to take over the car. Bring Waldron and the girl up in your cab with you. Talk to him, get acquainted. I, ah, I want your opinion of him, and some of the other men’s too, before I definitely hire him. After all, the starch doesn’t wash out of a cop that easily.”

There was a chuckle. Radcliffe put down the phone, very thoughtful.

There was an excellent reason why Waldron should not have come out here to act as the new security chief. He hadn’t been asked. Radcliffe had sized him up as too far gone to want to dig up his roots and try the Ground, despite his half-formed intention to accept the original invitation.

Well, no one could be right all the time, Radcliffe told himself philosophically, and called for another cold beer.

It was phrased as a polite request; nonetheless, it was an order, and Waldron complied, getting out of the car and letting Bill take the wheel while he and Greta accompanied Rick to the armored monster heading the seven-vehicle string.

Clearly, he had to play along with the pretense that he was coming to take up a specific job with Radcliffe. When the mistaken assumption was revealed there might be trouble, but for the moment there were double advantages in the pose: he could reasonably ask about details of Radcliffe's organization which no mere stranger would be told, and they were being taken at a good speed direct to Radcliffe's estate, instead of having to argue with patrols and probably spend their cash on bribes merely to be told what route to follow.

There were comfortable padded seats in the back of the cab, plenty large enough for Rick, Greta and himself. Waldron passed cigarettes, learning as he did so that the driver was called Tony.

"I, uh, I'd heard about you from Mr. Radcliffe," Rick ventured ingratiatingly. "Like you did him a good turn in New York."

"Very smart of you to figure out who I was," Waldron said in the sort of tone calculated to imply that Rick was due for promotion if he kept this up. "You weren't told I'd be linking up with your convoy?"

"Huh-uh. It was just that you might be on your way shortly, so— What is it, Tony?" In response to a muttered exclamation from the driver, he pushed forward to peer through the windshield.

"Only a weirdo," he said after a prolonged stare.

"What's that?" Greta had spoken little since leaving the border post; now she craned like a tourist.

"See, over there? Like a scarecrow!"

Some thirty yards off the road, a man was standing stiff as a post, his clothes ragged, his face turned ecstatically to the sun and his eyes forced wide.

"What's he doing?" Greta whispered.

"Nobody knows what the hell weirdos are trying to do," Rick said contemptuously. "Fool with the wrong things, wind up like that—nutty as a fruitcake. Tony, you're all on edge, know that?"

"The boss lost a load," Tony muttered. "Could be a fake —spotting for hijackers."

"What's this?" Waldron probed.

Rick amplified. He, naturally, accepted the loss of the previous convoy as a genuine robbery; Radcliffe had carefully limited the number of those in on the secret. The story made Waldron's nape tingle. This convoy business, then, was no grandiose stage-effect.

Darkness was gathering as they reached Gradyboro, two miles past the border posts of Grady's Ground, and huge neons were lighting the facades of the main buildings. Apparently this had been made into a kind of junior Las Vegas; every second sign advertised gambling. There were groups of people gathered on several street-corners waving banners and handing out tracts to passersby.

"Relidges," Rick said in answer to a question of Greta's. "Nuts who think there are angels in the alien city. We put up with them. They do the dirty work for us."

Then, some twenty miles further, was Gradyville, equally bright but scarred with piles of rubble here and there. Waldron found he was so tired he couldn't remember the original names of the towns Grady had named after him—

"That's the governor's place," Kick said, gesturing at a distant floodlit edifice with fountains playing before the portico. "Big—but wait till you see ours!"

The convoy, headlights ablaze now, rounded the shore of a darkling lake, and there it was; Radcliffe's mansion, a sprawl of glass and reinforced concrete, with pools and fountains and a horde of scurrying servants who closed in on the trucks as they slowed and brought a breathless message.

"Mr. Waldron and his friend are to be taken straight to the boss!"

And, barely having time to glance around, they were duly escorted into the house, down a corridor with one glass wall, through a door giving into a room dominated by a vast table at the left-hand end of which sat Radcliffe in an immaculate white suit, contemplating the remains of his dinner. But at the other end of the table—

"Yes, Mr. Waldron," said Radcliffe silkily. "Take note! I told you I would get what I paid for, didn't I? And I did, I did!"

He gestured the servants who had accompanied Waldron and Greta to leave the room. Waldron didn't notice their departure. His eyes were riveted on the face of the woman seated opposite Radcliffe. It was a vacant

face now, almost devoid of intelligence, but there was no mistaking the identity of Maura Knight.

XII

There followed a long silence, as empty of time as of sound—Waldron had no idea whether it lasted ten seconds or ten minutes. Eventually Radcliffe stirred.

“Thank you, Maura. You may leave us now. Have someone come with drinks for Mr. Waldron and his friend.”

Obediently as a trained dog, Maura rose from her chair. As she passed Waldron on the way to the door, her eyes scanned his face, and briefly a gleam of recognition shone in them; then she was out of the room, and he was reacting with a fit of almost physical nausea.

“Sit down,” Radcliffe invited, and waved at chairs on his right. “Ah—I didn’t have to introduce you to my lady friend, but I don’t believe I know yours.” He cocked a sardonic eyebrow.

Mechanically Waldron shaped words. “Greta—Greta Smith. We, uh, decided to travel together.”

“I see. United we stand!” Radcliffe commented, and Waldron realized abruptly that he was drunk. He carried it well, but the telltale signs were just perceptible in his voice and his flushed face. “Well, sit down, like I said.”

They obeyed. Radcliffe leaned on the table with both elbows. He fixed a concentrated stare on Waldron’s face.

“So! What brings you here, Waldron? You can forget the story about a job being offered to you—I’ll explain that some other time, but what it amounts to is that one of my over-zealous aides turned a momentary suggestion of mine into a presumptive fact.” He chuckled.

“I—” Waldron had to lick his lips; the shock of finding Maura Knight here had reminded him with painful vividness of the last time he’d seen her, and though he could only guess what Radcliffe had done to get what he had paid for he could be damned sure it wasn’t pleasant. “I got tired of making phony gestures in a smelly office, like you said I might. I wanted to see if what you told me was true, that out here was a place where things

actually happen.”

Radcliffe’s eyes moved briefly to Greta and didn’t linger on her. He said, “But you seemed to be upset at meeting Maura. Have you had second thoughts?”

Waldron said carefully, “I didn’t think she was likely to speak another polite word to you after what you did to her.”

He knew that Greta’s mind must be in turmoil, having no clue to the subject under discussion, but he dared not offer an explanation. The whole point of their coming to Grady’s Ground together was that attention should be focused on him, while she was free to carry on her work unobserved.

“I—changed her mind,” Radcliffe said, and laughed. It was a horrible sound, half drunken, half contemptuous. “Does that shock you, Waldron? If it does, then there’s no future in your staying here. Go back to your smelly office and keep on filling up forms and enforcing petty regulations and wondering what the hell the point of it is.”

A liveried manservant tapped at the door and brought bottles and glasses to set before the new arrivals. Radcliffe held out his own glass with an imperious gesture and the man filled it half full of straight whisky.

“So you came in with Rick’s convoy,” Radcliffe continued in a musing tone. “What do you think of Grady’s Ground? Is it what you expected?”

“I haven’t had time to find out,” Waldron parried.

“It isn’t, it isn’t.” Radcliffe gulped at his drink. “I’ll tell you what you were thinking you’d find. You expected a sort of Wild West show, a patch of primitive jungle, every-man-for-himself—and so on.” He snapped his fingers. “Hell no! We have the civilized appurtenances! We got flush toilets that *work*. We keep our roads mended. We pay taxes, for Christ’s sake.” He chuckled as if at a private joke, and the chuckle turned into a hiccup. “We have patrolmen—like a police force, except a lot of people who came here thought that was a dirty name. We run this like a modern country. Radio, TV, phones, everything... So that’s what it looks like. A modern country. And—and do you know what it is?”

He was leaning so far forward on the table now that his chest was almost touching the polished top, and his voice was thick with the intensity of his emotion. Greta put out her hand and fumbled for Waldron’s fingers under the table, alarmed by the other’s passion.

“Do you know what this place is? It’s a rat-hole! It’s not a country or a community or an empire or what the hell labels people stick on it. It’s a

nest of *god... damned... rats.*” He spaced the words with emphatic care.

“Know something, Waldron? Last time I saw you I was out of the hole. I was on human territory. I was kidding myself I was a man, rational, intelligent, master of his own planet. And when they radioed me you were coming here, I got to thinking. I been drinking with it. You noticed.” He drained the contents of his glass and threw it tinkling to the floor.

“That Maura kid... a rat! Hear me? That’s all any of us are—rats, and worth no more than rats. You think I shouldn’t have changed the girl’s mind to get what I paid for? You do, damn you! I can see it in your eyes!” Radcliffe slapped the table with his open palm and leaped to his feet so violently he overset his chair.

“God damn it, then, I’m going to have to prove it to you! I’m not going to have you sitting there and thinking you’re really a man!”

He stormed to the door and bellowed along the corridor for Rick Chandler to come running.

The two identical cars which were waiting at the door when Radcliffe harshly ordered them out of the house were familiar to Waldron only from pictures: the turbine-engined Cadillacs listed at a basic price of forty thousand dollars and supplied before the arrival of the aliens to heads of state and royalty-in-exile only. Rick Chandler, looking very tired and struggling to hide his ill temper, was at the wheel of the one into which they got with Radcliffe; the driver of the other car following them was accompanied by four armed bodyguards.

“Take ‘em up to look at the aliens!” Radcliffe barked, and fell slumped against the luxurious cushions.

Greta gave a whimpering murmur of terror. Waldron wondered how much of it was genuine, how much dictated by the role she was playing, and wished achingly he had a role which would permit him an outlet for the fear churning in his own guts. It was all very well to remind himself that Grady had established a workable form of society here under the aliens’ noses—noses?—but the dark night was infinitely menacing and Radcliffe, drunk and depressed, was dangerously capricious.

He decided the best course was to remain silent during the trip.

The highway they followed passed two shantytowns where there were no lights but kerosene lamps, dim in unglassed windows, and another small town almost as shabby, almost as depressing, almost as smelly—for

Radcliffe had ordered the windows rolled down.

“Rats!” Radcliffe said, as though the stink proved his point.

Ahead, reflected by the peaks of the highest hills, a roseate glow began to be discernible. Greta moved toward Waldron as though for reassurance and protection. “How much further?” he asked Rick softly.

“Get a clear sight from the next rise,” the driver answered. Radcliffe snapped at him.

“The hell with that! Keep going on this road till I tell you to stop!”

Rick gulped audibly, and then nothing more was said for long minutes. They saw it.

Monstrous beyond conceiving, as though the cities of London and Tokyo and New York and Los Angeles had been piled together and turned into a translucent, mist-veiled, luminous unity. The natural features had been ignored, as though they were irrelevant; somewhere underneath the shining mass were lakes and hills, roads and small towns, woods and fields—and they *were not*, decreed from existence, stamped flat like mere lumps in muddy dirt. Stabbing hundreds of feet into the night, shafts of iridescence rose: a myriad Jewels thinned to the substance of a higher cosmic plane. Lights sharp as stars flashed and faded, and the colors noted—tonight, they were mostly rose-pink, but ever and again blues, greens, pure flame-yellow and white of a clarity to frighten the onlooker crossed the background and dissolved.

Opal and chalcedony, jade and chrysolite, Jacynth and amber, ruby and emerald, everything which mankind had ever meant by the word “gem” was involved in this majestic, awful creation. Waldron’s mouth was dry. He wanted to shrink away from his own eyes, cut the nerves conveying the knowledge of such a reality to his brain—not only the sheer integrated size of the alien city, but the implication that its builders must be not simply more powerful, not simply more intelligent than man, but utterly and inconceivably *different*, made him cringe with himself. *I dared to think we could act against them? I was a stupid ignorant fool!*

“We live off their garbage,” Radcliffe said in a thin voice. “Did you know? Like dung-beetles. Like flies and maggots... Rick, stop the car.”

The driver, his face beaded with sweat, obeyed. The lights of the second car bloomed briefly in the mirror and went out.

“How—how is it obtained?” Waldron forced out “I mean the garbage.”

“It’s found all over the country for about fifty miles in any direction,” Radcliffe grunted. “As though they throw it away at random when they

have no further use for it.”

“What’s that noise?” Greta whispered. “Like singing!” Waldron hadn’t noticed it, being so preoccupied with the sight of the alien city, until now; it was slow and solemn and rather sweet.

“Show ‘em, Rick,” Radcliffe grunted. Rick switched on and swiveled around a powerful spotlamp on the side of the car’s windshield. Its beam sworded across a small shivering group of ragged men and women, about half a mile distant on a flat hilltop, staring with adoration toward the alien city.

“Relidges,” Rick said. “You saw some of them back in Gradyboro earlier. They come out here some nights and sing hymns through to dawn. Bring their kids and all. In the rain, too. Even in the snow I’ve seen em.”

For the first time Waldron felt he couldn’t blame the thousands of religious fanatics who had jumped to the conclusion the aliens were heavenly creatures. Certainly the builders of this awe-inspiring edifice were closer to the angels than was man...

“Rick, douse that light!” Radcliffe had come alert, and was peering down the dark hillside below them. A short expanse of ground there was shadowed from the otherwise all-pervading luminance of the city, and something like a firefly was moving across it, flickering irregularly a few feet from the ground.

“Somebody carrying a flashlight?” hazarded Rick.

“Flashlight *hell*.” All the drunkenness and the maudlin depression had gone from Radcliffe’s tone. “Look, it’s changing color all the time. Call the other car, and tell ‘em to come down with me and see what’s happening.” He reached for the door-handle.

Rick uttered brief commands to a radio-phone installed under the dash, and glancing back. Waldron saw men leaping from the second car and spreading out down the hill toward the tiny darting polychrome glow.

“What is it?” Greta ventured.

“Could just be that someone’s found a live relic,” Rick grunted. He fumbled out a cigarette and lit it without taking his eyes from the men fanning out below them. The spark of light had stopped moving, as though the bearer was panic-stricken.

“A live relic?” Waldron echoed, for need to break silence.

“Yeah. Turned on, or whatever. I saw one once, but they’re pretty rare. The boss got fifty thousand for a big one once. He won’t let this go in a

hurry.”

XIII

Ichabod’s first horrified thought when the moving shapes came down the dark hill toward him was that his impiety in coveting the pretty relics of the angels had gone too far, and avengers were coming from the city to punish him for his sin. Then a flashlight beam sprang up, and he realized those approaching were merely men. But the relief was marginal: men also would take his prize away from him.

Silent tears coursing down his cheeks, he stood with his treasure englobed in his hands, its brilliant multicolored glow leaking out between his fingers. If he had thought of stuffing it inside his shirt... But it was too late now; he had been spotted.

He cast a frantic glance toward the other hill, some distance off, where his parents sang their night-long hymns under the fervent guidance of Brother Mark, and wished he could turn back time and once more find himself on the fringe of the grouped singers, cancel his decision to sneak away and get himself another gleaming heavenly jewel to replace the one his parents had taken from him and sold.

“He’s only a kid,” one of the silhouetted men said to another.

“And crippled, too,” said the second man. “Where’s the boss? Didn’t I see him come from the front car?”

“I’m here!” an authoritative voice called from slightly higher up the hill, and the speaker came scrambling and grunting to Ichabod’s level. “Get it off him, Gabe.”

Reflexively Ichabod tucked his hands, and the thing he held, between his legs. It was no help; the man addressed as Gabe strode up to him and pried his grip loose from the lovely coruscating ball.

There were low whistles, and in the ball’s light Ichabod saw their faces reflecting awe. “That’s a beaut!” one of the men said in an impressed tone. “Never saw one that shape before.”

“Give it to me,” Radcliffe said, and it was placed on his palm. It was

slightly warm and slippery from Ichabod's perspiring grasp; apart from that, it was quite ordinary to the touch, being about as smooth as good glass. Its appearance, though, was altogether otherwise. Within its translucent depths moved colors as rich and varied as those of the city itself. Radcliffe's earlier dark mood had faded before the blast of cupidity when he'd seen Ichabod in the distance; now he felt it return, but gently muted, as he studied the marvelous shifting display inside the globular relic.

"I wonder why they chucked this out!" he said, mostly to himself. He glanced at Ichabod, weeping soundlessly and gazing without hope at his treasure in another's hand.

"Where did you find it, son?" Radcliffe swung around. On the other hilltop, the group of singers had stopped their chanting, and some of them had detached themselves from the main group and were heading this way. The leader was tall, and it could be seen even at this distance that he had a full black beard.

"Got any cash on you, Gabe?" Radcliffe inquired. "For a thing like this, they'll stand out for a thousand, likely."

"I have a thousand with me, boss," Gabe grunted. "But if I'm not mistaken that's Brother Mark at the head of them, and he won't listen to talk of money—you could offer a million and he'd call you a dirty sinner."

"So that's the famous Brother Mark, is it?" Radcliffe's interest heightened.

They waited. The relidges came on at a steady pace, and barely even slowed when they were close enough to see that each of Radcliffe's men held a gun. Ichabod let out a wordless yell when they were ten paces off, and hobbled at maximum speed to throw his arms around the man third from the front.

"What the *hell*—I mean, what are you doing here?" the man gasped. "Brother Mark! It's my boy Ichabod!"

Brother Mark took no notice. He went straight up to Radcliffe and put out his hand.

"It's holy. Give it to me," he said.

Radcliffe studied him. He was an impressive figure, towering over all the others present, his black beard flowing down on the chest of a full-length black robe embroidered with a golden cross in front and symbolic angel's wings behind. But Radcliffe was seldom daunted by appearances.

He glanced toward the man who had claimed to be the father of the limping boy. “I was just about to offer the kid a thousand dollars for it,” he said.

At that, even Ichabod turned his head and forgot to cry for several seconds; his father, one hand on his son’s shoulder in a melodramatically protective pose, gave an audible gasp.

Brother Mark took half a pace back, horrified. “You’d buy and sell a relic of the angels?” he thundered. “Who are you, apart from what’s obvious—an ignorant blasphemer?”

“I’m Den Radcliffe,” the trader said. “You may have seen the place I have back toward Gradyville—the one about four times as big as your hovel of a church.”

At having his sect’s headquarters referred to as a hovel, Brother Mark was nettled; he tried not to show it, but it was plain from the sanctimonious tone of his answer.

“What need have we of splendid churches now that the very hosts of heaven have built temples for us?”

“I haven’t seen you very anxious to enter these— ah—temples,” Radcliffe gibed.

“We shall enter in due time, when we are cleansed of our earthly pollution,” Brother Mark snapped. “You, of course, will reach a somewhat different destination.”

A noise behind him made him half-turn as though suspecting mockery from Radcliffe’s men, but it was only Ichabod, who apparently had intended to say something. The boy changed his mind when Brother Mark’s bearded glare fastened on him.

“All right,” Brother Mark grunted. “Hand that thing over, like I said. Its proper home is in a church. You defile it even by looking at it, let alone touching it.”

Radcliffe tossed the ball into the air, mockingly, and caught it again. “No, I’m not going to part with it now that I’ve got it. I’ll pay, but I won’t let it go.”

“But it’s mine!” wailed Ichabod, and left his father’s side. “It’s not *fair!* It’s mine, I found it, and I don’t see why this one’s got to be taken away too! They didn’t even give me any of the money they got for the other one!”

His father came after him and clamped a hand across his mouth—but too late. Brother Mark had heard.

“Greg Sims! What’s this? Has your boy found a relic before?”

Sims moved his feet in the dirt like an embarrassed child. He said, looking at his feet, “Well—uh—”

“Yes or no?” Brother Mark thundered.

“Well—yes. But it wasn’t the way I wanted it. It was Martha.” The flood of self-apology came with a rush now. “I said to give it to the church but Martha said tithe it and get food and clothes— A hundred twenty dollars we got.”

“From this same unclean sinner here?”

“No. From a man called Corey Bennett. He invoked your name and said he follows you and—”

“No disciple of mine will sell a holy thing for *money!*” blazed Brother Mark, and flung out his arm like an angel ordering Adam and Eve from Eden. “Go!”

There were shocked murmurs from the other reldiges; they drew aside as if from lepers. Sims, reaching for his son’s hand, tried to argue; Brother Mark would have none of it.

Radcliffe had been feeling a frown of puzzlement crease his forehead for some moments. Now he caught Gabe’s eye and nodded. Gabe took his meaning and slipped a short distance away in the darkness with the Simses, and there stood waiting for Radcliffe to finish his business with Brother Mark.

“Do you hand it over, or do I take it, or do I call on the angels to visit you with the plagues of Egypt until you cede it to a worthy holder?” the reldige boomed.

“Call the angels all you like,” Radcliffe shrugged. “I’ll do business with the Sims family—after they’ve been thrown out of your church, they won’t be choosy who befriends them, and I’m rich.”

“Then I curse you!” Brother Mark screamed, and flung his arms high, fingers curled over like claws. “I—”

Radcliffe, his expression bored, had tossed the gleaming ball high in the air again—higher, in fact, than he had intended. Much higher.

The shock was fearful. He looked at where the ball ought to be. It wasn’t. And it had not come down. Only a stain of radiance in the air itself even suggested that it had been present at all.

“I—” whispered Brother Mark, and had to swallow, staring at the spot in the air where the alien ball had disappeared. “I curse...”

“Oh my God!” cried one of Radcliffe’s men, and turned and ran.

Radcliffe stood frozen for long moments. He was brought back to awareness of the reldiges’ departure by a pummeling at his arm. It was Ichabod, hysterical with anger. Radcliffe tried to thrust him aside.

“Give it back to me!” the boy wailed. “It was mine, it was mine and I want it back!”

“Ichabod, you dirty little sinner!” his father shouted, stumbling after him through the darkness.

“No, leave him be, Mr.—Mr. Sims, isn’t it?” Radcliffe recovered his self-possession with an effort. “Is it true that your boy has found one of these relics before?”

“Yes—uh—yes, that’s the second.” Sims answered without much attention to the words; he was following with dismayed and regretful eyes the return of Brother Mark to his dutifully singing flock.

“A hundred and twenty dollars and you didn’t give me any of it!” moaned Ichabod. “And anyway, I wanted the *relic*, not the money!”

“Was the other one the same as tonight’s?” Radcliffe asked.

“More shaped like a thin egg. But it was all glowing inside, same as this one.”

Radcliffe nodded thoughtfully. Live artifacts were pretty rare, and it was a considerable coincidence for the same boy to have discovered two of them—enough of a coincidence, he judged, for the matter not to be left there.

Also, Corey Bennett had got the other one for a mere hundred twenty bucks, when the market price would be at least ten thousand and possibly twenty. That wounded Radcliffe in his professional pride. Bennett was new on the Ground—they hadn’t even met each other yet.

“I want you to come and see me in the morning, Mr. Sims,” Radcliffe said. “Bring your boy with you. Gabe! Give Mr. Sims a hundred, will you? It’s, ah, compensation.”

He cut short Sims’ garbled thanks and strode up the hill toward his car, repressing an irrational desire to glance over his shoulder at every other step and see whether vengeful aliens were coming after him to reclaim their property from the possession of an inferior species.

Waldron and Greta had had only the most inadequate view of what had passed between Radcliffe and the relidges. While the gleaming ball had been there to shed its radiance the scene had been fairly distinct, but then it had disappeared, and after that only dim shadows had remained. With Rick in the car, moreover, they dared not talk freely for fear of betraying the true nature of their relationship.

“Clever!” Rick had said admiringly, when the luminous ball had vanished right in front of Brother Mark. “The boss is always pulling new tricks!”

But it couldn't have been a very successful trick, Waldron decided. For when Radcliffe climbed back to the car and got in, his face was dour and he refused to utter another word until they had returned to the house. Then he merely said, “You'll be shown to a guest-room. Good night.”

And that, for the time being, was that.

XIV

Potter looked down the long table and reflected on the ridiculous nature of the meeting. To satisfy those who were still concerned with legalistic niceties, he had had to constitute this group into a subcommittee of the Congressional Committee on Emergency Countermeasures. *Was there ever anything so absurd?*

He ticked off the paradoxes in his mind while waiting the last half-minute before starting time. Meeting on foreign soil; including a Soviet Minister and a woman space-pilot, a trio of Canadian observers, a Russian doctor, an American psychologist and a professor of physics born in Sweden...

The clock's minute hand closed the last twenty-second gap and it was ten a.m. He said, “Where's Jespersen?”

The saturnine Clarkson, next to the professor's vacant chair, raised his hand. “He asked me to sit in for him. He heard some rumor about a live relic turning up for sale in Calgary, and he's flying down there to check on the story.”

“Excuse me.” Natasha leaned forward; at these meetings she carried on

a running translation service for Abramovitch, and frequently had to have technical terms explained. “A –what?”

“A live relic. An alien artifact which is still apparently functioning—discharging radiant energy or showing some other signs of activity.”

“Thank you.” Natasha started to turn to the stout Abramovitch next to her, then paused. “Oh, by the way: Dr. Zworykin asked me to say he will be a little late. There have been some hopeful signs during the night.”

The entire audience tensed and then seemed to mete out for themselves a careful ration of optimism. Potter said, “About time! Okay—Mike, you said you wanted a word before we get down to regular business. Go ahead, but keep it short.”

Congreve looked down at his hands, knotted together on the table before him. He said, “Well, it’s not going to be easy to make it long, because there’s damned little to it except for a sneaking suspicion. As you know. Academician Abramovitch enjoys the cooperation of a small section of the rump administration in Russia...”

Potter caught a fleeting scowl on the fat man’s face as Natasha paralleled Congreve’s exposition with her translation. Congreve, not noticing, continued. “There has been a noticeable slackening of Buishenko’s expansionism; the government has held two towns against him which they had formerly scheduled for—uh—tactical surrender this week. Last night’s messages were even hinting at countermoves to regain lost territory. All this suggests that the identification of Pitirim as Buishenko’s secret weapon was accurate, and without the boy he’s been put at a disadvantage.

“However, as you know also, since Buishenko set up his headquarters in what was to have been a sort of emergency Kremlin for use in atomic war, it’s been possible for the government to monitor even his scrambled transmissions—he’s using known codes and scrambler patterns—and some of the messages intercepted in the past few days have been rather worrying.”

The spy looked both ways along the table and lifted a finger to count *one*. “First off: there was to have been a sort of blitz crosscountry attack with air support on the government’s emergency site in the Samarkand region. It’s been called off. My assessment is that Buishenko started by assuming Pitirim had been kidnapped by the government and taken to this obvious location, but has now received information to show him the assumption’s false.”

Potter's imagination filled briefly with a picture of the situation in Russia as it had been described to him by Natasha and by Congreve; the whole monstrous, sprawling nation torn to shreds by Buishenko's Tartar-like hordes, communications broken, government reduced to impotence by the sheer distances involved... By comparison it made him feel that North America was the size of a suburban lawn.

"Two," Congreve said, adding another finger. "The air pursuit which followed the *Whale* to its rendezvous with Harlequin was Buishenko's, not the reactionary government party's."

"What?" Natasha exclaimed. "Mike, you did not tell us this before! How do you know?"

"I've been doing some double-checking," Congreve said. "At first I assumed as you did that the excellent secrecy you maintained around the plan to get Pitirim out of the country had caused one of the local Air Force commanders to treat it as—well, simple piracy, I suppose you'd say."

Potter sighed inaudibly. Everywhere the same; *let not thy right hand know...* At least half the surviving Russian high officials would have stopped at nothing to oppose Abramovitch's plan to take Pitirim out of the country, seeing it as an act of treachery. The situation being reversed, so that Grady became a ravening conqueror instead of a mere parasite and local tyrant, the same thing would have occurred here.

"What makes you think it was Buishenko's men in pursuit?" he demanded of Congreve.

"Because they took time out on the way to shoot down the government pursuit planes. If they hadn't, the *Whale* wouldn't have stood a chance of making rendezvous with us."

Surprised looks came to several faces. Clarkson took out a slipstick and began to run a rough calculation; in a few seconds he was nodding. "Damned right," he said. "There must have been a delay of at least twenty minutes—I don't have the precise figures for the point of interception, but it's ridiculously far to the east unless one assumes the pursuit came from within the territory Buishenko controls."

"My point precisely," Congreve agreed. "And three!" Another finger raised. "I believe that—"

The door slammed open, and Zworykin came in, his face a battleground for incredible fatigue and overwhelming Jubilation, Directly behind him came the American psychologist who had been collaborating with him on the task of breaking down the barriers around Pitirim's mind: Louis

Porpentine.

Natasha hurled an excited question in Russian at Zworykin, who snapped, “*Da!*” That much needed no translation, but the rest of the exchange was incomprehensible. Potter cocked an eyebrow at Congreve.

Before the spy could elucidate, however, Porpentine had dropped exhaustedly into Jespersen’s vacant chair and spoken without caring whether anyone was listening or not.

“Well, we got him talking, at any rate!”

“Are we right?” Potter demanded with urgency.

“I guess so.” Porpentine yawned cavernously. “Excuse me –I didn’t sleep at all last night; none of us did. You’ll have to get the exact details from Alexei, because I don’t speak word one of this language of theirs, but what it comes down to is this—assuming we can trust what the kid says.”

Silence fell over the room, as everyone waited for his next words.

“Young Pitirim has been into the alien city over there and come out again alive. What’s more, he likes doing it, and the reason he consciously advances for refusing to cooperate with us is that we took him away from the place where he was allowed to go whenever he liked.”

There was a stunned pause, then Potter said, “But—but how the—?”

“God knows.” Porpentine sat up, shaking his head violently. Untrimmed hair fell into his eyes and he brushed it back with an irritable gesture. “As you know, Mr. Potter. I’ve been involved for the past year or more with studies of the interaction between us and the aliens. The nearest I’ve ever got to such a story as this is sheer rumor. It’s a standing yarn among the people of Grady’s Ground that a few people have managed to get into the alien city and return alive. When you try to pin down names and dates, you wind up inevitably with a reference to some weirdo or other—hopelessly schizoid—or else, if it’s a religious maniac you get the story from, with a reference to some half-mythical saint who’s now more than likely ascended to heaven in a fiery chariot.”

“Is that your experience in Russia too?” Potter demanded of Natasha.

“We have heard such stories,” the girl confirmed. “At the beginning, we took them seriously enough to call for volunteers who would attempt to enter and sabotage the alien city. I think—” She lapsed briefly into her own language to ask a question of Abramovitch, and resumed. “Yes! As I thought: none of these attempts was successful. Either the volunteer vanished, or else he was later discovered completely insane and wandering about in dirt and rags.”

Zworykin spoke up with violent emphasis. Potter waited till he finished; then he invited translation from either Natasha or Congreve. Natasha got there first.

“Alexei says there is only one way to make sure of the truth of what Pitirim says. We must take him to the alien city here.”

Porpentine gave a grunt which was probably meant for a cynical laugh, but he was too tired to put his view into words. Potter stared down at the table.

“We could do that if we had to, of course. Although we have a minor-league Buishenko of our own—this man Grady—there’s nothing comparable to the open civil war going on in Russia. In fact, just yesterday Greta Delarue entered Grady’s Ground to check up on a story that came from one of the regular agents we maintain there for information and supplies of artifacts.”

Abramovitch said something, scowling, and Natasha translated it for the others:

“Mr. Abramovitch says it was clever of you to handle your Grady so gently. Our government battered at the edges of the area around the aliens until there were a hundred thousand crazy soldiers milling like ants. They made the core—the nucleus of Buishenko’s forces. Then we had civil war, as you say.” She paused, and added in a lower tone a comment of her own. “You know, I think even if Buishenko had not had Pitirim people would have followed him anyway. I think the soldiers saw the aliens’ work and were so ashamed of our little achievements compared to *that* that they decided it was pointless doing anything except grab what they could and enjoy life.”

It was one possible view, Potter told himself. It left one hell of a lot of questions unresolved—but never mind, all this was a monstrous red herring. He rapped on the table to cut short a buzz of random conversation.

“Dr. Porpentine! How certain are you that this story of Pitirim’s is true?”

“It’s what he says. I guess we’ll have a chance to probe a bit deeper—unless he quits cooperating again—because it’s out of the question to move him for another couple of weeks. He’s a sick kid, you know! He’s diabetic to begin with, and it looks as if Buishenko’s medical facilities are nonexistent, because the condition’s been neglected for heaven knows how long. Also, he’s got rickets, and scrofula, and—and so on!” He waved a hand to indicate a list of diseases too long for

enumeration.

“But you’re going to *have* to move him,” Congreve said.

“What?” Potter and half a dozen others spoke in chorus.

Congreve leaned forward. “We’re told that Dr. Jespersen is in Calgary checking on a live artifact. I doubt it very much.” Clarkson looked up sharply and started to speak, but changed his mind. “Dr. Jespersen, you see, was not born in Sweden. Things are still functioning fairly normally there, and I had some checks run for me. I’m now ninety percent certain he’s one of our Russian friends’ most remarkable achievements. He’s a hypnospy.”

Blank expressions greeted the statement. Congreve went on, “I doubt if Mr. Potter needs that term explained, but for other people I’ll say that that’s an agent for whom a total artificial personality has been constructed by hypnotic means. Don’t look so upset, Dr. Porpentine. The possibility was established in the late fifties, but subjects susceptible enough for the complete process are so rare we know of only about forty such cases altogether. They hoped I might make one, but I didn’t prove suitable.

“The way the world is, this might seem unimportant, except for one thing. One of the secrets the Russian government, ah, failed to hide from me when I was working there was this.” He looked modestly down. “The report—in point for Soviet hypnospies is that same emergency government base under the Urals where Buishenko has set up in business, and, assuming Dr. Jespersen has not actually gone to Calgary, that’s where he’s heading now—carrying the news of Abramoviteh’s presence here, which naturally his hypnotic self views as a factor of extreme danger to his country. After all, his indoctrination took no account of alien invasion. He must have been here a very long time.”

XV

Waldron awoke to discover with some surprise that he was lying with his arms tight around Greta and hers around him. They were supposed to be lovers, so the fact that the guest-room to which Radcliffe had had their baggage sent was furnished with a double bed had had to be accepted, but it had been Waldron’s impression that the pose was to remain a pose—yet here they were, as cosily entangled as newlyweds.

Then he remembered why. For fear the room might be bugged—a successful free trader in the near-anarchy of Grady’s Ground might well take such precautions—they had moved close to whisper their comments on the awe-inspiring spectacle of the alien city. So far, quite clear. But when tiredness from the day’s long journey had overtaken them, they had separated surely...

And clung to one another, again as the dream began. That was it, Waldron felt a sudden prickle of sweat spring out on his forehead.

In the face of the images that had crowded his sleeping mind—entities as bright and pure as sunbeams, cold as crystal, implacable as fate itself—he had sought comfort, child-fashion, in the warm presence of another body.

A wave of thankfulness that he had not had to be alone surged through him, and to his own surprise he kissed her cheek. Asleep, without the daytime makeup designed to make her look like an aging tramp, she was very attractive.

Her eyes opened slowly. There was a momentary flicker of alarm. But she did not push away from his embrace. She said only, “You were—you were dreaming, weren’t you?”

“Yes. You too?”

“About the aliens.” She gave a nod, keeping her eyes wide open, as though afraid of slipping into sleep again. “Jim, are we crazy? I mean, to even think of doing something to oppose such creatures?”

“I don’t know,” Waldron said, and rolled toward the side of the bed. “What I do know is that if we give up the idea Radcliffe will be proved right. We’ll just be rats and not men.”

“Why was he so bitter about it last night? It had something to do with the girl sitting at dinner with him, didn’t it? I meant to ask, but I was so tired last night.”

Waldron, face dark, told the story of Maura Knight. Greta shivered.

“Oh my God... But at least he’s not so callous he can’t be ashamed of what he did to her.”

“What did he do?” Waldron demanded, picking out his clothes for the day from the bags piled at the foot of the bed.

“I’m not sure. I think it may have been dociline, though where he’d have got it from I don’t know. It’s one of the unpublicized group of drugs that a chemist at Pfizer came up with eight or ten years back. The East Bloc were

also said to have it. Ten c.c.'s is equivalent to several months' intensive brainwashing." She shuddered. "I saw someone who'd been treated with it. He looked the way this girl does—*drained*."

It occurred to Waldron with shocking violence that last night they had worried about the possibility of eavesdroppers. He slapped his hand up to his mouth in a gesture for silence, and dismay spread swiftly over Greta's pale face.

If there were spy-microphones, those responsible for monitoring them hadn't yet got their news to Radcliffe. Though it was late, already past ten a.m., he was sitting in the same room where they had seen him last night, a half-eaten dish of pancakes before him, a servant silently keeping his coffee-cup filled, a cigarette spiraling smoke up from the top of a table-model radio. A trailing wire led from the back of the set to the skeletal steel frame of an antenna visible beyond the wall-high windows. But the radio wasn't playing.

He greeted the visitors with a curt nod, but said nothing until they were seated and provided with coffee and food. Then he took a last drag on his cigarette, stubbed it out, and addressed Waldron.

"Well, *rat*?"

"Yes," Waldron said, and didn't have to feign the intensity he put into the words. "It made me feel that small."

"Good." Radcliffe took another cigarette and the servant standing by was quick to light it. "It might be a damned good idea if someone took Governor Grady out some night and rubbed his nose in the same sight. I hear tell it's over a year since he last set eyes on the alien city. Too long. I go out and remind myself every month or so." He gave a bitter laugh. "You know, I read once that when they gave a general a triumphal parade in ancient Rome, they had this slave standing behind him to whisper in his ear all the time, 'Remember that you're only a man!' And nowadays we have this chance to remind ourselves what a goddamn mess men have made of their world." He emptied his coffee-cup with a nervous gulping and waved away the servant's offer

"But it's better to make like a rat than a mouse, isn't it? Rats have sharp teeth. Rats carry plague. They aren't creatures you can quietly ignore because they're too insignificant to make an impact on the larger world. How do you feel about it?"

Waldron nodded cautiously. "Yes..."

Radcliffe grunted, then went on, “You know, when I first saw that map on the wall of your office, I thought, by God, here’s a rat-type in this swarm of worthless mice. Then I thought again, and decided that if you were content to waste your life in that kind of job now that there were aliens on Earth, you must be a mouse at heart. And I don’t give a blast of air for the mice. Hell, what happens if the relidges win out down here? We spend the rest of human existence singing jolly hymns to a nonexistent god and praising aliens who are no more angels than I am— which is saying something.” He gave a sardonic chuckle.

“Grady’s a mouse-type. He runs the Ground pretty damned well, but he hasn’t been out for a year to see the characters he ought to thank for putting him where he is. When you want more coffee say so, huh?”

Waldron nodded. The food and coffee were both excellent.

“And what happens if the old guard pull things together? I mean, for instance, what if the government sorts things out and manages to get back effective control of the Ground here? We wouldn’t be any better off. We’d be tailing behind people who think that human values are all-important. Jesus, if we go back to that we’re done for! What we need is—”

Another servant entered on soft feet and stood impassive at Radcliffe’s side, waiting for him to finish speaking.

“What we need is guts. That’s all. The guts to stand and look at that damned great shining monstrosity out there and say, ‘Damn you! Whatever the hell you are, damn you! We’re going to kick you back to wherever you came from, and when you go you’ll never want to come back!’ Agreed?”

“Yes, but—” Waldron began.

“But what?” Radcliffe pounced.

“I was just going to say there’ll have to be some changes in human nature before we can do what you want. There’s something so utterly inhuman about the alien city—as though they’re not only ahead of us, but started from somewhere different anyway.”

“Men haven’t got wings,” Radcliffe grunted. “Show me a bird that can go supersonic! Yes, what is it?” he asked abruptly, turning to the patiently waiting servant.

“Mr. Sims and his boy to see you, sir,” the man murmured.

“I was wondering when the hell they’d get here. Put them in the morning-room and I’ll be with them in a moment.” He pushed back his chair and rose. “A final word to you, Waldron. We have rats and mice

both, here on the Ground. You spend today however the hell you want—go see the mice at play, take in one of these nutty relige meetings, dig the gamblers and the whores and the rest of them. Then come back and tell me plainly and simply whether or not you're a rat like me. If you are, maybe I'll even consider hiring you, the way Rick thought I was going to." He went out.

On Radcliffe's entry, Sims jumped to his feet from the chair on whose edge he had been perching. Ichabod, carefully drilled, copied his father's example.

"Mr. Radcliffe, sir! I'd have been here earlier, but we had trouble last night—there was this argument with Brother Mark and others, and then they sent a cursing party and sang outside the house to stop us sleeping and there was this fight with someone from over the way who couldn't sleep either, and—"

"Shut up," Radcliffe said, and dropped into a highbacked armchair. "What's your boy's name?"

"Ichabod," Sims said. Apologetically he added, "Was my wife's choice, not mine, Says it means 'the glory is departed'. I never could see that, because according to Brother Mark the glory had come to us, not left us—"

"Sims, if you always talk like this I'm surprised your wife still keeps company with you. Will you *shut up*?"

Appalled, Sims subsided back to his chair. Ichabod, however, remained standing, his eyes fixed on Radcliffe's face and eloquent of his enduring resentment.

"Good morning, Ichabod," Radcliffe said levelly.

The boy turned down the corners of his mouth. "I don't like you," he said stubbornly. "I would'na come if Dad hadn't beat me first. You took my ball. I got it. I found it!"

"Ichabod, you mustn't talk to Mr. Radcliffe like that!" Sims exclaimed.

"I'll have you out of the room if you open your mouth once more without my asking you!" Radcliffe barked. He leaned toward Ichabod and put on a coaxing tone. "Now listen, son—What did your dad here say when you had the shiny thing before, the first one?"

Ichabod scowled. "He said it wasn't right I should have it 'cause I'm not supposed to want anything for myself. He went on saying it even after he'd taken it away and sold it to the man."

Sims squirmed, but the force of Radcliffe's threat a few moments earlier kept his mouth shut.

Something is going to have to be done about Corey Bennett, Radcliffe thought. But he kept that to himself. Aloud, he said, "So where did you get the first one, son?"

"It come from the holy city," Ichabod said.

"Well, of course it did," Radcliffe agreed. "But where did you find it?"

Ichabod rubbed his hand on his leg and didn't answer, his eyes roving, embarrassedly, all around the room.

A little more gentle probing satisfied Radcliffe that he wasn't going to get much more information about the first of the two live relics to reach this boy's hands; like a good many of the unschooled kids from the shantytowns hereabouts, his sense of past time was ill-developed, and only such highlights as his annoyance with his parents remained from the episode. Radcliffe switched his line of inquiry.

"Now, about the pretty ball you found last night, son—how did you come by that?"

Ichabod was more forthcoming about this. Radcliffe soon began to suspect that his sense of pride had been injured somehow, and praised him freely for anything that occurred to him. After that it took only a short time to get reasonably full details of the start of last night's events; Ichabod was forthright about his opinion of the hymn-singing, which he hated. So he had sneaked away, he admitted—his parents, *of course*—not noticing he was gone.

"And then I went and got it," he finished. Radcliffe started. It wasn't possible that—or *was* it? Last night, during the argument with Brother Mark, there'd been this declaration that the disciples could only enter the heavenly city when they were (how did it go?) cleansed of earthly pollution—and there'd been this stifled noise which had been Ichabod changing his mind about speaking... Radcliffe drew a deep breath. "Now, let's get this quite straight, son. You mean you went straight to the—the holy city and you went right in and you picked it up?"

"Well—I guess they must have an awful lot of this stuff and if they threw some of it away they wouldn't mind if I..." Ichabod's voice trailed away as he stood torn between pride in his own daring and the anticipated wrath of his father.

Which came. No amount of threatening could have silenced Sims in face of such a blasphemous claim. The man was on his feet instantly.

“Why, you lying little sinner!” he roared, drawing back his hand for a fierce blow to the boy’s head. “I’ll teach you to mock at holy things!”

Radcliffe jumped from his chair and caught the upraised arm a fraction of a second ahead of the contact with Ichabod’s face. Even as he listened with mechanical non-attention to Sims’ flood of abuse against his son, his mind was weighing and calculating. It would have to be proved, of course, but if the boy had really done it—if he could do it even once more for Den Radcliffe rather than for himself—he would be the means of toppling Grady for good!

XVI

“Where shall we start?” Waldron murmured to Greta, thinking what a stroke of luck it had been to be able to get away from Radcliffe for a full day so soon after their arrival.

Her answer was prompt: “We go see Bennett.”

He checked in mid-stride; they were walking down the same long corridor with one glass wall which had been the first part of the house they’d seen last night. “Isn’t that risky? Drawing Radcliffe’s attention to him right away?”

“We know for certain some connection was made between Radcliffe and Bennett. Damnation, didn’t he turn up in the *City of Angels* and head straight for Radcliffe? Yet according to Bennett’s own recent reports, at this moment of time he’s never met Radcliffe.”

It came home with shocking violence to Waldron how paradoxical the situation really was. He scarcely heard the rest of Greta’s argument for the thundering of his own blood in his ears.

“On the other hand, we don’t know from what moment in future time Bennett gets—gets displaced. For all we know he may already be involved in the course of action which leads to his death. We can’t miss the chance of contacting him at once just because we’re afraid Radcliffe will suspect I’m not what he’s been told.”

That was unanswerable. Waldron shrugged and came to a halt at the end of the corridor. “Where do you imagine they put the car? And do they have decent gasoline distribution here on the Ground?”

“Of course they do. Grady writes contracts like a South American dictator with most of the big corporations.” Greta pushed open a swinging door and led the way out to the yard at the rear of the house where the convoy had pulled up.

It took them nearly an hour’s search to locate the address Greta had for Bennett. It was the only one of a group of four five-story apartment blocks which had survived the passage of the mad armies; the sight of it, fresh with paint and sparkling glass in all its windows, was incongruous by contrast with the other three so similar and so close, but with their windows smashed and smoke-stains licking up the walls.

“You’re sure that’s it?” Waldron said in low tones.

“Certain. Look, someone’s coming to meet us—you do the talking.”

Waldron braked. From the main entrance of the building a tall colored man in white coveralls with an embroidered name on the chest had emerged. He wore a Sam Browne belt with a holstered .45. As he came closer, Waldron saw that the embroidered name was COREY BENNETT. “Is—uh—Mr. Bennett at home?” Waldron demanded, feeling a sense of gathering doom.

“Could be,” the colored man agreed warily.

“Would you give him this and ask if he can see us?” Waldron handed over an envelope containing a scribbled note from Greta; it consisted of three Scientific Service cypher groups.

The man took the note and went indoors. Waiting, Waldron glanced up the face of the building and saw that at three of the high windows men were peering down, watching.

“Leery of strangers here on the Ground,” he muttered.

“It puts me on edge,” Greta whispered back. “As if murder was going to be done any moment.”

But there was no murder. Only the colored man came back and nodded for them to get out of the car.

They found Bennett in the glass-roofed penthouse: a man of middle height, with sandy hair receding and watery blue eyes. The horrible comment crossed Waldron’s mind: *So that’s what color they were before they became like Morello’s cherries!*

They had come to speak to a dead man, and they dared not warn him of

the death sentence. He was glad that Greta, not he, had to do the talking.

The moment the door closed behind the colored man, Bennett spoke fiercely. “You’re Greta Delarue, are you? Heard of you! But what the *hell* are you doing here? I’m in enough trouble as it is.”

Not waiting for a reply, he waved them irritably to chairs and sat down himself. “Impatient, aren’t you?” he went on. “I was supposed to have a year to consolidate myself before anyone came to join me, and all of a sudden—”

“I’m sorry,” Greta said in a tight voice. “There are reasons, though. I’m here on the direct orders of Orlando Potter—”

“*That* slick-tongued time-server!” Bennett said. Waldron saw Greta flinch and wondered what nerve the insult had hit. “Committee on Emergency Countermeasures and all that garbage! Listen, I’ve only been on the Ground a few months, but I’ve been here long enough to recognize one thing—all those so-called ‘countermeasures’ are make-believe. What they’re trying to do is patch together the world as it was, so we can forget about the aliens except when they choose to interfere with our affairs. Oh, it’s easily enough done!” He made a scornful gesture. “There they sit and ignore us except when we try and attack them, and—hell, even then, do they actually pay any attention to us or do they simply set up gadgets like flypapers to get rid of some of us?”

Bennett must have been boiling this up for a long time, Waldron realized. He exchanged glances with Greta, who moved one eyebrow to signal they should let him talk himself out before trying to argue.

He leaned back in his chair and glanced around the room while Bennett concluded his tirade. According to his sketchy briefing, Bennett had come here in the guise of an ex-insurance salesman—insurance had gone to hell in the aftermath of the aliens’ arrival, and virtually the entire industry had collapsed. He was in fact a physicist with a good research record, and there were few enough of them left because so many universities and large laboratories had been in the urban fallout zones after the explosion of the nuclear defense missiles. His orders were to make himself as comfortable as possible in the post of a licensed free trader—Grady issued the licenses—and buy up available artifacts with government funds to try and complete the only alien device ever to fall into human possession of which some shadow of an inkling of its function was remotely suspected.

He’d done well. Of course, he’d brought some capital, but to control this building, have a fair-sized staff, and live on the scale suggested by the penthouse around them, he’d had to display a talent for his task as well.

“We’d get somewhere if we tackled the job wholeheartedly!” he was declaiming. “I’ve said this again and again in my reports. What’s the point of deploying our scientific resources the way they’re being used at present—patching up power supplies, getting factories working again to make luxury goods? Hell, some of the stuff I’ve seen on sale here in Gradyville makes me *sick*! Thirty-nine inch wall-mounted TV sets! That sort of thing takes precious skills away from the main job! Damn it, you see my point, don’t you? With a concerted effort instead of this nit-picking we’d get somewhere!

“Here I am, working by myself, not even knowing how many other Federal agents we’ve got here, and all around I see people trading in things which could offer clues to the aliens’ techniques—I don’t mind so much about the corporation scientists, some of whom I’ve become friends with, because whatever they get their hands on goes out of the Ground and back to somewhere with decent facilities for study. Though even that’s ridiculous! They passed this bill saying alien artifacts were federal property, and no one takes a bit of notice—they may have the separate parts of a working device sitting in three different corporation labs instead of being brought together in a government lab as they should be. But what makes me want to puke all over the floor is seeing the ignorant s-o-b’s like Grady’s staff and Radcliffe and people like that just grabbing what they can and selling where they can. Listen, the other day I got something I hadn’t expected to find in less than a year’s search—a *working* artifact which I think—”

He broke off. “I talk too much,” he said morosely. “Jesus, I don’t even know if what the aliens build *works* in a human sense.”

“But you do have a theory,” Greta said. “I’ve seen it mentioned in your reports.”

Bennett hesitated. At length he nodded. “I do, yes. It seems to me that... Well, listen. I’ve been more and more obsessed with something I remember from—oh—ten years back. They were building a new freeway not far from where I used to go fishing on weekends. And the first winter the road was in use, there was a fatal crash on an icy road. They found a fox tangled up in the wreckage. So they went out and shot the rest of his family. I think that’s what’s been done to us. I think these so-called ‘alien cities’ aren’t cities—I think they’re interstellar transport nexuses. Ever checked a map and seen the orientation of the five points of each of the—the cities?”

Waldron and Greta shook their heads. Bennett jumped up. “It’s easiest on a globe. I’ll get mine.” From a cupboard built into the far wall he came

with an eighteen-inch globe on which he had pasted paper stars to represent the alien edifices. “Here you are. See how the points line up? Four out of the five point directly toward the other ‘cities’. I think Earth is an interchange station. Each of the five takes in and sends out traffic in a preferred direction, and also forwards traffic and receives it from each of the four others. But hell! I’m no astronomer, and nobody will send me one for an assistant, so I can’t find out if the fifth point shows activity correlated with Earth’s motion around the sun, or the time of day even, and nobody’s keeping records of activity in the four other places to see if there’s synchronicity!” He stared accusingly at Greta.

Casting around for a way to placate him, she hit on the suggestion the Russians had advanced to explain Buishenko’s phenomenal appeal to his followers. “Uh—I think maybe people are still waiting to be convinced the aliens’ techniques are within our mental grasp. As soon as something proves we can comprehend some device of theirs, you’ll get the combined effort you’re after. But so long as the aliens are surrounded by this aura of almost supernatural awe, most human beings will prefer just to try and patch up the same comfortable life we had before they came.”

“I hope you’re right!” Bennett snapped. “Because if you are, it won’t be long now. I have this strong-room in my basement here—it is a strong-room, and that’s what everyone assumes is its only function. Actually, though, it’s a pretty fair lab, and right in there I have—”

A buzzer sounded. Automatically Waldron and Greta looked around for a phone. It proved to be concealed in the chair where Bennett was sitting. He spoke to its back. “What is it?”

“This is Ames Street Lookout, Mr. Bennett. We have a visitor turning toward the house. I think it’s Den Radcliffe—leastways, it’s two of his turbine Cadillacs.”

Bennett started. “What does he want with me?” he muttered. “I hope to God I haven’t attracted his attention somehow! There are some fat swine here on the Ground—like Grady himself—but Radcliffe is a self-styled rat, and he’s out to topple Grady if he can. When he does, life’s going to be a damned sight tougher. You’ve heard about him, I guess?” he shot at his visitors.

They exchanged glances. “We—we know him,” she said. “It was his inviting Jim Waldron here that gave me a cover for use on the Ground.”

“You—!” Bennett bounced to his feet. “Get out! *Fast*, before he reaches the house! And don’t come back! You must be out of your minds! I suppose this is more of Orlando Potter’s brilliant idiocy—isn’t there a

single rational man left in authority on the whole stinking *planet*? Here I am, and you have to come in on *Radcliffe's* say-so?"

"We didn't want to draw too much attention to you," Greta said, reddening.

Bennett threw up his hands and looked to the ceiling in angry exasperation.

"What do you think you've *done*, then? If Radcliffe finds out I didn't declare that live artifact, all he has to do is tell Grady and I'm done for. Radcliffe hates the guts of any successful competitor... Ah, don't waste my time. Move, both of you, and get clear before Radcliffe finds you here!"

XVII

"Think he saw us?" Waldron whispered. Consciously he knew it was absurd to keep his voice down, but it seemed natural.

Twisted around in her seat to peer through the back window, Greta shook her head. "I can't be sure. I don't think so."

"We'll make sure, anyway," Waldron muttered, and swung the car with a screech of tires around a right-angle corner.

"Do you think he had us tailed? Or would they have put a tracer on the car, maybe?" Greta didn't look at him.

"It's possible. On the other hand Bennett seemed to have some reason to fear a visit from Radcliffe. What was he saying as he threw us out? Something about a live artifact, and if Grady heard about it he was done for... Did you follow that?"

"Vaguely. I gather Grady finances his administration by a levy on free traders. He insists on all finds being declared so that he can buy in outstanding items and re-sell through his own contacts. They don't like this much, but they all abide by it because of pressure from their colleagues—what the *hell*?"

She slid across the seat, helplessly. Waldron had jammed on the brakes halfway around another corner, and the car had skidded on a patch of loose gravel. Its nose came back under control just in time as he fought the wheel.

Across their path, broadside on, was a large black patrol-car. The four

men, all armed, in Grady's gaudy uniform, who had been waiting silently beside the vehicle remained still until the other car stopped. Then they moved forward in puppet-like unison.

"I'm Captain Bayers," said the most heavily-braided of the four, bending to Waldron's window with an insincere smile. "May I see your identification?"

Sweating from the shock of finding the road blocked, Waldron fumbled out his papers. Greta did the same. Bayers scrutinized them carefully.

"New on the Ground, hm?" he suggested.

"Yes. Ah—" Waldron thought of invoking Radcliffe's name—but if, as seemed likely, these men had been monitoring comings and goings in the area they might start asking why he and Greta were so eager to get away from Bennett's before Radcliffe arrived.

"I see. Get out," Bayers grunted. "Leave the car here. You can pick it up afterward if it hasn't been commandeered. The Governor wants a word with you and Miss Smith."

For a moment no one moved. Then Bayers dropped his hand meaningfully to his gun, and sickly they complied with his order.

"No, don't bother asking Mr. Bennett to receive me indoors," Radcliffe said to the colored man who had come over warily to greet him. "Just tell him to come down and take a look."

The colored man started to object, changed his mind, and went into the house. Radcliffe lit a cigarette and glanced at Ichabod, next to Rick in the front seat. The kid had been washed and clothed and Radcliffe's personal physician had applied some ointment to a skin condition he was suffering from—like most of the shantytown kids—and shot him full of vitamins and a broad-spectrum antibiotic. He'd been troublesome at first, but he was pleased enough not to have his father around, and on this journey he'd sat as quiet as could be wished.

The colored man came back. "Mr. Bennett says he—"

Radcliffe cut in impatiently, "Hell, if he's scared to show his face let him just peek out an upstairs window! Rick—go around and open the near door and let Ichabod out for a moment. That'll do."

Rick complied. Uncertain, Ichabod lowered his feet to the ground and stood blinking in the sunlight. Radcliffe scrutinized the face of the building for a hint of Bennett's whereabouts—and there he was, visible

behind the glass doors of the main entrance. At least, the figure there answered to the description: sandy receding hair, medium height, and so on.

“That your boss?” he asked the colored man in tones loud enough to carry to Bennett.

“That’s Mr. Bennett, yes.”

“He’ll go on being Mr. Bennett,” Radcliffe said, and curled his lip. “But he won’t be your boss much longer.”

He motioned Rick to help Ichabod back into the car, and subsided with a grunt of satisfaction into the soft padding.

Camouflaged control posts guarding the approaches to the Governor’s Mansion shot challenges at the car over the radiophone. Bayers replied crisply, and the driver did not slow down. Last night, when Rick had pointed out the house to them, Waldron hadn’t realized the fact, but it was more of a fortress on close inspection, its facade reinforced with heavy concrete false walls, its roof screened with armor-plate, its windows shuttered with steel panels. The surrounding estate was heavily planted with hedges and shrubberies, but gaps revealed tantalizing glimpses of the working of Grady’s private army-men drilling by squads on a graveled pathway, the crew of an armored car servicing their guns, six or seven armored trucks in a tidy line.

At one point the driver slowed to walking pace, his wheels almost edging off the driveway first to the left, then to the right, while his eyes checked off landmarks: trees, buildings.

“Mined around here,” Bayers said with a chuckle. “In case you were wandering.”

Before the entrance to the house three cars were parked: one snow-white turbine Cadillac, another patrol-car similar to this, and a red convertible. As they approached, a man in a smart business suit emerged from the house, carefully scrutinized by armed guards beside the door, and got into the red car.

Bayers and his men escorted them to the entrance and handed them over to the resident guards with a murmur of explanation too low for Waldron to catch, and they were curtly gestured to go inside.

The hallway was like a Hollywood reconstruction of a Byzantine palace, marred by piles of loot—it was clearly loot, even at the first glance—along

the walls: pictures in gilt frames, rough wooden crates leaking excelsior. Guards were everywhere, suspicious, hard-eyed.

Their new escort spoke with a thin man in a dark suit; they waited while he vanished and reappeared, and then they were taken straight down a long corridor toward the back of the house.

Greta's hand found Waldron's and clung tight.

Double doors were opened by yet more guards; the doors were of beautiful natural oak, with handles and fingerplates of gold. And here, at a desk bigger than the legendary Pershing desk, framed in a vast window beyond which sun lay bright on long lawns and immaculate flowerbeds—

“Governor Grady!” their escort rasped, and threw up a perfectly drilled salute.

Perhaps it had been Bennett's description of the “governor” as a fat swine that had caused him to expect a gross man, Waldron thought. He wasn't gross. He was big, but well-proportioned—six foot three or so, with smooth black hair combed over a widening bald patch, a heavy black Teddy Roosevelt moustache, red cheeks, sharp dark eyes. He wore a black string tie on a white shirt; the jacket of his cream summer suit was tossed on the corner of the immense desk, half-covering a bank of phones with at least forty direct circuits.

Clearly he was not a man who denied himself the pleasure of life; there was a tray of bottles and glasses on the other end of the desk, a case of good-quality eight-inch cigars, and a stack of gaudily-wrapped goodies which Waldron didn't immediately identify. But the aura he exuded was not that of a decadent parasite. He looked, in fact, precisely like a man capable of carving out a private empire while most of humanity was on the run like frightened rabbits.

He was not alone in the room, for there were two pretty girl secretaries waiting on chairs against the wall, and at another, much smaller, desk a man in gray sat, studying the new arrivals unblinkingly. But Grady's presence reduced everyone else to irrelevance.

“The names are Waldron and Smith,” the escort said in low tones. Grady made an impatient gesture.

“Why the hell do people think I have to be told three times? Get 'em chairs. They may prove cooperative, and I believe in giving people the benefit of the doubt.”

Chairs were promptly provided. Mechanically, Waldron and Greta sat down.

“All right!” Grady said. “I’ll get straight to the point. What’s cooking between Corey Bennett and that bastard Radcliffe?”

There was silence. Waldron’s mouth was absolutely dry.

“Come on!” Grady snapped. “You just left Bennett’s. I know you’re new on Radcliffe’s list, I know you were at Bennett’s a short while ago, I know Radcliffe went there and didn’t stay because you’d already left... On my Ground I’m like God: not a sparrow falls but I get to hear it. *Well?*”

Once more, silence.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake!” Grady exclaimed, leaning back and waving his hands in the air. “You don’t believe me, hm? You’re too new here to think I’m as well informed as I say? Then listen! This ayem comes in the king relidge, the screwball who goes by the name of Brother Mark, to fink on some of his own flock—guy called Greg Sims and his wife Martha. Report is, their kid found a live relic and they sold it to Bennett. Bennett’s a free trader. I license free traders on conditions: they declare what they get, they re-sell within ninety days, and they pay tax on the profits. I didn’t hear that Bennett declared a live relic. Also, last night the same kid found another one and Radcliffe tried to take it off him. You were there, huh?” he interrupted himself, catching some betraying emotion on Greta’s face. “Thought you might have been. Would take some special reason like inducting important new staff to get Radcliffe away from his bedmates at that time of the night.” He gave a coarse chuckle.

Waldron thought: *My God, what have we walked into?*

“Now, today you go down see Bennett, and you’re the first birds to get caught by the net I’m putting around him. The second would have been Den Radcliffe—except I thought, what the hell for? Radcliffe’s a conceited son of a bitch, thinks he’s very cunning, thinks I don’t know he’s got ambitions to move me over from the top seat. Let him stay ignorant till he hangs himself. Also, he hasn’t declared this live relic he got off the kid last night—Brother Mark says the angels came and took it back, but Brother Mark would say that anyway. My guess is that Radcliffe and Bennett are trying to put over a fast one.”

He leaned in fake-confidential fashion across the desk.

“Maybe Radcliffe gave you a snow job about how soon he’s due to move me over. Think about it, huh? And take out some insurance against going down with him when he crashes, which will be very, very soon. I’d say—next week!”

“I’m sorry,” Waldron forced out. “I just got here yesterday. I don’t know

anything about a deal between—”

“What were you doing at Bennett’s, then?” Grady snapped.

The words hung on the air as though engraved in fire, and no sound followed them.

Waldron’s eyes went past Grady’s shoulder, and he knew without looking that Greta and the secretaries and the guards and the other man were looking the same way. As though moving in deep mud, slowly and with infinite effort, Grady also turned his head.

Coming up the long sweep of lawn, not on the ground but—above? No, somehow *around* it, *around* any ordinary direction of travel. What? *Something*, *Something* hurtfully bright to the eyes. *Something* moving within itself without relation to its forward progress. *Something* as alien and as terrible as the monstrous city they had gone to see last night...

XVIII

Sweating, Bennett twisted the combination on the doors of the strong-room which occupied more than two-thirds of the basement of his home. He knew the door to the stairs was shut and bolted; nonetheless, he kept looking over his shoulder as though expecting to find he was being watched.

Whatever purpose Radcliffe had had in mind in mounting his brief charade, it had said one thing clearly to Bennett: Radcliffe knew about the live relic he’d obtained from Ichabod, and was proposing to turn him in to Grady.

Damned fool thing, to lie and hide it! But if I’d declared it Grady would have wanted to know when I sold it and to whom, and if I’d faked a sale and he found out later he’d have wanted to know why I’d kept it and then...

The door of the strong-room creaked and groaned; the hinges needed oiling. He struck a light for the candles. Damned nuisance having to use them, but running power into what was supposed to be merely a safe place to keep his recent acquisitions could far too easily make people ask inconvenient questions.

And there it was.

When it came to dealing with the aliens' artifacts, conventional scientific techniques were virtually useless. You could weigh and measure them and examine them through microscopes—but try for X-ray diffraction pictures and their internal structure would crumble; test their substance with reagents and even under fluorine the surface would be stubbornly unaffected.

As though they aren't matter at all! What, then? Energy somehow stabilized into a nonentropic condition?

It would account for the aliens' detonation of all stocks of fissile material, of course: if their processes were delicately balanced, they wouldn't want to risk local outbursts of such intense energy once their "cities" were functioning.

So all that was left was to piece random items together: choose from hundreds, even thousands, of broken and inoperative odds and ends those which seemed to fit.

Like these.

It began with a sort of bowl, three feet across, having in its upper surface two indentations following the tautochronic curve, one larger, one smaller. The larger one held a half-egg form with three more irregular objects on top; the smaller held the thin near-ovoid he had secured from Ichabod. It was—well, complete, somehow, in the form he had arrived at. But did it *do* anything?

He stared with aching eyes at the prize he had so rapidly obtained and was now to lose. For it mattered more than he did. Whether Radcliffe had come here because of that blundering Delarue woman, acting on Potter's blockheaded instructions, or only because of the boy Ichabod, he must at once arrange to get this thing away from Grady's Ground. After dark, obviously, but as soon after as possible. It should be in a proper government lab. All the aliens' scrap and rubbish should go to a proper lab!

Crates. What was there into which he could pack the—?

He had half-turned to peer under a bench for some containers he could use to hold the separate sections of the device, when he checked. Was something happening within its translucent depths?

He stood rock-still, staring. Yes: from the small glowing ovoid in the smaller depression, the pattern of light was now *oozing*—permeating the big bowl-like base, spreading into the larger ovoid, infecting the three objects piled above!

“Oh my God!” Bennett whispered.

For it wasn't stopping with the limits of the alien substance. It was spreading still further—staining the very air with radiance and taking on the shape of something as incomprehensible, as majestic and as remote as the “city” from which the scattered parts had come.

There was a sensation like a blow delivered to—not his physical brain, but—his abstract mind, and he collapsed on the floor without a sound.

When he woke, it was to total darkness and total silence. He cried out, and only echoes answered. He got clumsily and fearfully to his feet; by touch he found his way to the stairs and up them to the door which was still locked and bolted. It concerned him only to get back to light and fresh air; he did not even stop to check whether the alien artifact still rested on the bench where he had assembled it.

All the lights were out in the house. No one came in response to his moaning cries. The floor of the entrance hall was littered with broken glass and his feet crunched at every step. Beyond the doors light beckoned; the gaudy neons were still ablaze in Gradyville. He moved toward them like an insect courting a lamp.

“There! That's him!” a voice shouted from the shadows outside, and a flashlight beam stabbed him in the eyes. They came rushing, while he screamed and flailed his arms vainly, and dragged him feet first down his own front steps to spit on him, and beat him, and kick him, as a blasphemer who had profaned a holy angelic relic by offering money for it.

When they had finished, they threw him in a ditch half-full of wet mud.

The phone on Potter's desk buzzed. He had been gnawing at nails already bitten to the quick, and staring at the black rectangle of the window, punctuated only by the stars.

They had ordered a blackout for tonight—by reflex, perhaps. Preparing for the worst.

More than likely the caller's someone who wants to know why my curtains aren't drawn to hide the glow of my cigarette...

“What is it?”

“Air Marshal Fyffe and his assistant are here, sir.”

“Send them right in,” Potter said, and got up to draw the curtains and turn on the lights; one could hardly receive the acting Chief of Continental Defense in a starlit office.

One glance at the face of the elderly man who entered told him that their worst fears had been confirmed.

“Buishenko’s taken Vladivostok!” he said.

The Air Marshal nodded. “Worse than that. Better let Farnsworth give you the details—he heard them direct.”

The younger man, in BCAF squadron leader’s uniform, who had come in with Fyffe, passed his brown leather gloves from hand to hand nervously as he spoke. “Well, sir, it’s pretty difficult to get a coherent picture. The Russian government forces are completely disorganized—there’ve been massive defections, apparently—and Mr. Abramovitch’s contacts haven’t been getting through at the agreed times. We have jamming on their regular wavelength, which suggests—”

“For God’s sake, Farnsworth!” Fyffe rapped. “Don’t talk like a meandering old woman—come to the point!”

Farnsworth reddened and gripped his gloves in both hands as though symbolizing his effort at self-discipline.

“Buishenko not only took Vladivostok against negligible resistance about two hours ago—he did it with sufficient reserve force on hand to move further, and there’s been an attack on the naval forces standing by off the coast—our forces, I mean, of course—with a new weapon.”

The words took time to register. Potter felt as though liquid air had been poured into his skull, freezing his mental processes. “Something he got from the aliens?” he whispered.

“Apparently,” Fyffe grunted. “One of our men observing the progress of the fighting from offshore is old enough to have served in bomber raids in World War II, and says he’s reminded of the old ‘flaming onions,’ the anti-aircraft rocket weapons the Germans used for metropolitan defense. But these are larger, more diffuse, of much brighter and more varied color, and last anything up to a quarter of an hour before burning out. In that time they can take care of a good many planes, of course.”

“Our reports indicate,” Farnsworth amplified, “that the entire air defense system of Vladivostok was taken out with these things. Then Buishenko’s forces came in by land, air and also sea, which took the defenders by surprise—they’d flown close to a full division to a point on the coast further north, and brought them down in boats commandeered on

the spot. But the paratroops actually took the city and the seaport, and it looks as though that's what's coming our way."

"Invasion?" Potter let the word go as though it were hot.

"I'm afraid it looks like it," Fyffe said. "Vladivostok is only a halfway stopping-place. He's coming over here, and I don't think he's going to waste time on diversionary attacks or—"

The phone buzzed again. Potter snapped the switch. "Message for the Air Marshal, sir. Radar reports are of a Cardinal at sixty-five thousand." The voice sounded vaguely puzzled. "I'm told just to say that, and he'll understand."

"A Cardinal," Potter repeated thoughtfully. "Wasn't that their answer to the Lockheed U-2, the ultra-high altitude spy plane?"

"That's right," Fyffe nodded. And to the phone: "Ask if there's anything left we can take it out with!"

Farnsworth checked him with a touch on the shoulder. "I'm sorry, sir, but I checked. We have nothing on the whole western seaboard that can reach sixty-five thousand and intercept."

"Ah, *hell!*" said Fyffe. His shoulders hunched as though carrying the entire burden of the world's cares.

"I suppose this means your Mr. Congreve was right, doesn't it?" Farnsworth asked Potter. "About Jespersen, that is."

"Hm? Oh—yes. Yes, he was definitely right."

"Our security services fell down badly there," Fyffe said in a self-condemnatory tone.

"Not really. Hypnospies are so rare that even I hadn't heard of them. You build up a personality over years, under continuous hypnosis, and no torture or slip of the tongue can betray the original identity." Potter hesitated, then said, "Well, we'll have to get our prize possession out of here, won't we?"

"The Russian idiot?" Fyffe said sourly. "Yes, I've made the arrangements. Porpentine thinks the journey will probably set him back to the state he was in when he arrived, but that girl what's-her-name—Natasha—talked Zworykin into it, and they're on ten-minute alert to get him to the airport."

He paused "Is it true that you're taking him to Grady's Ground?"

"Where else?" Potter shrugged. "If Buishenko did use the kid to get details of a workable weapon out of the alien city over there—and it

certainly sounds like he did—then the quicker we get him somewhere we can make use of his talents, the better.”

“But isn’t it courting disaster to trespass on Grady’s anarchy there—like the Klondike Gold Rush, men carrying guns and street fights between followers of rival traders!”

“Courting disaster is what the human race has been doing for years,” Potter said flatly. “Should we choose to be different? Besides, it’s not entirely true what you just said. Grady runs his private empire with a tight rein. Some of my own operatives are settled there, doing research and making reports to our government... If Buishenko does invade, Grady will have a refugee movement on his hands anyway, and I think we can hole up with my people for awhile at least. And although I’ve heard that Grady compares himself to God in his more expansive moments—”

The phone buzzed again. “For the Air Marshal, sir! Reports radar contact with massive aerial movement; speed, height and direction consistent with airborne-invasion?”

“Where are they now?” Fyffe asked sharply.

“ETA given as plus four hours fifteen minutes, but that’s all that’s in the message.”

“Four hours...” Fyffe looked at Potter. “You can get well clear by then. You can get to Grady’s Ground, in fact. Well, the best of luck, sir. They call this the Age of Miracles, don’t they, when something extraordinary happens? I hear that idiot boy has apparently worked a miracle or two at home, so I can only say this—I hope to God you make him work some on *this* side of the ocean. If you don’t, then...” He turned his gnarled hand over as though spilling a little heap of sand.

“What the hell can they be shifting those troops in?” Famsworth muttered to himself.

Potter bent to the phone. “Call the hospital and get Dr. Porpentine to ready the boy Pitirim for immediate evacuation. There’s a plane standing by at the airport. Tell them I’ll meet them there—and have my car at the front door in two minutes.”

“Yes, sir. Uh—I suppose they know where they’re going?”

“Grady’s Ground,” Potter said, for the hell of it. “As things stand, we’re a damned sight safer dealing with the aliens than with our own lunatic species!”

XIX

Waldron groaned. The drawing of breath for the groan hurt acutely, because all the muscles around his chest and belly were terribly bruised. But the pain was welcome as an affirmation that he still lived.

He forced his eyes open and saw only darkness. Something heavy, he realized dimly, was pressing down on his legs, and at once he felt panic in two successive stages: first, thinking of being weighed down under rubble which would trap him, deadfall-fashion; second, because the thing on his legs moved slightly, and conjured up inconceivable horrors.

There were various noises in the gloomy night. In the distance, there were explosions—perhaps gunfire. Closer, there were scrabbling sounds, crunching sounds, scraping sounds. With infinitely slow, effortful patience, he told himself: *Feet moving in gravel or such; a door being forced open...*

Abruptly there was light, so brilliant it hurt his eyes, and a booming voice.

“So he is dead! I hardly believed it!”

Who’s dead? I’m not—I’m NOT! Waldron found his voice, deep in a throat dry as a dustbowl, and croaked meaninglessly.

“What was that?” another man said sharply.

“It’s Waldron! Look, over there behind the pile of furniture. And his girlfriend too!”

“Get them out,” the other man said, and Waldron identified the speakers. This last was Rick Chandler, and the former had been Tony, the driver of the armored truck in which they had arrived on Grady’s Ground.

Figures only half-seen in the clash between utter darkness and the tremendous glare from a portable searchlight moved and grasped and helped them to get up. Waldron found himself standing, one arm around a dizzily—swaying Greta, whose face still showed the idiot emptiness of shock.

“The boss was wondering where you two had gone,” Rick grunted. “Grady’s private office was the last place we expected you might turn up.”

“Is it—?” Waldron had to stop, swallow and moisten his lips before the sentence would complete. “Is it Grady who’s dead?”

“See for yourself,” Rick invited, and gestured for the man with the searchlight to turn his beam.

Where Grady had sat commandingly at his enormous desk, there was a hole in the floor. Bright shards of glass from the shattered windows overlay everything with a diamond-dust spangling. Half in, half out of the hole, Grady lay, his skull cracked like a boiled egg, blood caking rust-brown on his white shirt.

“What happened?” Greta moaned, clinging to Waldron as if to a life-raft of sanity in an ocean of madness.

“You’re asking me?” Dick countered sardonically. “I thought you were here when it happened!”

“Rick!” Tony said. He had gone closer to the body, but not to look at it—to peer down between the dangling legs into the pit which had been revealed there. “Rick, what do you suppose this was, under the floor?”

“Get the guy we caught on the driveway,” Rick said. “He probably knows. He was one of Grady’s top security men.”

There was a coming and going, and then from the direction of the double doors a man was thrust limping forward, his hands lashed behind him, his gaudy uniform dirty and a smear of blood drying on his forehead. Waldron recognized the patrol captain who had escorted them here—when? Yesterday, earlier today? He found he had no idea how much time had passed. *What’s the name? Bay—Bayers!*

“This hidey-hole under the floor there,” Rick was saying. “What was it?” And added, when Bayers didn’t speak immediately, “Spit it out! You can see that your boss is dead—make it easier for yourself!”

Bayers gave a sickly nod and seemed to wilt. He said in a thin voice, “That was the governor’s strong-room down there. He kept his best purchases in it—live artifacts, mostly, I think.”

“Live artifacts,” Rick said slowly. “That makes sense, I guess.” He rounded on Waldron. “Say, what actually happened here? Did you see it?”

Waldron hunted through a dazing mental fog, and images began to emerge. There had been the—the shining thing, moving toward the governor’s mansion...

“I think,” he said at last, “that one of the aliens came to get their property back.”

The idea was fearful even as he formulated it, but Rick was unsurprised. He nodded. “That fits with what happened over near the city last

night—when the chief threw up that shiny ball and it just vanished into thin air.”

“And the churches,” Tony grunted. Waldron, mechanically stroking the back of Greta’s hand to soothe her—she was shaking dreadfully—looked uncomprehending, and Rick amplified.

“All hell’s been let loose since you been unconscious. The reldiges are up in arms because they say their churches have been looted—they had a lot of these live artifacts, of course, which they wouldn’t let go because they say they’re holy—and there was this deal with Corey Bennett, who bought one off the Sims kid, and something like what happened here happened at his place. We found it empty, all lights out, the staff run off scared, and a mob of reldiges chanting a—an exorcism, I guess. Even Grady’s staff took to their heels, from this place.”

“Dirty sons of bitches!” Bayers said vehemently. “Wasn’t any need to hand the Ground to Radcliffe on a plate!”

“But that’s what’s happened, isn’t it?” Rick said. Bayers’ answer was to spit sidelong into the wreckage of Grady’s desk.

“Okay, let’s move,” Rick snapped after a short pause. “Can you walk, Waldron? No, you look shaky—someone give him an arm there! Move it along, move it along! The boss’ll want to hear their story for himself.”

“Potter! Potter!”

The words jolted him out of the half-sleep into which he had finally managed to subside despite the maddening drone of the lumbering helicopter’s engines. They had decided on a ‘copter for the evacuation because it was uncertain what night-landing facilities were available on Grady’s Ground; Grady was known to maintain a small private air force, but it consisted mainly of helicopters used for chasing smugglers across no-man’s-land and a couple of executive-type planes reserved to his personal staff. Servicing and fueling for modern airliners or military planes was probably beyond even Grady’s astonishing private resources, so he would not have kept up his one available large airport, and their landing might have to be made on a highway or rough ground.

“What the hell—?” Potter grumbled, and realized that the speaker was Congreve, bending low over him. He tensed. “Is something wrong?”

In a single quick glance he took in the interior of the ‘copter. Nothing was obviously amiss: forward, the Canadian pilot Fyffe had assigned

them—a young man named Stoller—sat at the controls, with Natasha next to him as co-pilot; Zworyldn watched ceaselessly over Pitirim, who was in a semicoma; and nearby Porpentine dozed, his head lolling against the shoulder of the sleeping Abramovitch. Apparently normal.

“I don’t know,” Congreve whispered. “I’m afraid so. Come over here to the radio, will you?”

Potter scrambled awkwardly to his feet. Porpentine opened one drowsy eye and closed it again.

“Listen!” Congreve said, gesturing at the speaker of the radio set into the navigator’s table. “That’s Grady’s station.”

Potter looked blank. “Are you sure?” he muttered. Nothing was audible but a strong carrier hum.

“As sure as I can be,” Congreve answered. “We have a directional antenna, and I’ve swung it. The ground-reference checks. So does the power received. But I thought Grady had a twenty-four hour commercial sound service operating, and since I first picked the signal up I’ve heard nothing but the carrier.”

Potter fought weariness to the back of his mind. “Uh—have you checked the nearby wavebands? Could be the dial is mis-calibrated—”

“I’ve done all the obvious things,” Congreve broke in. He twisted the radio dial with angry fingers. “Here—here’s Federal Midwest out of Chicago, which ought to be harder to catch than Grady’s station right now. Here’s Federal Far-West out of Spokane. I’ve had the three Canadian services—hell, I’ve had the Mexican Government broadcast out of Baja California a few minutes back, clear as a bell! But Grady’s, which ought to be loud enough to shake the ship, is—” He snapped his fingers.

“How far off the Ground are we?” Potter demanded.

“I’ll check,” Congreve said, and went to lean over Natasha’s shoulder and hold a whispered consultation. Shortly, he was back.

“They’re expecting to come in sight of the alien city any moment now,” he reported. “There’s cloud ahead, and a faint glow off it which may indicate a reflection from the city.” He hesitated. “Have you—have you seen the city before?”

“Once,” Potter said shortly, and regretted his curt tone as soon as he had uttered the word. He enlarged, hoping Congreve would accept the implicit apology for his rudeness.

“I was sent out to survey the situation after the first of our troops

mutinied and turned back—the night they burned Bemidji, in fact. I saw it then, from the air. I’ve never wanted to see it again, particularly.”

“You have your chance now!” Natasha called. She had turned in her seat and had been listening to the last few moments of their conversation. “It’s just coming into view.”

“And *still* we don’t get Grady’s broadcast,” Congreve muttered. “What shall we do?”

“Set a course to skirt the alien city to the south,” Potter said crisply. “And if we don’t pick up one of the local transmissions in—let’s see—five minutes, we’ll just have to announce ourselves.”

Congreve stared at him. “Are you sure that’s wise?”

“What else can we do, God damn it? Things must have gone to hell here to interfere with the regular radio service. I don’t want to put down blind, at night, into heaven knows what—rioting, maybe!”

“I thought Grady ran his territory with a pretty strict hand,” Congreve said.

“Yes, but—”

“Mr. Potter!” Stoller, their Canadian pilot, leaned excitedly forward in his seat. “I’m getting flashes from the ground ahead. Looks to me like rifle-fire. And there’s a burning building, I think.”

“Not the glow from the alien city?”

“No, that’s over to port. I’m setting a course around it to the south as you ordered.”

Potter hesitated only a second. Then he snapped at Congreve, “Put out a call! We know the regular frequency Grady uses for this official transmission—it’s the old police frequency for North Dakota state police. Identify us as a Federal authorized flight and ask for a landing site.”

“But—!”

“Do as I say!” Potter wiped away sweat which was trickling toward his eyes and itching his skin.

Congreve obeyed. For several minutes there was nothing to hear. Ahead, the burning building grew clearer, and at last they flew straight over it, jouncing in the uprush of hot air. On the street which the flames illuminated, figures no larger than ants were scurrying about.

“Something’s certainly gone to hell,” Stoller muttered.

“What’s that?” Natasha had secured binoculars from somewhere and

was peering out into the darkness; now she pointed. “Is it another helicopter? Oh, yes! See, closing on us now!”

Across a patch of stars revealed by a gap in the clouds, a whirling rotor had slashed briefly. No details could be seen at this distance even with the aid of the binoculars.

“Congreve, call them!” Potter rapped.

“I’m trying!” Congreve exclaimed angrily. And in the same second, a voice, harsh and authoritative, burst from the radio.

“Federal ‘copter! Federal ‘copter! Land at once!”

“Give me the mike,” Potter barked, and put out his hand. “Hello! Hello, this is Orlando Potter—Federal executive on Federal business. We wish to land at an authorized site and be conducted to Governor Grady. We cannot land blind in the middle of a riot or whatever is going on. Over.”

There was no answer for endless seconds. And then, with the horrifying inconsequence of nightmare, a yammering series of fiery flashes broke from the dark shape of the other ‘copter and a line of holes sewed itself along the wall of the hull, the last of all tearing open the chest of the sleeping Pitirim.

XX

It was still hard for Den Radcliffe to believe, but it appeared to be true: no one else on Grady’s Ground had made preparations for the eventuality that Grady might drop dead or be unexpectedly assassinated, and consequently the rulership of this territory was falling into his hands like a ripe fruit off a branch shaken by the wind.

He sat alone at the custom-built desk he had had built into his house. It was actually more of a control panel than a desk—from this one console, he could not only maintain radio communication with any of his forces, but also direct the ground defense of his local fortifications, erect automatic barricades, raise and lower steel shutters over windows and hidden spikes in the driveway, and as a last resort fire the mines and remote-controlled guns which were his ace in the hole.

But he wasn’t going to need that ace. Not by present accounts.

It had been an incredibly confusing day, but sense was finally emerging

from the chaos of it all. The information Rick Chandler had radioed in from the car outside the governor's mansion helped to complete another section of the picture, and doubtless when they arrived Waldron and his girl would amplify further.

Meantime, there was a chance to set matters in perspective.

He pushed a stud on the right of the desk and said, without waiting for a reply, "Bring me some cigars and a tray of drinks, and make it fast!"

Then he leaned back with a sense of work well done.

First off: the garbled news of something amiss at Grady's place—panic among the staff, the private army scattering, forgetful even of their weapons, carrying only some crazy tale about aliens attacking the governor. That had been enough to spur Radcliffe into action. His own private army had still been chortling over the smooth way Grady had been cheated when the consignment of valuable goods had been "hijacked"; two or three score people besides himself had made a substantial profit on that swindle, and when he'd passed the word they'd been not only ready but eager to do whatever they were told.

Then there'd been the uprising among the reldiges, sparked by another similar report, this time to the effect that angels had come to the churches and driven out the worshippers with flaming swords. One version had it that Brother Mark had been struck down, but so far Radcliffe was reserving judgment on this rumor.

Those of Grady's regular forces—the patrols, chiefly—not yet affected by the news of the governor's alleged death had found themselves with mobs of frantic reldiges to deal with. By early afternoon a good deal of street-fighting had been in progress. This had been no skin off Radcliffe's nose—indeed, some of the activities of the reldiges had served his purpose excellently. They had attempted to storm the radio and TV stations to announce to the unbelievers that the wrath of the heavenly hosts had descended on sinners, and since late afternoon there had been no transmissions either on sound or vision. The defenders were presumably still holding out, for the carrier hum of the radio was coming over strongly, but the survivors were clearly too busy to make any announcements. Moreover, the governor's mansion had been sporadically defended by a few desperate or ill-informed "heroes" until after nightfall, and Rick and his men were probably the first outsiders to see Grady's body, so most people were still in a state of suspense. If Grady proved to be alive after all, his vengeance on anyone who had broadcast reports of his death over the radio would be terrible.

Balked at the radio and TV stations, some of the reldiges had turned to other prey. With the plain purpose of visiting Brother Mark's curse of last night upon its intended victim, a large party had approached Radcliffe's place, but had easily been beaten off, leaving almost half their original number dead or wounded. (The survivors had afforded Radcliffe a good deal of his positive information about the day's happenings.)

Other reldiges had made for Corey Bennett's place, and they had had more luck. As soon as he'd had men to spare—which hadn't been until after dark—Radcliffe had sent a party to check on Bennett, whom he regarded as the most likely of the other free traders to have kept his head during the crisis, and reports had come back of the same nature as those received in the vicinity of the governor's mansion: mindless panic among the staff, who had fled, wild rumors of alien visitations, and a gang of reldiges too terrified to enter the house but keeping up some sort of chant and ceremony at the entrance to ward off the anger of the angelic avengers.

As soon as he could safely leave the center of operations, Radcliffe decided, he'd have to go take a look at the alien city. What he'd be looking for precisely, he didn't know. But he had a vague premonition that if the aliens were finally being stirred to take as disastrous a hand in human affairs as they had in the days soon after their arrival, his inheritance of Grady's Ground would be a hollow triumph.

The door slid open and his tray of drinks and cigars was brought. Wheeling it, unclothed as he had ordered her to remain unless told otherwise, came Maura Knight.

The sight of her chilled him with self-contempt. He stared for long moments at her child-vacant face, seeking some sign of fear or anxiety over the day's events. As always, she seemed untouched; there was a hesitant smile on her lips, suggesting the eagerness to please him which had been made the central driving force of her life, but it didn't reach her eyes—it never had, never could. Behind those eyes the light was out.

"Maura!" he said harshly as she turned to leave. Obediently as a trained dog, she paused and looked hopeful of—praise, possibly. Or even of punishment. Merely to have Radcliffe show her attention was her reward for living now.

Ever since the night he'd first met this girl, something had been preying on his mind. He realized it now. Something was working within his brain, like a gnawing maggot, capable of taking achievements which had seemed desirable until they were accomplished, and then turning them bitter and putrid.

Was it *only* because of Maura? He thought how, back there in New York, he had told Waldron he was going to get her to give what he'd paid her for, one way or another. And he had. She would never refuse him again for the rest of her life. Yet this mere submission wasn't what he had wanted. When he learned yesterday that Waldron was on the Ground, the fact had begun to claw its way up from his subconscious like a loathsome insect, and he had sat drinking to drown knowledge of it—and had failed.

The same sensation of being cheated was already undermining his pleasure at being master of Grady's Ground.

What drives me? The urge that I told Waldron about—the same need people outside feel, to pretend they're their own masters when the aliens regard us as mere vermin? Was that why I had to get this girl when she resisted me?

It struck too close to home. He shifted uncomfortably on his chair, framing the words to dismiss her, and was forestalled by the door opening again. It was locked by a switch on the desk, which he had not closed after Maura entered.

The newcomer was Ichabod. Limping, shy, he peered into the room and flinched when he realized that Radcliffe was here, but he made no immediate move to withdraw, his eyes going to Maura and studying her unblinkingly.

With a quick wordless murmur, as though seeking permission for even so trivial an action, Maura gave a half-bow toward Radcliffe and held out her hand encouragingly to the boy.

“Can—can Maura come back and talk to me now?” Ichabod ventured. “There isn't anybody else to talk to, and I'm—I'm lonely here without my folks.”

What became of the Simses in today's riots? The question flickered briefly across Radcliffe's mind, heralding a return to a more normal mood, for it at once occurred to him that although the day's crisis had relegated Ichabod to the back of his mind his suspicion about the boy's ability remained a potential key element in his domination of the Ground, and to know that he got along well with Maura was a valuable bit of news.

“You like Maura?” he asked. When the answer was slow in coming, he added in an encouraging tone, “Don't be shy, Ichabod! You can do what you like here.”

Ichabod blushed tremendously and gazed at the floor. In a near-whisper he said, “I—uh—I always wanted to see a pretty lady without any clothes

on... I tried once. I went out the back of Mrs. Harrison's house and looked through the window at—but Mr. Harrison caught me and beat me, and then he took me off home and my dad beat me, and..." He looked beseechingly at Maura. "But she shows *anybody*, and I don't feel like I'm being a dirty little sinner for liking it!"

Radcliffe felt a blast of laughter charge up to the top of his mind, and slapped the smooth metal of his desk. When he had recovered from his fit of half-hysterical merriment, he waved towards the door.

"Take him off and look after him, Maura! But I guess he ought to go to bed soon—he must be tired."

The door's closing was like a switch turning off his laughter, and he was cast back to his previous depression.

Let's face it, he told himself. We are not a rational species. If we were... If we were, maybe we wouldn't be squabbling over the garbage of the aliens.

A buzz came from the radio-phone set into the desk, and he jolted forward in his chair. "Yes?"

"Mr. Radcliffe, we have a 'copter coming from the west, heading directly toward the alien city. They're calling on the regular patrol frequency. We thought you ought to be informed just in case they turn out to be reinforcements that Grady—"

"Out of the question," Radcliffe said. "Maybe you're not up to date. Grady's dead, and his death triggered the riots today. He couldn't have sent for help even if there was somewhere to send for it."

"Oh." A discomfited pause, and a dogged resumption. "Well, sir, they claim to be a Federal authorized flight carrying government personnel. But it's a Canadian Air Force 'copter, not American, and they demand to be put in touch with Grady."

"Bring them down," Radcliffe said. "Order them to land first, and if they won't comply— You are armed, aren't you?"

"We have a submachinegun, sir. That's all. We'd have to poke it out through the door and sighting wouldn't be easy, but I guess—"

"Just a moment," Radcliffe grunted. A light was flashing now, indicating that someone was approaching the outer perimeter of the defenses around the house. He picked up an internal phone. "Who is it coming in?" he demanded.

"Rick Chandler's party, sir. Bringing Waldron and his girl. They cleared

the forward lookout a moment ago.”

“I’ll want them in the long room as soon as they get here,” Radcliffe rapped, and went back to the radio.

“Hello! I’ll leave this to your initiative—shoot through their rotor-sweep, maybe. But get them down. After what’s happened today I don’t want an aircraft blundering around over the alien city—it might get mistaken for a bomber!”

Alarm was clear in the voice with which the distant speaker signed off.

Rapidly, Radcliffe checked with all his outstations in succession, and received from all of them reassuring statements about the situation. The Ground was in his control beyond a doubt.

I wish it didn’t taste like ashes...

He set the desk on automatic and rose. As he started to leave the room, however, the radio sounded again, and he hesitated. A gray cloud of doom blurred his mind, as though he had already heard what the message would be and it was of a nature to destroy his still-fresh success. But he took the call anyway. “Yes?”

And instead of the former voice, it was that of a stranger, a man almost crying, with other noises blending in: engines droning, a woman shouting, three or four men cursing simultaneously. But the man near to tears was shrieking within inches of the microphone, and that was what Radcliffe heard most distinctly, without comprehending the sense of the words.

“Bastard! Stinking dirty bastard, you’ve killed him, do you hear? You’ve killed the only person in the world who can get into an alien city and come out again alive—you’ve *killed Pitirim*, don’t you hear me? Murderer! Traitor! *Murderer!*”

XXI

It dawned only gradually on Waldron that something was amiss with Radcliffe. The lingering shock of the experience he had undergone caused some of the delay; more was due to the fact that while he was being interrogated he was also being checked over by a doctor whose fingers stabbed with painful precision at his injuries before the verdict was pronounced: no broken ribs. They had been very lucky. Whatever force the

alien had used to enter the sealed strong-room under the floor of Grady's office, it had been violent enough to shatter the huge desk and bring chunks of the ceiling down.

And, of course, to crush Grady's head in.

Finally, however, it occurred to him that Radcliffe was not displaying the satisfaction one would have expected. Why not? A stroke of fate had made him undisputed heir to Grady's Ground—it might take awhile to consolidate his holdings against other free traders and fanatical reldiges, but he had such a long start over his competitors his ultimate victory was beyond doubt. *Could it be, Waldron asked himself for want of a better inspiration, that he's humiliated by the fact that it wasn't really his doing, but stemmed from interference by the aliens? Is he afraid the aliens will take his new powers from him in his turn?*

He had not found an opportunity to voice the questions which would guide him to a firm opinion—their talk being frequently broken into by reports from outside and requests for a decision on action to be taken—when there came the definitive interruption which put all these matters out of Waldron's head.

One of the many nameless servants came into the long room where they were, and bent to whisper something Waldron failed to catch. Radcliffe's answer was prompt; he demanded an extension phone to talk directly with the source of the news.

The phone was brought. Straining his ears, Waldron tried to make out what was being said, but after first hearing that the caller's name was Gabe, he lost the rest because of the noise the doctor made putting away his instruments and medicaments. Still, enough and more than enough could be guessed from what Radcliffe himself was saying.

“Where did they come down?... Is it going to be easy to get them away from there?... Damn the reldiges! Run ‘em down if you have to, but bring them in as fast as you can. I want to know what the hell all this is about!... I heard that before. Are any of the others hurt?... Who?... Orlando Potter?... He does, eh? Do any of the others claim to be anything special?”

At the mention of Potter's name, Greta had tensed and given a stifled exclamation. This did not go unnoticed by Radcliffe, whose eyes flicked to her face and stayed there during the remainder of his conversation on the phone.

“The Russian *what?* . . . Listen, Gabe, if you can't recognize a bunch of nut cases when— Oh, the hell. Just get them to the house and I'll make up my own mind. And don't let anyone slow you down, hear?”

He slammed the phone back in its cradle and addressed Greta. “The name Orlando Potter mean anything to you?”

Greta licked dry lips and sought advice from Waldron with wide and frightened eyes, but he had none to give. At last she said, “Yes. he’s on the Congressional Countermeasures Committee. He’s about the only one of the whole lot who’s actually doing anything.”

Radcliffe nodded. “Interesting. Especially interesting is why you should know that—not many people pay much attention to the farce of preparing countermeasures against the aliens. I think we’ve only had half the truth out of you two so far. You said, for instance, that you were in Grady’s office because Bayers picked you up and brought you in for some sort of interrogation which hadn’t come to the point when the alien arrived.”

Waldron and Greta exchanged glances. They had had no chance to consult on the details of their story; it had merely seemed advisable to continue to conceal their connection with Bennett. In the aftermath of shock, though, they now realized that they’d forgotten to allow for the fact that Bayers was in a position to supply additional information.

As Radcliffe proceeded to point out. “Bayers says you were coming away from Bennett’s place when he stopped you, and this is an item you forgot to explain. I don’t like half-truths. Let’s have the full story—fast!”

This has got to be Greta’s decision, Waldron thought. I’m still no more than a stalking horse for this trip.

Silence stretched. Abruptly Radcliffe jumped to his feet and strode the two long paces to confront her. “Talk, damn you!” he rasped. “I know Waldron—met him before. He doesn’t have any surprises for me. But I think you have, and I damned well want to be told!” He shot out his hand, forking finger and thumb under her chin and pressing cruelly to turn her face up to his. “How do you know so much about Potter, to begin with?”

She jerked her head free and shrank back in her chair. “All right!” she blurted. “I know about him because I’m an executive of the Federal Scientific Service—my real name’s Greta Delarue.”

Radcliffe let his hand fall to his side. “Go on,” he said in a softer voice. “About Bennett, for instance.”

“Uh, he’s—or he *was*—”

“The hell with that! We can’t find him, dead or alive, so who cares? What’s your connection with him?”

“He’s also a Federal agent.” Greta seemed to let herself wilt, resigned to the pressure of circumstances, “A trained physicist researching into the

nature of alien artifacts.”

Radcliffe turned on his heel and resumed his chair. When he next spoke, his expression and tone had completely changed.

“You mean it’s not really true that those bastards down in Washington were leaving the aliens to their own business and scratching up their own patch of dirt?”

“Of course not,” Greta said sullenly. “But—Jesus, with a hundred and thirty million demoralized, hysterical fools cluttering up the continent, how much effort do you think was left over to make investigations here?”

Radcliffe thought for a few seconds. Finally he said, “I don’t get one thing. If Bennett was established here—a Federal agent with a good enough cover identity to deceive me, when I thought I knew everything that went on here— why the roundabout method of getting in touch with him? Why the pretense of being Waldron’s mistress; why the pantomime of coming via me instead of going to Bennett?”

Color flamed in Greta’s cheeks, and she let go the final devastating blast.

“Because at all costs he mustn’t be allowed to learn that he has *already* walked into the *City of Angels* and accused you of—”

She broke off. In utter amazement Waldron saw Radcliffe’s face turn white as milk; his eyes closed, and he slumped sideways in his chair.

He had fainted.

To Potter, the events following the riddling of their helicopter with machinegun fire were as inchoate as nightmare. There was a quality of total unreality about the gaping wound torn in Pitirim’s chest, about the hysterical shouts of Dr. Zworykin, about Congreve’s lunatic accusations into the microphone of the radio. Along with the hole in Pitirim’s body, a chunk seemed to have been ripped out of time itself, and the happenings thereafter were all jumbled, lacking any rational sequence.

He spent the whole of the duration of their ride, after landing and capture, sorting out his memories, not because they came back to him in association with elapsed time but because intellectually he knew they must have occurred in some logical order.

First: the descent, a tangle of noise and blood and stinking kerosene spurting from a punctured fuel tank. They came to rest on a highway, with no lights nearby, and the other ‘copter followed them down and men

rushed to surround them and order them out. Frenzied yelling made a nonsensical thunder in his ears, but someone retained enough calm to get matters straightened out—Natasha, he thought, blistering the ears of their captors with a medley of archaic, literary insults.

After that, vehicles came roaring up: huge armored trucks, two of them, their headlights like the eyes of dragons. One of the men who came with the trucks was called Gabe, and took charge, silencing the commotion and asking crisp direct questions. The answers he got, however, made him as confused as everyone else, and he went back to his truck and could be seen talking on a radio-phone while his colleagues stood around with guns leveled, shifting uneasily from foot to foot.

At the edge of consciousness, Potter picked up scraps of information: Grady was dead, Radcliffe was taking over the Ground, the rioting they had seen from the air was mainly among the reldiges... But all such news seemed petty and without relevance. He had not realized to what a pitch his depression had finally brought him: now it came home to him that he had been pinning all his hopes, with mystical trust, on Pitirim—to whom he had never even spoken.

Packed like cattle in the leading armored truck, which became the trailing truck when the drivers backed up to a spot where they could turn around, the new arrivals were carried off as proudly as valuable loot for approval by Radcliffe, the new master of the Ground.

Meantime, what else might not be going on in the world? Were Buishenko's hordes drifting from the sky on parachutes like snowflakes, wielding the new weapon he had heard described? Were the aliens discussing the day's events, deciding that they must make another smashing move against the local vermin? It was better to retreat than to think about such possibilities. He let his mind fold inward, passively enduring what the world might offer.

It was not until they had been driven out of the trucks when they reached their destination, and herded down a bright corridor into a room dominated by a long table, that anything struck through his armor of apathy. Then he came aware with a single lighting jolt.

Greta? Here?

She looked at him without emotion. Beside her was a man whom Potter reasoned would be this Waldron who was to have been her associate. Both of them were in torn, dusty clothing, and scratches and bruises on their faces and hands had been smeared with a yellowish salve. They were clearly exhausted.

So, too, was the man in the chair at the head of the long table, presiding over their encounter as though over the meeting of a corporation board. This dark-haired, immaculate man would he Radcliffe. What sort of person? Greedy, unscrupulous, careless of the future? Presumably; this was what it took to rise to the top in such an environment.

“I guess you’ll be Orlando Potter,” Radcliffe said slowly. “Welcome. Sit down—there should be chairs enough. Gabe!” —to their escort—“What did you do with the body?”

“Brought it in on the second truck,” Gabe told him.

“Have it put in freeze. I don’t know if there’s anyone on the Ground who could learn anything from it, but in case there is, we’ll try and preserve it.”

He glanced along the ranked chairs, close to the table, in which the newcomers had sat down as ordered, made compliant by weariness, or shock, or despair, or sane unwillingness to offend this unknown tyrant.

“I’ve been talking with your friends, Mr. Potter,” Radcliffe said. He didn’t look directly at Potter, but slightly to one side, as though ashamed of something. “I’ve been told a great many things I didn’t know: among them, that it was Corey Bennett who came to the *City of Angels* and—and frightened me so badly.” He moistened his lips. “I sent a party out to search the neighborhood of Bennett’s place. They caught some reldiges and beat out of them the fact that they’d jumped Bennett, thrown him into a ditch and left him for dead. He’s not in the ditch now. I reckon he’s *gone*.”

Silence, except for the panting of gross Abramovitch.

“You’re wondering, maybe, what kind of man you have to deal with,” Radcliffe resumed. He chuckled bitterly. “So am I! I know I’m not a replica of Grady, an opportunist and a parasite. I’ve been used to describing myself as a rat among mice, but today I’ve discovered I don’t know how to be a good rat! Rats carry plague! Rats gnaw power cables! Rats jam machinery and foul granaries and undermine floors! I want to do that to the aliens. I don’t know how. If you can, *show me!*”

Potter conquered his vague astonishment and tracked down his voice in the recesses of a dry throat. He said, “God damn it, we might have been able to, but—”

“But the boy brought from Russia has been killed,” Radcliffe said. “I’ve been told about him. By Greta.” He hesitated. “I wish... But you can’t turn the clock back. The hell with it! I’ll tell you plainly: right in this house I have a kid called Ichabod who last night went into the alien city and came

back with a live artifact. He's yours."

XXII

The way things had turned out made Potter feel he might as well have undergone some such temporal transformation as had taken Corey Bennett back to die, twisted through some alien dimension, in a New York police station. It was pointless to puzzle over why this had happened; accept it as one of the facts of life—say *A of M!* and make the best of it.

He had slept badly, but coffee and a solid breakfast had given him fresh strength, and he was beginning to believe the assurances Radcliffe had thrown out last night. One hell of a lot of points remained to be cleared up, though.

He cleared his throat and looked down the long table toward the dark-haired man at the far end. Instantly there seemed to be a shift of focus, as though—once more—some dimensional twist had taken place and what had been the head of the table became the foot.

"Mr. Radcliffe, you suggested that a survey be made to discover whether anyone else on the Ground might contribute to our discussions." *Oh, this absurd formality—but comforting, with its illusion of human-controlled world.*

Radcliffe grunted, slouching in his chair. "We're still looking. So far we don't have anybody. Scientists mainly seem to have preferred to study the aliens from a distance."

Too damned true. Potter thought of his own attempts to get a decent cross-section of talent into the Ground.

"How about your own committee back in Washington?" Radcliffe asked.

"I'm afraid they're chiefly taken up with emergency administration." Potter hesitated. That was a wishy-washy excuse. Without previous decision, he blurted, "The hell! Let's face it—the people with common sense and guts mostly were blown to bits when the aliens fired our nuclears, and all we have left is second-rate talent dragged in from backwater jobs to hold the line and stop us degenerating into complete chaos. The idea of progressing hasn't got through to them yet; if they can keep from sliding backwards, they're satisfied."

Radcliffe nodded. “Greta told me you were the only guy trying to put some meaning into the bit about ‘counter-measures’. That makes you a rat on my scale of values. Where do we start gnawing through the power cables?”

“I guess as good a point as any to start from would be the case of Corey Bennett,” Potter suggested. “Is anyone not informed about this now?” He glanced at the three most likely to have missed hearing: Abramovitch, Congreve and Natasha.

“I filled Natasha in last night before we went to sleep,” Greta said. “And she promised to pass it on to Abramovitch.”

“Excuse me,” Natasha said. Abramovitch had spoken up, interrupting her usual simultaneous translation, and she relayed, “We have not been told what directly killed Bennett.”

“Cerebral hemorrhage, wasn’t it?” Waldron said. “Uh—at least, our police surgeon said so.” *Eyes like cherries... And now he’s gone. Suppose we had warned him, what then?*

“Not precisely,” Greta said. “When they examined—”

“Wait, please!” Natasha again, holding up her hand while Abramovitch spoke. Translating: “Mr. Abramovitch says that without being told he would have expected on the evidence to find very many cavitations in the brain and radiation damage.”

“I’ll be damned,” Greta said. “That’s exactly what they did find. How did he know? Have there been similar cases in Russia?”

Potter studied Abramovitch with interest. It was common knowledge, of course, that the fat man had been a reputable research scientist before entering the government, but it was a platitude that politics and science mixed badly and a good committee scientist was not likely to make original discoveries. Accordingly he had discounted that aspect of Abramovitch.

“We have studied the brains of what you call ‘weirdos’ and found this damage. Unfortunately, access to the vicinity of the alien city in Russia is almost impossible, and Buishenko kills weirdos on principle.” Natasha paused.

“I don’t get this,” Greta said. “I meant to check sometime, but I haven’t had the chance. What causes the damage?”

“Let us ask you first: what purpose do the alien cities fulfill? Do you believe them literally to be cities?”

“Bennett had a theory about them,” Greta said, and summed up his hypothesis about a transport nexus, mentioning the lack of synchronized observations which might confirm the idea.

“Couldn’t we get the necessary data?” Waldron asked. “Not from Russia, but maybe from Brazil and Australia—”

“No, we can’t!” Potter snapped. “Christ, why are people so eager to assume we haven’t done a single damned thing? The Brazilian one is in the middle of a stinking tropical jungle, and the Australian in the middle of a waterless desert. If we had the spare capacity we might get to the Antarctic one, but like I told you, people mostly aren’t thinking ahead now. I want to hear Abramovitch’s opinion of this theory, anyway.”

“It has also been suggested in Russia and fits many points very well,” Natasha translated. “One: the orientation of the pentagram structure. Two: the radiation damage in the brains of weirdos—”

“I’m not following you,” Greta cut in.

“Interstellar travel would require some means of reversing the flow of time to reduce the immense periods consumed in lightyear journeys, yes?” Natasha cocked an inquiring eyebrow. Potter felt sure she wasn’t having to consult Abramovitch for this, and was impressed at her grasp of what to him was a fantasy. “We know that your Bennett suffered some time-displacement. Also, he was physically turned around. It will follow that certain elements of his body will have had the sign of their charge reversed—”

“My God,” Greta said. “Terrene-contraterrene annihilation. I follow!” And, seeing helpless expressions all about her, she added, “This would explain the cavities in the brain, and the process releases a lot of very hard radiation, too.”

“Also it is consistent with the observed nature of the alien structures,” Natasha resumed. “The artifacts we have obtained do not react in normal chemical fashion. Perhaps they are not matter, but—but coagulations of energy somehow stabilized so that the process of mutual annihilation of matter is slowed down, and shows only in the emission of light.”

“But what does this indicate about the aliens themselves?” Congreve demanded. “Are they, too, coagulated energy?”

“Not necessarily.” Natasha exchanged several sentences with Abramovitch. “It is possible,” she continued, “that they are not unlike ourselves—they have, after all, chosen this planet, with its atmosphere and gravity, for their base. We may have seen only the manifestations of

automatic processes which seem to us inconceivably advanced but which to their builders may be as commonplace as”—she shot a glance at Radcliffe—“mousetraps!”

“This would explain something else, too,” Radcliffe said unexpectedly. “The fact that Bennett was in some way affected at a distance by this process. Also it shows how Ichabod, and your—your Pitirim, were able to enter the alien cities and come out alive. Only trouble is, it flatly contradicts the existence of weirdos, who go crazy.”

Potter revised his assessment of Radcliffe. Upward. He had had no real contribution to make to the discussion so far, but Radcliffe’s point was receiving serious attention.

“A possibility,” Natasha said at last, translating from Abramovitch. “Let us suppose that the operation of the process of transportation negates some basic human assumption such as the direction of the flow of time. Possibly one might begin to remember the future—? If Bennett were alive he could describe how it felt to return to his own past, but we can only now verify this by questioning some weirdos.”

“I’ll arrange to rope in as many as we can find,” Radcliffe promised, and made a note on a scratchpad before him.

“You’re still leaving something else unexplained,” Waldron ventured. “What about the weirdos who don’t come back? I’m sorry—of course, we don’t know they’re weirdos if they—”

His voice trailed away, but the others had taken his point. Greta shrugged. “Almost anything could have become of them. They might have gone mad inside the alien city, or just plain got lost. Or even”—she gave a nervous chuckle—“have been carried off to some other planet!”

There was a moment’s silence. Congreve chuckled abruptly and looked at Radcliffe. “Say, last night you were mentioning some of the things rats do to humans. You left out one important one. They get on ships, don’t they?”

A grim sort of joke, Potter thought. He said, “If I’ve followed this correctly, we can begin to see how Pitirim and Ichabod got in and out of the cities. A proper grasp of the ordinary idea ‘time’ is rather sophisticated, isn’t it? A child, especially one with disturbed mental functions anyway, might not be nearly so badly affected as an adult.”

“ ‘Except ye become as little children’,” Congreve murmured. “The reldiges think the aliens are angels, don’t they?”

The question was rhetorical. Potter disregarded it and went on,

“Clearly, we’ve got to take this Ichabod out to the city as soon as possible and conduct a controlled test.”

“I’ll organize that right away,” Radcliffe said. He gave a bitter laugh. “You know, when you get a bunch of people together and talk rationally about the aliens, they don’t look nearly so frightening, do they? I think we’ve been running scared without any need. Hell, the first time we talk it over we come up with all kinds of solid suggestions for things to be done—even though we *are* a gang of mismatched amateurs.”

“It’s not all that simple,” Potter said. “We’re here in a nice island of temporary calm. But what’s going to happen when Buisbenko’s invasion force moves inland? They’ll do their damndest to stop them, of course, but the defenses on the West Coast are practically back to the musket stage, and Buishenko has this new weapon derived from the aliens.”

“What?” The exclamation was chorused by everyone, including—to Potter’s slight surprise—the Russians, whom he had expected to know about it already.

“What sort of weapon?” Natasha asked.

Potter gave a brief description as he had heard it, and Natasha and Abramovitch started to talk fiercely together.

Radcliffe, ignoring them, said, “It’s okay, Potter—you don’t have to think I’m kidding myself. I know how tough it’s apt to be. I’ve been wondering what in hell I’m going to do about the relidges, for instance. I heard earlier that Brother Mark, the king of the angel-chasers, really did get his yesterday. Walked up to the alien which came to get back the live relics stored in his church, and—well, they said he was struck with a flaming sword, as you’d expect. But now that leaves the relidges like a chicken without a head.”

“I think—” Congreve began, and stopped. The others turned expectant eyes on him. “I think the answer to that is to give them another head, isn’t it? Before some genuine new fanatic crops up from among them and takes charge.”

“That’s an inspiration,” Radcliffe muttered. “Are you volunteering?”

“Well—yes, why the hell not? I’m going to be a fifth wheel around here on the scientific side. And this sort of acting is in my blood. Did they tell you I was just about the best damned spy we ever planted in Russia?”

Before Radcliffe could reply, Natasha let out an excited cry. “Now listen! This weapon of Buishenko’s—it is not from the aliens!”

“Not from the aliens?” Potter echoed in amazement. “But—”

“It is derived from work of Academician Kapitza,” Natasha rattled off hastily. “When he was under house arrest for refusing to work on a hydrogen bomb in the Stalin period, he did research on spherical lightning, and from his work it was discovered how to stabilize a ball of energy in the air with a tight-beam radio projector as power source. The wavelength is about half a meter to four meters. We had done some work in Russia to make the weapon operational, but having so many nuclear weapons we did not complete the research. Buishenko must have had it finished for him and begun to produce the necessary projectors.

“Like I was saying,” Radcliffe announced into the subsequent silence, “when you start talking calmly about these aliens you cut them down to size, hm?”

“I’m not cutting them down,” Waldron said, with a scowl at Radcliffe. “They did blow up all our nuclears—piles as well as weapons. They did drive armies insane just by waving a wand or something... Any ideas on how that was done? If Buishenko’s forces move this way, we’re due for a repeat performance.”

“It would somehow have to discriminate between...” Greta frowned. “Oh, leave that for now. We’re fairly sure it won’t affect us as individuals. Maybe there’s a numerical threshold, or—” She spread her hands emptily.

Potter started to speak, and changed his mind. A thought had occurred to him which might explain this particular mystery. But it was better for laymen not to throw in wild speculations. *Try it out first—when we take Ichabod along, maybe.*

He rapped the table and stood up. “All right! Let’s get to work, shall we?”

XXIII

As though the stars really have fallen to Earth, Potter thought. And the Day of Judgment is at hand!

It had taken them until nightfall to prepare for this crucial test, and now, below them on the dark hills, scores of fires sparkled fitfully, and half-seen figures came and went all around.

“Has anyone counted them?” Greta asked under her breath.

Potter glanced sidelong at her. Their brief separation had returned them to the condition of strangers; they had not enjoyed even a real friendship, let alone true intimacy, during the months they had been physical lovers. The reflection was disturbing. If it were so easy for two human beings to avoid understanding, what hope was there of eventually comprehending the aliens?

He gave a distracted answer to her question, although she had probably not sought one. “Counted the refugees down there, you mean? Two to three thousand, I was told—the most timid of the relidges.”

“What’s more, the silliest of them,” Waldron said. “The ones who think Brother Mark was really Christ born again and will judge the sinners in three days’ time. And the ones whose homes got burned down last night.”

“Just as well it’s summer,” Greta said. “They don’t have any shelter, do they? I can’t see any tents.”

“Most of them don’t even have a blanket,” Potter grunted. “And too scared to go home and fetch one, in case fire descends on the shantytowns like Sodom and Gomorrah.”

There was a brief pause. Waldron said abruptly, “Makes you wonder, doesn’t it, what right we have to object if the aliens treat us as beneath contempt.”

No one had the heart to comment on that remark. Potter, uneasy, turned his head to scan the interior of the ‘copter. Opposite, clinging to Maura’s hand and excitedly pointing out the fires on the ground, was Ichabod; Radcliffe had warned Potter he might be afraid of flying for the first time, but instead he had been eager to try it. Apparently his parents regarded man’s flight as blasphemous, a usurpation of an angelic privilege, and now that he was free of their control Ichabod wanted to try everything they had forbidden him to do.

“What became of the kid’s family, does anyone know?” Greta whispered. Potter spread his hands.

“Rick heard a rumor that they were attacked by a mob of relidges during the riots. Brother Mark threw them out of the congregation because they sold a ‘holy relic’ to Bennett, and some of their former friends decided this was what precipitated the disasters on the Ground.”

“Has he been told?”

“I don’t think so. But he hasn’t asked.”

Forward, there was a discussion in progress. Natasha was piloting—she seemed to have been trained in all forms of flying from gliding to

space-travel—with Abramovitch in the second pilot’s seat and Congreve leaning over their shoulders. Abramovitch had secured from somewhere, thanks to Radcliffe, a chipped and battered portable spectrograph, and was aiming it at various points on the exterior of the alien city.

Natasha turned and called to the passengers behind. “We have a good spot to land now—free of relidges and opposite what should be an easy entry point for Ichabod.”

“Fine!” Potter said.

“I didn’t know we could tell what was a good spot,” Waldron muttered.

“Abramovitch has a theory,” Greta explained. “I came out here with him this afternoon, and we went over Ichabod’s movements of the night before last as nearly as we could reconstruct them. The least active places logically would seem to be in the angles between two arms of the pentagram, and from the hill where the relidges were holding their all-night hymnfest that’s where Ichabod’s shortest route took him to.”

“Does he know what he’s expected to do?” Waldron asked with a jerk of his head at the boy. “Is he frightened?”

“He knows okay,” Potter assured him— “And he doesn’t seem at all afraid. Just pathetically pleased he can do something to gain other peoples approval. It’s a hell of a thing to say, but I doubt if his parents are much loss to him.”

The ‘copter settled. Beyond the windows in the nose, the looming bulk of the alien city rose into the view of the passengers. Potter found himself reminded of something, frowned, and almost at once trapped the elusive resemblance.

Of course. A calving glacier.

But a glacier transmuted. Where the pack-ice of the Arctic would be whitish, grayish, or perhaps greenish, as it bent to the bitter sea and cracked off its daughter icebergs, this was jewel-brilliant, more dazzling than rainbows, more fascinating than fire. Here the ground-color was white with a tinge of yellow, and the bands and striations and jagged flashes which moved across the surface alternated dark red, scarlet and apple-green.

“There’s a meaning in those changes of color!” Natasha said fiercely as she shut off the ‘copter’s turbines. “There must be a meaning! But will we ever know what it is?”

Outside, the sheer bulk of the alien structure was awesome. Potter stared at it, shivering, for long minutes, half aware that the others were doing the same. It's quantity, its volume, made the impression. A human city would be notched, skylined, threaded with streets or alleys. This was a whole, a unity. At a mile's distance one still had to crane upward to see the topmost edge.

He gathered his faculties and turned to Ichabod, bending an encouraging smile on him. "It's all yours now, son!" he said. "You know what you've got to do, and since you've done it before it should come easy."

Liar. For all we know the aliens have lowered the threshold of the defenses and this kid may be due to die tonight.

But Ichabod's eyes were round and unexpectedly fearful as he surveyed the prospect ahead. He kept tight hold of Maura's hand, which she did not seem to notice; she was gazing with childish delight at the gaudy play of colors confronting her.

"I-uh- Can I take Maura with me?" Ichabod blurted. Startled, Potter framed an answer and found the intended words meaningless. What could one conceivably say to a request like that? The girl Maura-Waldron had told him about her-had been treated with dociline or one of the related drugs, and her personality depressed to near the animal level. To send not merely a crippled child but also an idiot on this vital expedition...

"Can I?" The voice was bright and eager. "Can I really? Please let me!"

For a disjointed second he thought it was Ichabod talking again, but it wasn't. It was Maura, having belatedly caught up with the meaning of what had been said, and looking so delighted that Potter almost envied her. He sought advice with his eyes from the others, and while he was still awaiting guidance, he was forestalled.

Maura determinedly urged Ichabod forward, and they set out across the uneven ground toward the polychrome glory of the alien edifice.

"Hey!" Potter threw out a foolish arm as though to draw them back, but Greta, sighing, touched his hand and pushed it down to his side.

"Orlando, what the hell can you do? He wouldn't have gone without her-didn't you hear that in his voice? And if he can go in and come out again, and Pitirim could, then we have one common factor operating: both of them were child-minded and even retarded. So's she, isn't she?"

"Yes, but-" Sweat crawled like insects on Potter's face. "She may go crazy in there, and attack him, or get him lost, or-"

"We know all that," Greta said firmly.

Dejected, Potter turned aside, not wanting to watch the odd pair of explorers depart. Natasha and Abramovitch were doing so, with binoculars and a cine-camera. Congreve passed cigarettes without looking at the people he offered them to; Potter refused and walked a short distance off to be by himself.

At least we should have gone closer, taken them to say a hundred yards...

And the thought died. He was struck by a sudden memory. At the close of the discussion meeting this morning, inspiration had come to him; a hint of an explanation had dawned as to why nearly a million people survived unharmed on the Ground, in weird contrast to the fate of those who had come in armies bent on attacking the aliens.

The theory could be checked. Very easily. He drew a deep breath and set about proving his suspicions.

“Think they’ll make it?” Waldron muttered. He threw down the cigarette Congreve had given him and ground it out.

“A few moments ago, I asked you that,” Greta countered tartly.

“Did you? Oh. Sorry, guess I didn’t hear you.” Waldron stared with aching eyes toward the alien splendor; by now, Ichabod was almost lost in the swirl of color, and Maura, much taller and bulkier, was reduced to a blurred silhouette. “How is it possible to *get* in there, anyway? I can’t see any openings—”

“I’ve asked Ichabod about that,” Greta said. “All he can tell us is that when you get right up close things feel different, and you see—or rather, become aware of—a way in. I tried to pin it down by getting him to make comparisons, but he couldn’t think of anything it resembled.”

“Try asking a rat to describe an experimental maze,” suggested Congreve cynically. “What’s it like once you get in?”

“He wasn’t very clear on that either. There was a long high place full of colored lights, and the shining ball he brought back with him was on—might be a shelf, might be a pedestal, might be something completely foreign to us. He did make a comparison on this, by the way. He said it was like the alley barber’s. I gathered that was a place with a lot of mirrors and bright lights, maybe some barbershop in the city his family came from where he used to be taken as a small boy.”

“Try again,” Waldron told her. “How about a kids’ Christmas show he

was taken to? The cave of Ali Baba was full of jewels, wasn't it?"

"Of course, you must be right," Greta said with disgust at her own lack of perspicacity. "Presumably before the aliens came his parents wouldn't have been so strict—"

There was a noise behind her, and she glanced back, and the last word turned into a choking scream. Waldron and Congreve spun.

With the dragging, zombie-like motions of a man fighting a fit of insanity, Potter was clambering down the short ladder from the 'copter with a gun in his hand. He was coming awkwardly, for he was facing them, finding his balance with his free hand behind his back seizing and letting go of successive rungs. But it was his face which had made Greta scream. It was transformed: the lips curled back in an animal snarl, the eyes wide and staring, a shiny trickle of drool running down the chin.

The gun rose jerkily to aiming position, wavered, steadied, while the horrified Abramovitch and Natasha forgot their need to watch Ichabod's progress with Maura. Potter's jaw clenched with terrible effort, and a sound came between his teeth which might have been, "Help me... !"

The gun twisted and the muzzle pointed now at Potter's own temple, and Waldron moved.

Infinitely long ago, infinitely far away, a piece of the aliens' incomprehensible workmanship had lain on a table in his New York apartment. Shamefaced, as though it were an amulet, he had pocketed it and carried it at odd moments, knew its weight and shape with greater precision than anything else he had ever handled, even his old police automatics.

He threw.

The heavy, stubby rod slammed on the bones of Potter's upraised wrist with a noise like a hammer, and in the same instant Waldron followed it, arms at full stretch, to claw at Potter and hurl him the last yard to the ground. The gun boomed, and a flash of heat scorched hair on his scalp, but the bullet whined harmlessly away. He twisted the weapon from Potter's fingers.

"Hold him down!" he shouted, and Congreve seized the flailing arms in an expert wrestling grip. For long seconds, Potter strained to break loose; then, as suddenly as it had come on, the mad fit left him, and he went limp and spoke in a thin parody of his normal voice.

"My God. My God... I never thought it would be so strong!"

"What—what happened?" Greta whispered.

“I thought I’d find out if I was right. About why the armies we sent against the aliens went crazy. And I was. I proved it. Didn’t you see the same thing happen to me?”

XXIV

“The way I see it is this.” Potter conveyed the cigarette he had been given to his lips; his hand shook so badly he dropped ash randomly all over the blanket in which they had wrapped him to counter the temperature-depressing results of shock. “We already know—from studying Bennett’s body, and from the existence of weirdos—that the aliens’ processes have an effect on the human brain. We can guess that they’ve cut out some of the intermediate stages we use in communication and acceptance of information— symbolization, for instance. Their sense organs may be quite different from ours, anyway. But the fact remains: our brains *are affected*.”

“Now, it struck me that possibly there was a—a detector in operation, set to measure a particular complex of nervous signals which associates with hostility. It’s probably not as simple as the way I’m putting it—I visualize two interrelated curves on a graph, one for straightforward intent to attack, one for some quality like what we think of as intelligence, indicating that the attack when it comes will not be the blind pounce of an animal, but something sophisticated enough to cause the aliens trouble. When the combined reading exceeds a certain margin, I’m postulating that a field of some kind is generated to modify the pattern of the nerve signals. What I did was this: I just sat down on the ground and concentrated as hard as I could on my hatred for the aliens and my confidence that we’ll be able to damage them.

“And before I knew what was happening, I had an overpowering urge to go get a weapon and destroy not aliens, but other people. I literally couldn’t control my own movements—it was like being under a post-hypnotic command.”

“But you started to turn the gun on yourself,” Waldron said.

“Yes.” Potter tossed away his cigarette and rubbed his bruised wrist. “Thanks again. If you hadn’t—what *did* you throw at me, anyway?”

“This.” Waldron held it up: the not-glass cylinder.

“An alien artifact? Well, I’ll be damned!” Potter hesitated. “Where was—? Well, I’ll be damned!” Potter hesitated. “Oh yes. Greta, you’ve read up on the Ground. Are there a lot of suicides here?”

“Rumor says yes. Grady never let any figures get out to Washington, though. Bad publicity.”

“Rumor is probably right, then. I was fighting the urge to kill you with all my willpower; something seemed to snap, and I was so depressed and so sure of my own incompetence to do anything, not just attack the aliens but anything at all, that I wanted to end my life.”

“A sort of second-stage effect?” hazarded Waldron.

“I imagine so.” Potter frowned. “There must be a quantitative measurement involved, too. Right now, there are two or three thousand more-or-less organized reldiges camped around the edge of the city. I’ll lay a bet that if they were exchanged for the same number of Buishenko’s troops, they’d take off for an orgy of burning and looting within minutes. Our armies were affected as far away as Ball Club, I seem to remember, which is why the government decreed a no-man’s-land around Grady’s Ground.”

“It fits, Orlando,” Greta said. “It does fit.”

“Thanks for those few kind words,” Potter answered sardonically. He glanced at Congreve. “Mike, can you— give the gist of what I’ve said to Abramovitch, and find out his reaction?”

“I’ll do my best.” Congreve rose and moved toward the spot where the two Russians were still gazing at the alien structure, waiting for the return of Ichabod and Maura.

“How long has it been?” Waldron muttered.

Greta checked her watch. “Almost two hours. We did tell the kid to stay only a few minutes, but—”

“Hey!” Congreve’s voice broke excitedly on the night. “There they are now, but— Greta, didn’t I hear you say you’d told the boy not to pick up anything?”

“Of course I did!” Greta jumped to her feet and stared toward the luminous coruscating wall of the alien edifice. “After the way the aliens came and snatched back the live artifacts everywhere on the Ground, it’s insanely dangerous to take any more!”

“Then the temptation was just too much for them,” Congreve said grimly. “They’ve each got a whole armful of beautiful shining gewgaws!”

Waldron's instant mental comment on the news of Ichabod's reappearance had been jubilant, and followed the almost equally reassuring corollary to what Potter had proposed as the nature of the aliens' defenses. To them, perhaps, it was a trick employed as casually as men would set up an electric fence to enclose cattle—but it did imply that they recognized a faculty of rational planning in human beings.

The possible consequences of a wholesale looting of the aliens' goods, however, drove all the optimism from his mind. He hurried to join the others, peering through binoculars at the figures, which were now close enough to be seen in the light from their burdens.

“What do we do?” he snapped. “Get over to them and make them get rid of what they've taken?”

“I'm afraid,” Potter said soberly, “it's too late for that” He pointed.

Speechless with dismay and horror, they saw: moving with inhuman swiftness outward from the shining city, a thing that did not need the ground to tread on, but moved as a wave moves, making successive volumes of air glow with a furnace-bright radiance. It closed on the trudging humans, and the watchers yelled a futile warning—futile?

Not quite! Waldron felt his heart leap. Maura, perhaps puzzled to hear the distant calling and stirred to a habit-directed response, had turned her head and caught sight of the glowing nothingness swooping—diving?—to the attack. She screamed, loudly enough to make Ichabod jump with alarm, and incontinently let fall the baubles she carried so that she could seize her companion and drag him away.

Startled and frightened at being suddenly grabbed by the hand, Ichabod dropped his treasure too, and his wail of complaint was cut short by a moan of fear as he saw the alien pursuer. Perhaps all the tales of avenging angels his parents had pounded into him rose up to make him forget about everything except flight. Limping, howling wordlessly, he followed on the end of Maura's arm; as for the girl, she went on feet to which terror lent wings.

The pursuer was content with the booty. Above the random mound of shining artifacts it hovered; they were somehow drawn up into its substance, and then it was gone—not visibly along the path it had followed before,

“Thank heaven,” Waldron breathed. “Come on!” He set out to meet them at a run.

“Shall I take him?” Congreve said to Natasha, who had picked up Ichabod and was crooning wordlessly to him over an accompaniment of helpless weeping.

“Thank you—he’s heavy to carry far. But be careful. He has wet himself with his fright.” Natasha transferred her burden to the spy. “How is Maura?”

“Shaking like a leaf, but otherwise unharmed,” Greta reported. She was walking with her arm around the other girl’s shoulders, comforting her. “Which was, after all, the result we hoped to get.”

“A pretty damned negative result,” Congreve snapped. “A couple of nights ago Ichabod went in there and stole a live artifact and got away with it, and now—”

“I’m sorry, that’s not true,” Waldron interrupted. “It was taken back when Radcliffe was arguing over it with Brother Mark.”

Congreve grunted. “I still say the results are negative.”

“I think I’d disagree.” Waldron spoke up with some diffidence, but the point which had occurred to him seemed so important he had to offer it “I’ve been thinking over what—uh—what Mr. Potter said. And it seems to me...”

He let the words die as Abramovitch came toward them at a lumbering jogtrot, uttering explosive apologies which Natasha translated; “Sorry not to have come to help but there were some most indicative spectral readings from the one which came in pursuit—we must get comparative results before we are certain, but we can bring live artifacts from elsewhere and set them up to be retrieved by the aliens—”

They were climbing back into the ‘copter before Waldron got a chance to renew his suggestion. The invitation to speak up came from Greta when she had disposed Maura comfortably.

“You were saying something, Jim—some idea you’d had ”

“Yes.” Waldron stared down at his hands. “I can’t pretend that I’ve followed all the theories that have been chucked around today—so many of them have left me giddy. But I’ve been piecing together what Mr. Potter said with something I think Mike Congreve mentioned, and *also* what you said, Greta, about the common factor in all these cases where someone got into the alien city and came out again without visible harm.” He raised his head to stare at Congreve as the turbines hummed up to takeoff power.

“Didn’t you say you thought it was worth trying to become the leader of the relidges in place of Brother Mark, to stop some unknown fanatic

slipping in?”

“It seemed like a great idea for awhile,” Congreve told him sourly. “The more I think about it, though, the more—”

“Just a moment. Radcliffe once told off Brother Mark by saying Brother Mark wasn’t very eager to try entering the holy city. Wouldn’t it give you the prestige you want if you can walk in and out unhurt to prove your sanctity to the faithful?”

Congreve stiffened. “Hell, if you think I’m going to take a dose of dociline or such, like Maura here, just to be able to—”

“No, wait!” Waldron leaned forward. “There’s something you said this morning, yourself. ‘Except ye become as little children’—remember? Now, there’s a trick you can pull with hypnosis, isn’t there, called regression? You get sort of sent back to an earlier time and behave and think like a child. I’m sorry I put it crudely, but I don’t know much about this business.”

“My God!” Potter said in an awestruck tone. “Mike you’re a good hypnotic subject, too—aren’t you? You must have been, because you said you were once considered a possibility as a hypnospy.”

Congreve had paled visibly. He said, “Yes—yes, of course I’m a good subject. I damned near made the grade there. Are you seriously thinking I could be hypnoed into a state where I could go out in front of that gang of reldiges and publicly walk into the holy city and come back?”

“Greta?” Potter asked tensely.

“You’ll have to ask Porpentine,” she answered, warily brushing back her hair from her eyes. “But it’s conceivable.”

“If this works—!” Potter was practically jumping with excitement. “Waldron, you’ve only scratched the surface of the idea. There was something else Mike said—I took it as no more than a bit of gallows humor, but now I’m inclined to treat it literally. Mike, you said something like: ‘There’s another thing rats do. They get on ships.’ ”

In the silence which greeted his words, a sudden trembling hope took root in all their minds.

Much to their surprise, they found Radcliffe waiting for them personally when they landed. Jumping down first from the door of the ‘copter, Potter called to him.

“It came off! But that’s not the half of what we have to tell you! We have news!” In his frantic enthusiasm for the slim chance they had conceived for their species, Potter found himself forgetting everything else about Radcliffe except that he had not proved to be a second Grady. For a few seconds he found himself almost liking the man.

“I’ve got news for you too!” Radcliffe snapped back. “And it’s a damned sight more urgent than yours! I didn’t radio you because I want to delay it as long as possible before it becomes public. When it does, there’ll be hell on earth—hordes of refugees, probably some of them moving into the Ground...” He passed a hand over his forehead. “Listen: I got this coded message for you, signed ‘Fyffe’. It says—”

He dropped his voice and glanced around warily. “It says Buishenko has taken Victoria and now controls all of Vancouver Island; the Canadian government tried to escape, but practically all their aircraft were shot down. And the invaders aren’t stopping. Presumably they’ve found out that what they want isn’t there anymore, and in that case there’s only one place your what’s-his-name—Pitirim—would have been taken where he could have been useful. Here! And that’s where Buishenko will be heading for next!”

XXV

The distant voice—somehow Potter could not think of it as belonging to an individual with a face and a name, and was mentally labeling it as simply “Washington”—was near to cracking with hysteria.

“Nobody here gives a *damn* what’s happening on Grady’s Ground! Those bastards can carry on cutting each other’s throats till doomsday as far as I’m concerned. We’ve proved it’s no use trying to attack the aliens, and another try had better be left to the scientists when we’ve straightened out the rest of the world. Haven’t you any idea what’s going on? The Russians are in control of Vancouver Island—they’re bombarding Vancouver itself, on the mainland opposite—they’re flying in reinforcements and there’s practically no organized resistance. The Canadian government is a farce now, because they stupidly moved it to Victoria and when the Russians landed they scattered to the four winds. And the situation in the whole northwest is terrifying. In Washington and Oregon the refugees are already on the move— thousands of people trying

to take to the hills, same as happened when the aliens exploded our nuclears, only much worse because this time they *know* the Russians have landed. God's name, Potter or whoever you are! You expect us to have time for some crackbrained scheme to get at the aliens when any minute we may be told that the whole of organized society on the West Coast has *collapsed?*"

"I've told you there's only one conceivable reason for this attack—which isn't a Russian attack as such, but an attack by Buishenko." Potter wiped away sweat from his eyes.

"It's too *big!* Hell, Buishenko is only another Governor Grady, a mad dog living off the scraps the aliens throw out. This is a full-scale invasion, not a—a bandit raid."

"For the last timer Potter felt his temper strain toward the breaking point. "We bred a Grady over here because we were most likely to toss up a sort of super-businessman. Buishenko is more like another Attila—another Khan of the Golden Horde!"

"I haven't got time to listen to this garbage," Washington said. "They used to say you were a key man on the Countermeasures Committee. If you still have the guts, you'll get back here and work with the rest of us. The Committee is close to becoming the government these days—the emergency is never-ending!"

"I'd rather take my chance among the aliens than be governed by a shortsighted gang of second-raters like you!" Potter barked as his temper finally gave way. "The hell with you!"

He snapped the switch and the radio went dead. Behind him, Radcliffe gave a humorless chuckle. "So you finally got a glimpse of the way Washington looks to those of us who settled for Grady instead! Down there, they all have their feet firmly stuck in the mud of the past—and their heads too, for that matter."

"I guess I didn't really expect anything else," Potter said tiredly. "Have you had a chance yet to take stock of what you've—uh—inherited?"

"Pretty well." Radcliffe lit a cigarette and turned it over and over between his fingers. "And before you ask your next question—what chance do we have of standing off an attack by Buishenko's forces—the answer is *nil*. As I understand it, though, Buishenko has about the same chance of getting his army anywhere near the city."

"Not necessarily," Potter sighed. "One of the corollaries of this idea I worked out to explain what happened when we sent troops against the

aliens is that they most likely don't care what we do to ourselves. And Buishenko's men won't be out to harm the aliens."

"In that case, we might as well say our prayers. Unless this crazy notion of Waldron's can be pulled off. Which reminds me of why I came down. Porpentine wants to talk to you. He's waiting outside."

"If anything's come out of his examination of Ichabod, I guess I'd better hear it," Potter muttered. "I can't do anything about Buishenko, so I'll try and forget the bastard."

"I haven't said anything to anyone else yet," Porpentine began, "because I can't make the decision involved. You're as near to government level as I can get. Hell, though—it's more a matter for a philosopher! Listen. Both Zworykin and I have been over Maura and the boy from head to toe. Short of cutting them open for a direct look we've done everything available to us. And they appear to have survived the experience virtually unaffected apart from the scare put into them. Mike Congreve—who's been interpreting between me and Zworykin—is willing to test Waldron's notion of using hypnotic regression to an infantile level in order to go into the alien city, and it's just barely possible it might work. Such a detector as I gather you postulated would be gross in operation, capable of measuring only crude mental attitudes—not that I see how it could work at all, but it's a fair hypothesis.

"The trouble is this. Congreve's a good hypnotic subject, we know. But subjects so susceptible that they might make hypnospies with complete artificial personalities are very rare. And one test subject, anyway, won't prove anything. Ichabod hasn't proved anything about anyone but Ichabod! Suppose volunteers came forward; suppose they prove moderately, averagely susceptible to hypnosis—are we just going to send them off and risk them coming back as hopelessly schizoid as the typical weirdo? Radcliffe roped in a mob of about a dozen weirdos for us to examine, and I've never been so depressed in my life. It's like a walking asylum over our side of the house."

"I guess the volunteers will have to take that risk," Potter said heavily. "What else can we do?"

"Yes, but if those volunteers are valuable personnel? They're likely to be! Hypnotic subjects are generally of high intelligence and strong personality, not weaklings."

"In other words," Potter said, "is the chance of our gamble paying off

good enough to risk reducing some of our key personnel to mumbling lunatics? Hell, how can I say? But I'll tell you this: if Mike Congreve wants a companion when he goes out. I'll volunteer myself."

There was a pause. At last Porpentine said, "You won't have to. Jim Waldron offered himself already, and we tested him. He's a highly susceptible subject, and if the treatment doesn't work on him, it won't work on enough members of the race for the idea to help us."

Two nights later, Waldron stood shivering on the same hillside from which they had watched Ichabod and Maura set off on their nearly disastrous expedition. Distantly there came to him the sound of chanting: the numbers of the relidges had swollen tremendously as news of the fighting to the west spread. A score of would-be successors to Brother Mark were wandering wild-eyed across the countryside, preaching on texts from the Book of Revelations. *If this doesn't work...*

But it had to work. He looked around, seeing Greta—her face revealing a degree of personal anxiety which briefly warmed him—Potter beside her, Congreve, Porpentine, others and others. *Not, let it be hoped, so many that the aliens' detector reacts to a threatened attack.*

"Okay!" Porpentine was saying. "You both know—at the moment—the way we're hoping to work this. When I give the order, you'll regress to the respective juvenile ages which you reach most completely. You'll approach the alien city and if possible enter. You're protected by hypnotic injunctions against taking anything, and against staying too long. The act of leaving the city will trigger the return to normal awareness. Are you ready? When I say 'now'... *Now!*" Waldron blinked and stared at the looming, shining marvel of the city ahead of him. Somehow—he didn't remember how—he knew it was safe to go to it and marvel over its wonders. Particularly if he went with his friend Mike, whose mind was as full as his own with love and adoration for the beings like angels which had made such a miraculous place.

Not saying anything, gazing with hungry eyes at the glory before him, he beckoned Mike and set out across the rough ground.

Oh, the colors! Emerald and amethyst, ruby and turquoise, sparkling and gleaming! But— *mustn't touch!* Mustn't take anything. Look as much as you like, but *leave things alone.*

"I will," Jimmy Waldron said, a good boy aged seven, excited to be visiting such a place with his age nine friend. As he came closer, the riot of

color and light drove everything else down in his mind. The smooth vertical wall was so sheened and filmed with beauty that he never asked himself how he was going to get inside; it was as if there were a pathway—not physically marked, but as real as a straight line from here to there, the shortest distance.

Nonetheless, he was so overwhelmed he found himself hanging back, and Mike had to encourage him with impatient orders. “Come on! We haven’t got long, and there’s lots and lots to see!”

Of course: we haven’t got long, have we? He hurried up.

Without transition, the place of infinite colors seemed to close around him; as though the last few yards of the way compressed, and some single step was over a threshold, into a different room. He gasped.

Everywhere! No sky, no ground, no horizon: nothing but the fantastic rippling of iridescent luminance, like living in a rainbow, like *being* a rainbow!

“We have to turn left,” Mike said, and the words came without sound. “Then we have to go a hundred steps and look at what’s there and turn around and come back. That right?”

“That’s right,” he agreed, and they turned left as they had been instructed, toward the nearer of the two points of the five-pointed star.

Moving, the lights dizzied the mind, snatching at fragments of awareness and scattering them. *I remember when I went out of here before it was to—*

But I haven’t been in here before. How could I have gone out?

Never mind. Isn’t that red lovely? Like a fish, the way the color ripples along the—not the wall, there aren’t such things as walls or floors here, or open spaces. I’m in whatever it is; I’m part of it.

A figure moved ahead of him. He wasn’t supposed to lose touch with Mike under any circumstances. He quickened his pace, forgetting about the need to count a hundred steps, and went toward the moving figure.

And stopped, because it was not his friend Mike.

His juvenile, hypnotically-induced personality conflicted with suppressed adult awareness. He panicked as though a stranger had entered his very brain, and without trying to see what the other—*person*—might be, he fled.

A river of inchoate perception engulfed him: from color, it overflowed to sound, and orchestras and gongs and crashing cars thundered around

him. There was a twisting, there was a wrenching, and his guts churned with nausea, and—

He stopped, so astonished that he forgot everything which had a moment ago been crowding his head. He was himself, adult James Amott Waldron. He was out of the shining city, and his exit had triggered off the post-hypnotic order to revert to normal. To either side, huge gleaming walls receded, as they had the moment before he'd entered. *And he was not on Earth.*

The vision and the realization trod on each other's heels. His eyes, horror-wide, took in a landscape of pale gray rocks, crowned with brownish vegetation; his gasping lungs filled with air that smelt *wrong*—alien! Overhead, a slate-colored sky; to the right, near the horizon, a sun sinking, luridly red and not only from sunset clouds, but by nature. A cool sun, chill and unfriendly.

He leapt back as though from a monster in his path, and the scene vanished. He was again drowning in the flood of color and noise, and his mind was a small shrinking thing huddled in a dusty dark corner of his brain.

“Jim! Jim!”

Bending over him, someone. Fair hair, high voice. Greta. He raised his head and was bewildered to find himself on the familiar grass of Earth. He couldn't speak; his throat was sore from half-remembered hysterical screaming.

“Jim, we thought you were lost! Mike came back more than two hours ago, saying he'd lost contact with you.”

Waldron turned his head slowly, as though his eyes were frozen in their sockets and could face only straight forward, finding no one else in view but one of Radcliffe's men nervously clutching his gun. He whispered, “What happened to the others?”

“They had to go back, Jim. They didn't want to, but they had to. Buishenko is launching an attack on the Ground!”

Radcliffe had planned with care and foresight, no denying that. The more Potter came to know about the man, the more his original distaste was compelled to give way to grudging admiration. This desk, for instance: seated at it, he was as well informed about the progress of events as if he had been physically present in a score of widely scattered locations.

The data came in, though, in snatches, and the assembling of them into a rounded picture was taking an eternity. From Buishenko's airborne forces they had intercepted occasional unscrambled messages, and Natasha had translated and Abramovitch had glossed the words. Similarly, gabbled orders between the defending aircraft and the ground had come through; anything and everything available was being sent into the sky against the astonishing armada Buishenko had mounted.

Clearly his only concern was to get ground forces into the territory around the alien city. He had almost a hundred planes scraped together from God knew where, including a score of pure-jet troop transports and the remainder obsolescent Dyushin and Tupolev civil airliners, not one of them capable of sonic speed. Frantically the Canadian rump government and the military commanders of Federal Far-West Emergency Zone, operating from Spokane, had requisitioned anything they could put aloft—training planes, airliners with the ports smashed out so that machineguns could be mounted, even helicopters which could creep up to maximum altitude and serve as flying launchposts for rockets.

But the whole thing was ludicrous, Potter thought. The human capacity for waging war had been shattered when all the nuclear weapons had gone off at once, and since that time there had been questions of simple survival to deal with. No matter what insane heroism was displayed, Buishenko was going to get through with a substantial force—perhaps as many as five or six thousand men with a lot of conventional firepower.

Intending—what? The only possible explanation was that he planned to become master of Grady's Ground: to parachute his men and his weapons into the no-man's-land, mop up the ill-prepared local forces and stand off the fragmentary armies the American and Canadian governments could put into the field while he fortified and explored Grady's former domain.

"He'll do it," Potter said despairingly.

"I can't stop him," Radcliffe agreed. His face was gray with fatigue and dismay. "Hell, we free traders here have struggled for years to prevent Grady turning his patrols into an efficient private army—we thought if he pulled that off he'd become more than just a power-hungry administrator,

and wind up as an unchallenged tyrant. I've had my men search the Ground and report in. We have no weapons but small arms and a few rockets with warheads of forty or fifty pounds. The patrols are tied up coping with refugees flooding into the Ground from the west. We're sitting ducks."

"The only thing that can save us," Natasha said somberly, "is for the aliens to take a hand."

"But why should they?" Potter slammed fist into palm. "So long as no overt attack is made on them, what do they care about our private squabbles?"

There was a momentary silence. Potter's mind filled with hopeless visions; Out around the alien city, the reldiges, their numbers growing every moment, chanting their foolish hymns and praying to be spared the wrath of heaven. On the roads, maddened refugees flooding away from the invasion. And here, waiting for the storm to break, a handful of people who had kidded themselves they could act against beings closer to the angels...

Is this a case of survival of the fittest? Are we shut out forever from the clan of the highest races—those who come and go between the stars? Buishenko and his kind will never care about the stars. Does that mean that they'll win in the end? A rat with dreams of flying is not a rat which will survive and sow his kind!

Prompted by this dull play of thoughts, he said listlessly.

"Any news about Mike and Jim?"

"Jim got back," Natasha said. "Greta waited for him, and a few minutes ago he came stumbling out, screaming. But he's recovering. The treatment certainly worked on Mike okay—I spoke to Alexei earlier, and he was beside himself."

She hesitated. "There's something strange, you know? Jim said he had looked out—somewhere—and seen another world."

"He *what*?" Potter exclaimed.

"Another world." She shrugged helplessly. "He found himself standing on the ground under a dark sky with a cool red sun and brownish trees on the hills. Alexei and —and Dr. Porpentine are still going over their memories, but that's what I was told."

Potter's fury and frustration rose chokingly in his throat. "You mean it's true that what we thought were cities were a path to other planets, and he actually found his way to one of them?"

He heard his own words, so fantastic he could not believe he had meant them seriously. But they were taken seriously. “Apparently,” Natasha said. “It’s the most reasonable explanation, isn’t it?”

To a girl trained to fly spaceships, presumably it would be reasonable. Potter wrenched his mind free of this train of ideas, and found Radcliffe was speaking in a low voice.

“Check me if I’m wrong, Potter, but it seems to me that if Buishenko does make his landing unopposed and occupies the Ground, Washington will heave a sigh of relief on finding that that’s the limit of his ambition for the time being and turn a blind eye from then on.”

“I wish I could contradict you,” Potter said, resignation in his voice. “I guess there’ll be some fight left for awhile—there are people who’ve never lost sight of the danger from the aliens, who’ve been researching into their artifacts, who’ve come here as Corey Bennett did to try and glean scraps of information we might turn against them. But the spirit is going out of us. Ever been in a country occupied by a powerful foreign army?”

Radcliffe shook his head.

“I was over in Southeast Asia two or three times in the —the old days. You know: there were these uneducated peasants caught between the Chinese communists and their own governments which we were backing: a monstrous clash of ideologies which the peasants didn’t understand. The most advanced machines most of them had ever known were at best old broken-down trucks and farm tractors. And here was this war going on over their heads with rockets and napalm bombs and helicopters... Their minds closed up. They had no—no handle to grasp the situation. So it turned out that the most they could hope for *was* to raise a harvest and mend a leaky roof and keep a few kids from starving to death so they would be provided for in their old age. Their language didn’t even have words for the things the fighting was about! How could they try to comprehend it?”

“You think that’s how we’re going to end up?” Radcliffe muttered.

“I guess so. Oh, maybe in another two or three generations we’ll be adjusted enough to make another attempt at opposing the aliens... but it’s equally likely we may adjust so well the idea never enters our heads. We’ll have become an inferior species. Permanently.”

A voice broke from the radio-phone. It cracked with exhaustion.

“Rick Chandler, boss. It’s no good. Things are out of control. I’ve been trying to get some organization over here on the west side, and everyone’s

dead beat and the refugees are coming like a tidal wave—the cars are breaking down and running out of gas, so they’re coming on foot. We made contact with some Canadian army units and they tell us the planes are due to come into sight any minute. What do we do—pull out?”

“Have you made arrangements for evacuation?” Potter snapped at Radcliffe.

“Rat leaving a sinking ship? God damn, when have I had the *time*?” Radcliffe passed his hand through his hair. “Rick! No point in trying to straighten things out—we might as well leave Buishenko with the worst foulup we can to occupy his mind for awhile. Come back here. If the aliens don’t take a hand at the last moment, we can get a few of us away in the surviving ‘copters.”

“Surviving?” Natasha demanded.

“It’s actually the fuel that hasn’t survived. The news of Grady’s death had interrupted just about everything, including contract deliveries from outside, and anyway since Buishenko landed on Vancouver Island—”

A blurt of Russian came from the radio. They listened with aching intentness, as though sheer willpower could make the foreign words comprehensible.

And then Natasha laughed and clapped her hands. Beside her, Abramovitch hoisted his gross body to his feet and began to make a crazy dance of joy around the room. Porter and Radcliffe stared in amazement.

“What the hell is that for?” Radcliffe blasted.

“They are turning back!” Natasha explained, fighting down a babble of hysterical delight.

“Turning—turning back? But *why*?” Potter spoke with the dazed expression of a condemned man receiving a reprieve long un hoped-for.

“China!” Natasha said. “He said there is a Chinese invasion—the army is moving into Buishenko’s territory at home and they must go back to defend it.” She clapped her hands again, as though their accidental saviors could hear and appreciate the sound.

“Age of Miracles,” Radcliffe said under his breath, and for the first time Potter could remember he felt the phrase was truthful.

There was a long silence. He ended it by getting to his feet. “Radcliffe, have you got a plane I can take? I’m going to Washington.”

“Yes—yes, I have a plane with fuel for that trip, I guess.” Radcliffe seemed to come back from a tremendous distance. “What’s the idea, though?”

“I want to catch those purblind colleagues of mine when they’re still rocking from this shock. I swear I’m not going to let them rest until they’re *throwing* resources into the Ground. Hell, if it has to be martial law for the next generation, I’m going to have scientists here, engineers, physicists, astronomers, doctors, psychologists... You’re going to have more rats here than you can handle, Radcliffe!”

“I get along best with my own kind,” Radcliffe said. “But is it going to be any use?”

“Don’t you see?” Potter demanded in genuine amazement. “Listen! Jim Waldron hit on this notion to help get the relidges under control—said Mike Congreve should try and stage a proof of his superiority over Brother Mark by publicly walking in and out of the alien city. But this is only one part of the story.

“Well begin with this original suggestion—we might as well go to extremes and make Congreve the Archangel Michael! And he’ll preach on the text he mentioned himself— ‘except ye become as little children’. And we’ll pick and choose among the relidges and among everyone we have available, screening them for hypnotic susceptibility—use drugs if we have to, to improve them as subjects. We can hold private tuition classes for the best people we find. And we can send them into the heavenly city. And if it’s true that Jim Waldron found his way by chance right through to some other world, they won’t have to come back.”

“But other planets may not be fit for human life,” Natasha said feebly.

“Do you think I don’t know that?” Potter blazed. “But—name of God, woman! How many people died out there tonight, trying to beat off Buishenko? How many people are dying now because the Chinese are invading Russia? How many people were casually blotted out by the aliens when they set off our nuclears? Maybe we’ll have to think of the people who go as casualties, as we’ve always done in wartime; they’re going to include some of our finest specimens as human beings, but hasn’t war always taken what the politicians call ‘the flower of our manhood’? And surely it’s better to risk death in the cause of mankind than for some damned stupid local ideology or religion or something that’s going to be forgotten in a hundred years!”

“Rats get on ships,” Radcliffe said, as though the whole of what Potter had proposed could be summed up in those words.

“Yes—but whatever the hell you say, Radcliffe, we aren’t rats. We’re human beings, with some guts, some intelligence, some capacity for planning ahead. And there’s going to be a time when those blockheaded aliens come to wish they’d treated us some other way than mowing us down!”

XXVII

There would be snow later, probably; the leaden overcast was threatening and the wind had a keen edge to it. But Fred Johnson paid little attention to the state of the weather, like all the others standing patiently with him on the bleak hillside. His main reaction to the possibility of snow was a vague regret that he would not see how glorious the heavenly city appeared when there was a mantle of white on the earth around it.

By then, though, he would be in glory...

He had been a student electronics engineer before he’d been chosen at a meeting called by the Archangel Michael for special honor among the Disciples. He had been only half convinced before he’d undergone this private tuition; after it, he had fervently decided that his only goal was access to the wonderful angelic city. “Except ye become as little children!” the archangel had thundered—and he had. He waited passive with the rest of the Chosen Disciples, eyes fixed in adoration on the spectacular play of colors transfusing the vast wall across the valley, and never wondered for a moment why he was hung about with all these tools and equipment—an axe, a shotgun and shells, a medical kit, a portable radio, a bag of food, seeds, extra clothing, a load he was just strong enough to carry at a fast walking pace.

So were all the others loaded, with everything that might facilitate their survival—somewhere else. But he made no comment on their burdens either. He would not be able to until the post-hypnotic trigger buried in his mind during those long sessions of “private tuition” in the mysteries of the angelic host was tripped by an external stimulus.

Then he would remember that rats get on ships.

The helicopter settled to the ground alongside the glass-fronted hut

which overlooked the waiting group of Chosen. Radcliffe jumped down and walked briskly—for the air was bitter—toward the door.

The occupants of the hut glanced around as the door was opened, and gave a nod and settled back to their work. Only Waldron and Greta, checking lists and equipment manifests, made time to speak to him.

“Come to see them off?” Waldron asked as soon as he could pause in the recital of names and objects.

“Not exactly,” Radcliffe grunted. “I brought some news from Orlando—thought you might like to hear it direct instead of on a news bulletin.”

“Orlando?” Greta raised her fair head. “I thought he was still in Australia. Is he back?”

“No, he radioed a message to Washington and it was just passed on. They successfully infiltrated the city there at five a.m. our time and the reports look good.”

“Another possible?” Waldron suggested. “More than a possible. They say it’s the best yet—they found a subtropical climate, green vegetation, no large animal life in the immediate vicinity. Of course, it’ll take a long time before we can get anybody through to it, but it sounds great.”

Waldron stared out of the window at the group of Chosen—in all, some eight hundred were being sent today.

“You know, when I got that glimpse of Exit A on my first venture into the city, I was scared *blind*. I’ll never know how I found my way back. It must be possible for human minds to experience the same—the same direction markers as the aliens use.”

“Chancy,” Greta shrugged. “We’re better off using the instruments we’ve developed.”

“Are today’s batch going to Exit A?” Radcliffe asked.

“No—this is the first follow-up party for Exit G.” She scanned the bank of clocks on the hut wall; they showed GMT, local time, sidereal time, corrected transport time—the time by which they planned the departure of the Chosen—and several new rhythms derived from synchronous observations of the energy levels in the city. “Exit A won’t be back until about eight p.m. The Exit G route ought to be at optimum today, though—a clear green-and-purple path straight through. What the hell’s keeping Mike? He was due to start the talking two minutes ago.”

“I saw his ‘copter on the way as I was coming up,” Radcliffe said. “Look,

there he comes.”

They glanced at the gray cloud-hidden sky. All the Chosen were doing the same. The arrival of “Archangel” Mike Congreve was the signal they were so anxiously awaiting. Up till the moment when he showed himself, there remained the lingering doubt about their entry to the heavenly city.

Doubting was over. A ragged cheer went up, and was followed by a wordless chanting to a tune they had all been taught as a hypnotic reinforcement for their orders.

“Quite a man, our Mike Congreve,” Radcliffe said soberly.

True, Waldron agreed mentally. Congreve’s mind had been stocked during the past months with all the data available on relationships within the city; he could find his way within its swirling flows of color and sound as easily as he could on a human street. So far he had escorted parties totaling almost fourteen thousand people into the city and out to the various exits which exploration had shown to lead to habitable worlds.

Of course, “habitable” would remain a doubtful term for generations; some undiscovered plague might spring up, some long-term effect of alien chemicals in what appeared to be usable soil might depress the level of intelligence... But there was a slim chance, worth taking, of ultimate success.

There were other exits to be investigated later; so far, they had only been labeled as “dangerous-we-assume” because all those who ventured out through them failed to return with news of what they had found. But with better facilities, better equipment, more knowledge of what the aliens would disregard within the city, others would follow.

“It’s a big batch today,” Radcliffe muttered. “Aren’t you taking risks?”

“How do you mean?” Greta cocked her head. “Think the aliens will be alarmed by the numbers we’re putting in?”

“Isn’t it a possibility?”

“It’s always a possibility. But now that we’ve cleared the Ground of people in the know, there are never more than a few dozen un hypnotized minds available to trigger the detectors, and no matter how many hypnoed ones we assemble, we get no overt reaction. I think the aliens are tired of bothering with us. We’ve put up with rats and mice for thousands of years, and only moved against them when they did us direct harm: robbed our larders, or carried a plague we could catch from them. No, I doubt if the aliens could care less as long as we keep from doing actual harm on the way through.”

“Suppose we—well, affect them in some way we don’t know about,” Radcliffe objected. “Mice stink, for example. That’s regarded as a good reason to poison them even if all the food in the house is in cans they can’t interfere with.”

“We’ll go on taking that chance,” Waldron grunted. “What else can we do? This lousy little planet is in such a mess now— You’re keeping up with the news from Asia?”

“God, yes!” Radcliffe shuddered, his eyes on the group of Chosen as their “Archangel” addressed them before leading them down the hill. The booming amplified voice made the windows rattle in their hastily-carpen-tered frames. “It’s spilling over everywhere now. Some of the experts say the winter will cost twenty million casualties after the disruption of the harvest over there. And they’re still at it, like animals.”

“Can we have silence please?” Natasha interjected. She was seated at the desk under the window, Abramovitch beside her, watching the play of analyzed color on a spectrograph with a ground-glass screen. Picking up a microphone she went on without a pause:

“Mike, the colors are coming up to Exit G pattern now. Pavel says on the average they take three minutes to stabilize. As soon as you get four green flashes you can take them down the hill, okay?”

“Thanks!” came the whispered reply; there was a contact mike taped to Congreve’s throat for messages he didn’t want the Chosen to overhear.

Abramovitch leaned back and gave a mountainous sigh as he reached for a cigarette. He said something in Russian to Natasha, and laughed. He had learned a little English in the past few months, but still was far from fluent.

“What was that?” Greta inquired. It passed briefly across her mind that when there had seemed no hope of more than surviving under alien domination she had hated this would-have-been spacewoman for being so much better at competing with men. The feeling had been eroded. There were more important matters to concern her.

“Pavel says he is like a man in a post office, or the booking clerk at the railroad station—always hearing about distant places and never getting the chance to see any or them himself because he has too little pay for a foreign vacation. And now doubtless they will ask for him to go to Australia when they find a good exit there, and he will have been all around this small planet and still not have travelled properly.”

“He’s damned right,” Waldron said. He stared after the Chosen. The

four green flashes which indicated the coming availability of Exit G had shown slightly ahead of schedule, and Congreve was heading down the hill, the others following him in an irregular procession.

“He’s so damned right, in fact,” Waldron continued, “that I want to do something about it. I’ve been in and out of there a dozen times—I’ve been through Exit G and found my way home again, and I’ve seen a bird as big as an eagle that wasn’t a bird but the detachable crown of a tree, and a rock that wasn’t a rock but a colony of cells like a beehive, all the cells hard as stone... I think someone else can take over what I’ve been doing now. I want to see a job through to its conclusion.”

“So do I,” Greta said. “In fact, I’ve made arrangements to go see Louis Porpentine next week. I want to know if I can take the treatment.”

“I’ll be damned,” Radcliffe muttered. “You know something? *I* was calling myself a rat and other people mice. You too, Jim—remember? And here you’re all turning out to be better rats than I am.”

“Not going out there?” Greta suggested.

“Not going.” Radcliffe hesitated. “We aren’t going to shift a major chunk of the population this way, you know. We can hope at best to plant colonies and creep around unnoticed under the aliens’ feet, so that if they ever decide to sterilize us off this world, or another, well have survivors elsewhere. But until they do wipe us out, someone’s got to look after things here, and the way events have shaped up, it’s got to be people like me who are sons of bitches at heart.”

There was a brief silence. Then, as though embarrassed at having spoken so nakedly, he shrugged his coat tighter around him. “I’d better get going. Maura and the boy are waiting in the ‘copter.”

The door slammed behind him.

Everything was going as usual, Waldron judged from the calm way Natasha and Abramovitch sat at their banked instruments. He said in a low tone to Greta, “What do you make of Radcliffe now?” He still hadn’t quite got accustomed to calling him Den, but the reasons why not were growing fewer.

“I’m rather beginning to like him,” Greta said. “I like the way he treats Maura and Ichabod—as though they were his own kids. And they *are* like kids when they’re together, of course.” She cast a quick glance at the ‘copter, just visible in the corner of the long window. “I think he’s been changed, same as we all have. It’s a great thing to have hope, you know. Even if it’s a thin hope like ours.”

“Yes.” Waldron felt for a cigarette and offered Greta one. “I never thought it would come to this, frankly. I was convinced in my own mind that we were going to be reduced to inferior status forever, with no chance of change or progress. Part of the trouble, maybe—” He frowned, struggling for words. “I guess it’s here. We’re so desperate to think in terms of comparisons and analogies: Den Radcliffe with his rats-versus-mice, Orlando with his peasants under an army of occupation, and suchlike—trying to work our way back to familiar past events. But this isn’t the same as anything we’ve had before. It’s unique. Oh, there are some grains of truth in the analogies, granted, but you have to go on and on adding to the list before you get a fair match. Now, we aren’t trapped. We’re maybe like the people who came here from Europe to escape religious persecution, and turned into pioneers and then revolutionaries. The aliens regard us as rats—we can’t do that to ourselves, though. The people like Den who want to aren’t mentally equipped to take off for the unknown and try and start again. So he’s right in staying here.”

He broke off, for the others weren’t listening. They were staring with aching, longing eyes at the spectacle in the valley. One by one, following with fanatical commitment in the steps of their “archangel,” the Chosen were entering the city, on the way to their rendezvous with human destiny on worlds for which there had not yet been time to bestow names.

When the last figures hung about with tools and equipment dissolved into the incomprehensible web of forces which would shrink the interstellar vastness to the dimensions of a morning stroll, Waldron stirred and glanced at Greta.

“When you go down to see Porpentine, I think I’ll come too. Would you mind?”

“I’d like it,” she said, not turning her head.

Waldron leaned back in his chair and gave a sigh. *So rats get on ships. ... True. And I’m going to do the same. But I’m not going to do it as a rat. I’m going to do it as a man.*

At long last the sky began to shed the first of its threatened flakes of snow.

The End