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Chapter I

THE OLD MAN was hospitable but vaguely eccentric. He gave them a tasteless meal of unseasoned compresso-cubes and several cups of unsweetened coffee.

"You are flyers, you say?"

"Yes." Gilliad was polite but guarded. "We crashed in the forest."

The old man shook his head slowly. "We don't see many flyers these days, not in this province. I've heard about them, yes, but I have never seen one—I understand it is a kind of machine, this thing in which you flew?"

"Yes, it is a machine." Kendal's voice was gentle.

"Strange." The white head shook again. "I used to fly once, sometimes I flew for hours at a time but not in a machine. Now, alas, I am too old. When one is too old one loses interest."

He paused and sipped the coffee noisily. "You say you saw the house through the trees?"

Gilliad nodded. "We saw the light"

"Ah, yes, the light"

"It is a big house," observed Kendal. "Big and lonely."

"Big, yes." The cup went shakily back to the saucer. "Lonely, no; they are all here but sometimes I cannot be bothered, some of them talk so much."

He wiped his mouth carefully on a grubby piece of material and looked at them both with bright watery eyes.

"Where will you go now?"

"The nearest city for help," said Kendal.

"City? Oh, yes, that would be Dunsten, four kilometers; you could walk."

"There is no transport?"

"This is a backwater, there is no transport here; no one comes and no one goes."

"Then we must walk." Kendal rose. "Thank you for the meal, for your hospitality."

"Think nothing of it, I have never met flyers before." He rose unsteadily. "I will show you to the door."

"We can find our own way out, thank you."

"Oh, but you can't. You can find your way in but you cannot find your way out until I have shown you."

"Does it matter?"

"Of course it matters." The old man was suddenly shrill and petulant. "There is a way in and a way out, a way to enter and a way to leave. That is the order of things and we must obey orders."

Behind his back, Gilliad looked sideways at Kendal and tapped his temple meaningfully. His lips formed the word "nuts."

"This way." The old man held a door at the rear of the room.

They followed him down a long winding corridor broken frequently by doorways. On one of the doors, Kendal noticed, were the words

"Wife-Julie." On another "Doris," but this one had no qualifying statement.

The corridor turned again and the old man paused. "Keep to the left here, there is a tiger in the third room."

Gilliad looked at Kendal and raised his eyebrows despairingly. When he reached the door with the word "Tiger" on it he kicked it contemptuously with his toe.

There was a snarling sound and Gilliad screamed. He flung himself back from the door and put his hands over his face.

"Oh, my God," he said. There was a jagged gash beneath his left eye and blood trickled down his cheek.

The old man came forward. "I did warn you. I am very sorry, but I did warn you." He leaned forward studying the wound. "It is not deep and Tim's claws are quite clean, I assure you."

"A tiger in the bedroom." Gilliad flushed angrily. "You must be mad, a bloody tiger in the bedroom—"

Kendal kicked his ankle with deliberate savagery. "*Shut up*, you know why we came."

Gilliad clenched his fists but slowly regained his composure. "I'm sorry—but God, who would have expected that *here*?"

"No one," said Kendal, dryly. "This is Canada, not Bengal."

"You're not suggesting—"

"I'm not suggesting anything. We came to find out; this could be a manifestation."

"Manifestation be damned! I saw it and it clawed my face."

"All right, all right, but you are a Susceptible."

Gilliad paled slightly. "Could it, does it—"

"We don't know, do we? They told us so little. All we know is history, the

side-effects and the actual functioning of the addition was never explained to us."

"This way." The old man appeared to have forgotten the incident and was holding open the door. "Just take the footpath through the trees, it will lead you to the highway—turn right for Dunsten."

Outside there was a hint of frost, dawn was breaking, etching the trees against the eastern sky. Both men shivered as they made their way along the narrow footpath—not all of the shivering was from the cold.

When they reached the highway it was immediately clear that it had not been used for centuries. It stretched away in a dead straight line, broken and overgrown with weed.

Gilliad looked uneasily about him. "Four kilometers, eh? Looks more like four hundred—which way?"

"According to the old man, west."

"Let's hope the old goat was right; let's go."

They walked forward but before they had gone a hundred meters, two men appeared casually from behind some trees and fell into step beside them. They wore rough clothing; neither appeared to be carrying weapons but there was about them the unmistakable stamp of authority.

The taller of the two lit a squat pipe and looked at Kendal sideways. "Going some place?"

"Er—" Kendal hesitated. "Er—yes, we are going to Dunsten."

"Where you from?"

"Other side of the province—east."

"What were you doing back there?"

"We were flying; our machine crashed."

"So you spent four hours in the loony bin until it got light?"

"Loony?" Gilliad looked blank.

The tall man removed the pipe from his mouth. "Old man Pitcher is a nut, a third degree addict; we park our nut cases out in the wilds." He sighed. "We've got more space than people in this province."

He paused, tapped out his pipe on a nearby branch and thrust it into his pocket. "Where did you say you were going?"

Gilliad scowled at him. "Asking a lot of questions, aren't you?"

"I am?" The man smiled faintly and removed something from his pocket. "Commissioner Osterly, Ontario Intelligence Service—satisfied?"

"We've done no harm, we—"

"I want to know where you're going."

"We told you, Dunsten."

"Your maps are a little out of date—I can show you where it was." He thrust the empty pipe back between his teeth. "And you're from the east?"

"Yes." Gilliad was still scowling. "Our flyer crashed, you see, and—"

"Ah, yes, the flyer. We had a look at that before we picked you up, very interesting. We don't do any flying in this province ourselves but we know a little about metal—why so many structural weaknesses?"

"Structural weaknesses?" Kendal felt himself paling.

"Yes, as I say, we examined the wreck. We found a fused mass of metal which might once have been a repeller and a lot of structural faults designed to crumple at a minor impact. Before you try and answer that, we see it something like this. We see you floating in on a repeller unit just like a feather. When you touched the tops of the trees, however, all the various appendages crumpled and snapped off as they were designed to do. As a crash it looked real good even if the repeller did get you down safely and burnt itself out automatically as soon as you touched down. When you climbed out of the 'wreckage,' you knocked down a few trees for good measure but, my smooth friends, it is all too clear that that ship was designed for a one-way journey. Have you anything to add to that or do you propose to continue insulting my intelligence?"

Kendal said, tightly, "Is this an arrest?"

"You can call it protective custody if it makes you feel better." He smiled mirthlessly. "In any case, we're pulling you in for questioning."

"On what grounds?"

"There are no flying machines in this province, east, west or south. You therefore flew it from somewhere else, somewhere outside. No one leaves this province, no one gets in —you are spies."

"No, we—"

"Pretty damn poor spies at that. Your Intelligence is fifth rate, your maps out of date and your accent betrays your place of birth—you're both British."

The two men looked at each other, then Kendal shrugged, "All right, we're British, but we didn't come to spy, not in the military sense; we're not at war!"

"Should I know that? There's been no contact for a hundred and fifty years. Why did you come?"

"We—" Kendal hesitated again. "We're observers; we were sent to check a possible surviving civilization."

"Yet you came like spies."

"We did not know what to expect, what kind of reception we should receive."

"That so?" Osterly began to fill his pipe carefully. "Not popular, are you? A blind jump on a one-way ticket strikes me as being desperate."

"All right." Gilliad shrugged. "Politically we stank; we backed the wrong politician."

"Too bad." Osterly puffed at the pipe and it lit. "All the same, if they gave you a choice, as your story implies, they must have given you some device for getting information back."

"Well-yes."

"Before you hand it over, what information were you seeking?"

"We wanted to know"—Kendal was suddenly sweating visibly—"if coherent culture existed, what methods it had employed to suppress the machine."

"Machine? You mean the wish-machine"? He stared at them and suddenly burst out laughing. "My God, man, *they're legal here.*"

Chapter II

"LEGAL!" Kendal stopped dead. "*Legal?*" He stared unbelievably into Osterly's face. The man must be mad or had misunderstood his question. "The wish-machine—legal?"

Osterly only bunked at him. "Buy one yourself when we reach town."

Kendal shook his head as if to clear it. Legal! Everyone here must be insane, third degree addicts; civilization and the machine couldn't live together, history proved that. In England alone, there had been eight million deaths in eleven months, murder, suicide, riots. Hence the M-Police, the Detector-Squads—buy one! Legal!

He said carefully, "Are we talking about the same thing?"

"I think so, only we call them dream-machines."

Kendal leaned against a tree. "I find it almost impossible to believe. Legal! To me—forgive me—it sounds like *blasphemy.*"

Osterly puffed smoke from the corner of his mouth. "Listen, friend, England stood and fought, right? She won, right? But, do you know why she won? I'll tell you, she had only a forty percent addiction. Here, in Ontario, we had a ninety-five percent addiction with the population so thinly spread there was no hope of weeding out the addicts or suppressing the peddlers as you did back home. There's an old saying, 'If you can't beat 'em, join 'em.' Our governing ancestors did exactly that; they had no choice. It was concede to the majority or be swept away, so they conceded. It was damn bad for a time, the equivalent of five men trying to keep civilization going for ninety-five."

Gilliad shook his cropped dark head. "I'd say it was impossible."

"It was almost. At one time the entire population was down to fifty-seven thousand but we gradually pulled through; we're almost back to normal now."

"Normal!" Kendal's voice was almost offensively dubious.

"Look, son"—Osterly removed the pipe from his mouth and pointed it like a weapon—"you don't know, do you? You've been raised in the equivalent of a dictatorship with everything, apart from history, relating to the dream-machine suppressed. We had to live with it, when you've got a ninety-five percent addiction, you have to. If ninety-five percent of *your* population had been drug addicts, you would have faced the same problem. It was just like that save that the machine is worse than cocaine, heroin or anything else you can name and, what was worse, we had no prior knowledge of how to treat the complaint, but we learned; yes, we learned—the hard way."

Kendal said, "So you say, but I'm still wondering if we are talking about the same thing."

"You are?" Osterly took something from his pocket. "What would you call this?" before Kendal could answer, Gilliad made a moaning sound and stumbled backwards so quickly he almost fell. "Put it away, for God's sake, put it away—*please!*" His voice was agonized.

Osterly slipped the object quickly back in his pocket. "See they've done a good indoctrination job on you—how did you get that scratch under your eye?"

"It was—" began Kendal.

"Shut up, you. I'm asking your friend—well?" Osterly was suddenly grim and hard.

"I—I—" Gilliad was aware of a terrifying panic.

"The truth now, *the truth.*"

"It was a tiger." Gilliad was aware that he was almost on the verge of tears. Osterly's face seemed to loom huge in his vision and he was aware of suffocating terror. "It was a dirty great tiger in the old man's house; it clawed me— Oh God, oh God!" Dimly he was conscious that his legs felt

weak and that Osterly's assistant was supporting him around the shoulders. Far away he could hear Kendal shouting: "There was no tiger, *no tiger*, you understand. My friend was shocked, I looked in that room deliberately—"

"Shut up."

Slowly, weakly, Gilliad's senses returned to normal.

Osterly was stroking his chin thoughtfully. "It figures, one Immune and one Susceptible; you may be green but your lab boys certainly know what they're doing."

Kendal, still flushed and angry, said: "So what happens to us now?"

Osterly shrugged. "Out of my hands, up to the Commission now. If they don't book you for spies they can throw an 'illegal entry' at you." He paused, apparently listening, then he smiled thinly. "How do you boys fancy some crude surgery?" He didn't wait for an answer. "I have just been informed by 'Research' that, despite the fact that I've relieved you of a transmitter, someone is still beaming." The smile became a grimace. "Turn it off."

Gilliad backed away, realizing that further deception was wasted. "I can't."

"Can't, eh? Where is it?"

"Embedded in the palm of my hand."

"Sending pretty pictures, too, eh? Lucky you spoke out, I might have been tempted to use my knife." He nodded to his assistant. "Take care of the Immune; there's a ground car on the way. I'd better get this one to the Capital fast; funny sort of reports building up apart from the beam; they want this one priority-plus—come on, you."

Gilliad frowned, unconsciously playing for time. "What do we do—walk?"

"Don't be a fool, there's a *subjo* behind that clump of trees."

Gilliad shrugged. He had no idea what a *subjo* was but he followed

meekly.

When he arrived it looked like a huge beer barrel and a door in its side slid open as they approached.

Osterly waved him inside. "Take a seat and hold tight."

Gilliad had no chance to hold tight. As the door closed there was a curiously mauve flash and he folded in half clutching at his stomach. Perhaps he lost consciousness, for when he was able to straighten out everything seemed normal.

"All right, now?" The other smiled faintly. "You should take a note of this, you've just jumped seven hundred odd kilometers in a machine which doesn't exist."

Gilliad scowled at him. "This is Canadian humor?"

"Point of view; the tiger didn't exist but it clawed your face." He frowned thoughtfully. "I can understand Research making you a priority; just why did your people send someone as green as you?"

When, half an hour later, he was conducted into a brilliantly lighted laboratory, several white-coated men were equally curious.

They gave him a comfortable chair, a tray of food and while he ate they asked him casually almost friendly questions.

"How is England these days?"

"Does London still stand?"

"What is your name?"

The questioning was so casual that Gilliad found himself answering almost without fear until he tried to hold back. It was then he realized that holding back was impossible, something had loosened his tongue and resistance was impossible.

"So you have a dictatorship now?"

"It is for the safety of the people."

"Do you honestly believe that?"

"No, but I can see no other way to keep us safe."

"Yet you, yourself, given the opportunity, would seek less rigid methods?"

"Yes."

"You are, in short, a liberal?"

"Yes." Gilliad knew he was sweating, that he was virtually cutting his own throat but was unable to hold back the answers. Vaguely he was aware that someone had come and operated on the palm of his hand but he had felt no pain and the reason for the moment escaped him.

"In your society, then, you are a poor security risk?"

"Yes."

"A potential traitor?"

"No, not to my country, only to the regime."

They changed the mode of questioning abruptly. "You are afraid of the dream machine?"

"I am terrified."

"They are legal here—what have you to say to that?"

"I find it difficult to believe."

"Would you like to lose this fear?"

"No, I should have no caution, no protection, I should be vulnerable."

"You are also afraid of drugs such as cocaine?"

"Yes."

"Then, being afraid, you would not permit the injection of cocaine in the event of painful injury?"

"That is different."

"It is not different, we have learned to use the machine."

Gilliad heard himself shout: "Blasphemy!" but no one appeared to notice.

A voice said: "This is a bad case; well have to work on the demonstrable/logistics sequence."

"Later. We must fill in the background first and then move on to classification."

"Think we've got a good one here?"

"Too early to say but his reactions suggest an A plus."

"A plus." There was a low whistle of disbelief. "And the British threw him out."

"Fear threw him out—fear and ignorance."

The voices addressed him again. "Is it true you were sent on this mission because you were politically unreliable?"

"I supported the wrong politician."

"Had you a choice?"

"There were two candidates for the one post. I backed the one who lost his reputation."

"And this is a crime?"

"Yes. In the first place my political judgment was at fault, in the second I was an associate and, as such, suspect."

"And the same applies to your partner?"

"Yes. We were given the choice of a routine tribunal or this mission."

"Tell us what happened prior to this politician's downfall, try and tell as if it were happening now, *think* that it *is* happening now—do you

understand?"

"I think so, you mean relive it."

"Exactly."

"Well, if I remember rightly, I was—"

"You *are*, the time is *now*!"

"Yes—I am drinking with a friend..."

Chapter III

YES-YES, that's right, drinking, alcohol, synthetic, grade two, somehow hard to the tongue and with a curiously metallic bite. It was called whisky in public and metal polish in private but all alcohol tasted the same.

Manda was prattling as usual and he found himself answering her mechanically without really paying attention. He wondered briefly why he continued the association, probably she had become a habit, certainly not an occupation, but then she wasn't supposed to be, was she? They were friends—God, how long had that ridiculously transparent covering gone on? They were lovers, no, they shared an intimacy, it wasn't love. In the administrative class a man was expected to keep a mistress, so he kept one, it was as simple as that.

He turned his eyes away from her pretty, characterless face and stared at the wall.

The wall blinked words at him: *Be On your Guard! On Your Vigilance May Depend the Safety of the People.*"

He suppressed a scowl and turned his face away. The other wall said: "*The Machine is Filth. Seek Out and Destroy!*"

He thought, savagely: Even in a public bar you can't get away from it; surely there was no need to go to such extremes. It was becoming like the erotic excesses of some of the early religions, in any case the remedy was becoming far worse than the disease.

His thoughts were interrupted by someone striding towards the table.

"Why, Peter, I thought you were—"

"I was." Kendal stopped by him and leaned forward. "Sorry to break you two up but we've got a problem." He smiled charmingly but mirthlessly at Manda. "Spare him a minute, dear?" His voice was calm but the fair hair was untidy and the handsome face pale.

Gilliad rose, excused himself and followed Kendal to an unoccupied table in the corner.

"We've got trouble, big trouble." Kendal didn't bother to sit down. "There's a detectable 'tap' in our sector."

Gilliad felt the muscles of his face stiffen. "Official yet?"

"Not when I left; I was tipped by a local power tech I know."

Gilliad straightened. "We'd better get over there fast."

"With you, but I don't think we'll make it; it's somewhere in Euston B 12."

"We've got to try."

They tried. They sprinted for the compresso-tube and reached it in thirty-eight seconds. They waited fifteen for a train, the journey took seven, the elevator descent forty-three but when they arrived detector squads were already searching.

Gilliad leaned against the wall, his body feeling cold. "Perhaps we can sneak ahead of them," he said hopelessly.

"You're joking, of course." Kendal's voice was bitter and derisive. "There's tele 'eyes' scanning every inch of this area, we've been snapped and recorded. If we tried a 'detected and exposed' now they'd laugh us into the execution chambers."

Gilliad sagged. "Better follow up, we might just get away with a reprimand if we conduct ourselves smartly."

Kendal said: "You're a gibbering optimist but we'll try."

They moved forward, the crowds of sightseers giving quickly away

before their blue "Admin" uniforms.

Gilliad looked about him. So this was Euston B 12, a drab bleak tunnel, twelve stories below ground level. The home of third class technicians, janitors, oilers and similar minor laborers.

Here the roof of the tunnel was daubed and garish with only the crudest attempts to make the solid roof like the open sky—maybe none of these people had ever seen an open sky. Nonetheless, somewhere down here was a "tap"—someone had penetrated a power-beam and was bleeding off minute but detectable quantities of energy.

There was only one reason for a "tap"—something inside Gilliad's stomach seemed to twist unpleasantly—somewhere within this area *someone was using a machine.*

The trouble was that the damn things were so easy to construct, one fibro-prism tube, a Harvey-condenser and a couple of simple printed circuits.

The detector squads in their black uniforms were moving quickly about with instruments trying to center. The tunnel was honeycombed with single unit cells and their task was not easy. A fact made worse by their obvious unease. How long had this "tap" gone undetected and how much time had the addict had to build up something?

Gilliad could almost tell what they were thinking. Where were the robots? The damn things were never there when they were wanted. Why couldn't they have a few reserve Immunes?

One of the uniformed men gave the familiar "thumbs down" signal and the others crowded about him.

The watchers, however, were dispersing rapidly and the two men saw the reason. M-Police were arriving, grim-faced and purposeful. They moved lithely like panthers, thigh holsters and jackboots in sharp contrast to their scarlet uniforms.

The detector squads moved forward, made even more uneasy by the arrival of the police. One of them kicked quickly at the slit of a cubicle door. "Open for inspection. Routine check—open for inspection."

The door remained shut and the man glanced uneasily over his shoulder. "Open for inspection." He was shouting now. "Open for inspection or we shall be compelled to force entrance."

They waited perhaps ten seconds and then one of the men moved forward with a cutter.

Gilliad was aware of a sudden tension, the rest of the squad formed an arc around the door, weapons drawn and ready.

The man with the cutter approached the door with obvious unease. He leaned forward, poised on his toes, clearly ready to leap back at the slightest sign of danger. When nothing happened, however, he gingerly went down on one knee and switched on the cutter, steadying himself with his other hand.

It was then he screamed, dropped the cutter and flung himself backwards, right hand holding his left wrist. "The door, the blasted door!" His voice sounded choked and agonized.

Gilliad, feeling slightly sick, saw that the man's hand was bloody and grotesquely blistered.

"What happened?" Kendal sounded bewildered.

"You bli—" Gilliad bit back the angry words. "Sorry, _the man's hand is a mess; I think the door is nearly white hot."

Kendal said, vaguely, "Oh, I see," and continued to watch.

Gilliad fought down a desire to swear at him. He had nearly said "Are you blind?" but had fortunately checked himself in time, because Kendal was. Kendal was an Immune; only direct actions and what he could deduce by implication had meaning for him. He had seen the man fall, naturally, seen him clutch at his wrist and scream but, because he was an Immune, he couldn't see *why*. Kendal was one of the fortunate blind in the kingdom of the seeing.

One of the police stepped forward. "Stand back there." Something in his hand flashed and the door curled and crumbled like a burning leaf. A few flakes of powdery gray fell to the ground and there was a faint haze of bluish smoke but the door had gone.

It was then that Gilliad heard, far along the tunnel, the thin almost plaintive wail of robot sirens.

"Robots!" There was an audible sigh of relief and the members of the squad stood back.

The robots, when they arrived, were not impressive, black unreflecting cubes racing down the tunnel; they looked, head on, rather like speeding coffins. They turned and slid through the open door, however, only barely reducing speed.

Inside, there was a faint commotion and after a few seconds one of the robots came out; held in two of its retractable appendages was a dream-machine. It was a crude affair, without sides or container, its mechanism roughly cold-riveted to a rough plastic base but clearly it worked, clearly it had been working recently; the prism tube was still glowing redly.

The watchers drew back uneasily, almost superstitiously, watching both the door and the machine.

Another robot appeared and something stumbled after it— a man, arms bound to his sides by the robot appendages. A young man in a stained white shirt and grubby tight-fitting black trousers. Unshaven, unwashed, chuckling happily to himself like a contented child completely unaware of what was going on.

Gilliad looked at the man's blank unseeing blue eyes and shuddered. It was all right now but wait an hour, wait until the effects wore off and then-He had no time to dwell on the matter, someone shouted: "B-plus!" and there was an immediate scramble for safety. Gilliad was with them, only Kendal and the robots stood their ground.

After running about eighty feet, Gilliad tripped and went sprawling. As he fell he had the impression of something huge and black swooping low over his body. He lay still shuddering but it did not return.

Far up the tunnel a man screamed piercingly; there was the rasping discharge of energy guns and then only a babble of frightened voices.

Cautiously he lifted his head and was surprised to find that several of the detector squad were sprawling in the roadway with him.

"Damn good idea to go flat." One of the men had risen to his knees. "They went right over our heads." He suddenly noticed Gilliad's uniform and pulled himself hastily erect. "Uh, I'm sorry, sir—I didn't notice in the excitement. Let me help you up, sir, please."

Gilliad, his left knee throbbing painfully, permitted the man to help him upright. "What the hell was it?"

"Looked like a dirty great flying leaf to me, sir, could have been a bat. Thank God the addict had only been at it a short time, sir, I mean—" The sentence stopped abruptly and the hand which had been supporting him by the arm was suddenly withdrawn.

"Administrator Gilliad?" said a voice.

"Yes."

"You are wanted for interrogation—this way." Two scarlet clad figures stepped quickly forward. "This way."

There was no trial, merely a recital of divided charges. *Direct Guilt*, insofar that you supported injudiciously or by deliberation a candidate of known liberal inclination.

Guilt by Negligence. Inasmuch as security was so laxly enforced as to constitute immediate danger to society.

There was an immediate summing up. "Guilty on all charges but, in view of your previous good records, it has been decided that a privilege of choice should be granted to both of you. You may, if you wish, face public trial before a robotic judge or, alternatively, volunteer for certain classified government programs—"

Chapter IV

GILLIAD BLINKED and shivered, completely unaware that he had lived a small part of his life twice.

The white-coated men did not tell him they had seen the sequence depicted three-dimensionally through a special projector in another room.

Their voices were cool, neutral and without triumph. "In the event of an

addict being apprehended, what is the procedure?"

"The addict is confined in a temporary prison until the effects wear off."

"And then?"

"Then"—Gilliad tried to hold back the words or alter them but found the task hopeless—"then he is paraded through the streets and publicly executed in a slow-heat cubicle."

"Pretty barbaric, isn't it?"

"It is a warning."

"You approve of it?"

"No, no-God, *no*."

"Good—what else occurs?"

"All his friends, known acquaintances and immediate relatives are likewise executed."

"On what grounds?"

"Firstly, laxity; each citizen is his brother's keeper. Secondly, as accessories, the machine or the plans for its construction must have been received from someone, furthermore he may have passed them on."

"How often do such incidents occur?"

"Once or twice a year maybe."

One of the men nodded. "So you still have peddlers, the peddlers still employ skilled 'fingers' to pick the most likely addicts and, more important, there must be numerous caches containing construction plans. You are, in fact, at war."

"We fight the filth of an enslaving mechanism."

"You're quoting propaganda now. Hasn't it occurred to you that your regime has imposed conditions in which the construction of such mechanisms is most likely to flourish—the machine is an escapist device."

"It is also an offensive weapon, many good men perish eradicating long-term addicts."

"Your good men die on an altar of dedication contrived by the regime. You have Immunes and you have robots but ninety-five percent of your detector squads are Susceptible —why? Don't try and answer that question, I'll answer for you. In war there must be casualties, there must be danger, if there were not, mass support would wane and the regime would collapse."

"You are a cynic."

"Don't be superficial, Gilliad, facts are facts, reason them out for yourself. London is following a fashion copied in degree all over the world; concentrate your population, present a united front, keep the machine out and the people close enough together to keep an eye on each other. Once there were nations and peoples, now there are only cities, ten thousand armed camps in which the people are packed so tightly., they can barely move. United London, Fortress New York, the Bastion of Moscow, Chicago Citadel and countless others. All, secretly, suspect the others of being responsible for introducing the machine. They would go to war at the drop of a hat but fear, if they venture from the strongholds, they will again fall prey to the machine."

Gilliad shook his head frowning. "The machine has the race boxed-up tight."

"Not that tight." Osterly who had entered unnoticed strolled over and sat down precariously on the arm of an empty chair. He puffed at his pipe and squinted at the other through the smoke. "Gilliad, when I found you I should have shot you out of hand." He stood up, ejecting smoke from the side of his mouth. "Nothing against you personally; according to preliminary reports, your rating is pretty high, but I've been talking to the powers-that-be. They don't like the information you got out and are quite sure that London wasn't the only one to pick it up."

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow you."

"If you've been listening to Godden here, you should. Ten thousand dictatorships looking for a scapegoat suddenly discover a piece of Canada in which flourishes a free society, a society in which the dreaded 'machine' is legal; figure it out for yourself. If you've studied history, take away the

machine, work on the problem of reactions—the reactions of a dictatorship to a free society."

Gilliad felt a coldness in his stomach. He understood now only too well, sooner or later someone was going to pay Canada, particularly Toronto, Ontario, a visit. Probably a suicide fleet of aircraft manned by fanatical volunteers.

He said "I'm sorry." Then: "When do you think—?" in a voice which sounded a little choked.

Osterly shrugged. "Not really your fault; they must have got wind of something or they wouldn't have sent you. In answer to your second question, we figure some months both for propaganda and construction. They won't use rockets, they won't use nuclear devices, other cities have too many detection units."

He removed the pipe from his mouth and smiled mirthlessly. "I don't expect you've ever been told about it but a certain city started arming herself once, too massively. She was clobbered before she was half through, no one was taking any chances, so far and no further."

He sighed and returned the pipe to his mouth. "Highest capital in the world once; people not used to it used to get short of breath there. Now, the crater where she once stood is well below sea level; plenty of air now if you can bother to climb down to find out."

The man called Godden said: "What do we do with him?"

"Continue as before, he might be vital."

"He is, I've never run up against a potential like it."

"Fine." Osterly nodded briefly and went out.

Gilliad looked at his interrogators. "What happened to my friend, Kendal?"

"Safe, not even in custody. Of course he can't leave the city but we're preferring no charges as yet."

"And I?"

"No charges against you either. On the other hand we can't set you free, not yet; we need you."

"Why not Kendal?"

"Kendal is an Immune; we can't use an Immune."

Gilliad blinked at them, feeling cold inside, then his muscles tensed and he leapt. "A machine! You bastards, you've been using a machine."

A white-coated figure stepped adroitly aside, another tripped him, a third picked him off with a para-gun. Gilliad, suddenly deprived of the use of his limbs, crashed to the floor and lay still.

They turned him over and looked down at him. "Tough, isn't he? Shoulders of a boxer; lucky we were ready and he was slightly hysterical; hate to tangle with him when he's cool."

One of them bent over him. "Sorry, Gilliad, couldn't have you running amok. Apologies about using certain wavelengths of the machine but, like many dangerous drugs, we know how to use it. We can assure you, however, there is no possibility of addiction." He leaned closer. "Ready to behave yourself now? If so, blink your eyes slowly three times."

Gilliad glowered at them helplessly, realized the uselessness of resistance and complied.

There was a click, life came back to his limbs with a wave of pain and they helped him to his feet.

"Again, sorry."

He didn't look at them. "I feel defiled, contaminated—blast the whole damn lot of you."

One of them smiled at him a little sadly. "Indoctrination and plain damn ignorance; well cure you."

"Go to hell."

The man grinned. "Later—after instruction. In the meantime you're tired. We've fixed a room for you upstairs; hope you'll be comfortable."

The room shook Gilliad almost as much as his previous experiences; it was palatial and could easily have contained six living cubicles. An amazingly wide window gave him a view across the small city to rolling plains and a distant range of mountains. Here and there were clusters of trees—Gilliad had never seen a real tree in his life.

He stood there for a long time, lost in thought, and weariness seemed to envelope him slowly.

Yawning and suddenly uncaring, he undressed and climbed into the high and impossibly huge bed.

He had no conscious recollection of falling asleep but when he awoke it was dark and the wide window was only a dim outline framing a few far stars.

Stirring drowsily he wondered what had awakened him and then he heard it—a wild and curiously undulating wailing sound.

He stirred again, still half asleep; what the hell was it? He had the curious feeling he should know or should remember the sound.

He became aware of more immediate noises, whistles blowing and running feet in the street below.

A man's voice shouted: "Hurry it up there; get those lads into that truck, Slazzen."

He could hear a baby crying, gruff voices, the sound of long lines of transport hissing past and apparently racing out of the town.

The wailing sound slowly faded and the other sounds became clearer.

"Get into line there!"

"Don't panic; evacuation transport is on its way—"

Somewhere a hysterical woman was shouting: "Hilda! Hilda!-I've lost my little girl! Hilda! Oh my God-Hilda, darling, where are you?"

Suddenly he knew what the wailing sound had been and he leapt from the bed. Air raid warning! Everything seemed suddenly to fall into place, the conversation of a few hours ago, "ten thousand dictatorships looking

for a scapegoat"; "someone is going to pay Canada a visit." Only it hadn't been months but hours—his informants had miscalculated badly.

Frantically he struggled into his clothes, nearly tearing them in his haste, and still half dressed, plunged for the door.

It was locked and he ran for the window. This, too, resisted his desperate attempts to open and he banged on it frantically with his fist. "Let me out! Let me out!"

In the street an amplified voice began to boom hollowly at curiously echoing streets. "Final transports! Final transports! Evacuation squads in place. Zero is now one minute and forty-five seconds, all personnel with transport pull out *now*."

Gilliad swung a chair, the window rang hollowly to the impact and the chair crumpled. Outside the last transports whispered away.

Chapter V

DESPAIRINGLY, Gilliad leaned against a wall, almost resigned. They'd forgotten him, forgotten in the panic of evacuation that in one of the city's buildings was a single prisoner who could not escape without help.

Wearily he crossed to a window and stared upwards at the blue-black sky. It looked peaceful enough, a mist of stars, a few wisps of cloud.

The floor jerked suddenly beneath his feet, somewhere there was a blue-white flash and the building on the opposite side of the street suddenly whitened as the building swayed and groaned and an enormous detonation stunned his ears and senses.

He clutched at the wall to hold himself upright, conscious of a curiously twisting sensation in his stomach as huge solid fragments crashed on the roof or dropped heavily into the street.

There were other flashes, half blinding him; then, on the far side of the city, forty buildings suddenly exploded into flame as if drenched in inflammable liquid.

Gilliad felt sweat cover his body; he had always had a horror of fire. He wrenched the bed to pieces and tried to break the window with the leg.

The pane twanged and snapped back, numbing his wrist. He tried the door again with even less success. As he did so the buildings on the opposite side of the street were suddenly engulfed in fire and a tongue of burning liquid began to flow across the road.

Gilliad climbed on a chair and tried to tear down the ceiling, the room dancing redly with reflected flame.

The ceiling was equally strong; only a few dents and scratches resulted from his frantic beating.

There was a curious crackling sound, the window starred, began to sag tiredly and finally began to drip like jelly.

He flung himself at it and was driven back by a rush of heat which scorched his face. He was going to burn to death -Oh God-oh God!

Acrid smoke swirled into the room, searing his lungs and he staggered blindly about coughing and panting for breath.

He was going to die, he was going to burn—help—mad—all gone—he couldn't see—where was he?—hot, so damned awful hot—water, cool water—burning to death—help—for God's sake—help!

Voices—no voices here—all *gone*—"*Hold him down, for Gods sake*"—the pain! Fire eating his limbs—"*There, there, it's all right-*"

"Hypo, quick!"

"Forty grains Cottatoline."

"God, the skin is coming off his arms—"

"Shield is working."

"Thank God, another minute and it would have been too late!"

Slowly, unbelievably, Gilliad opened his eyes; someone was holding water to his mouth; a cool hand rested on his forehead.

"You—you got me out?"

"No—no, we didn't." It was a woman's voice, gentle but impersonal.

He blinked his eyes, trying to focus them. A dark-haired woman in a white coat was kneeling beside him, and looking down into his face.

"I don't understand."

Her expression did not change. "It will be explained— look about you first."

He looked. White-coated men were doing things to his arms and hands which were raw, red and hideously blistered; others worked on his feet.

"You *must* have got me out."

"Keep looking."

He looked and felt himself stiffen. It was the *same room*; beyond the wide but intact window, stars were paling before a whitening dawn. He could see the tops of the familiar buildings on the opposite side of the street; there was no smoke, no flame.

The room itself was a mess, the bed was a ruined tangle with one leg ripped off, fragments of a broken chair littered the floor and the ceiling was dented and crisscrossed with scratches.

He frowned, shifting his body slightly, trying to understand. "It was a dream?"

"You may call it that for the moment—you must tell us about it."

"Tell you—yes—there was the siren. It woke me up. I thought—" Slowly and haltingly he told them the entire story.

They nodded, looking at each other meaningly. The doctors finished with his legs and arms and the pain began to recede, leaving him sleepy.

A man came in with something in his hand. "Found it; it was stuck on the wall of the opposite building."

"Any reports yet?"

"Well, I've only made a superficial examination but, as far as I can tell, it's an emotional tape with a historical vision track put in as an overlay to give the correct effects. Not an expert's job, botched I'd say, but good

enough to produce results." He looked directly at Gilliad. "Someone wanted you dead—badly."

"I?"

"You, boy; someone, who knew machines, arranged one especially for you, tuned it to your wave-length and beamed a destruction impulse at you."

Gilliad blinked at him, drowsily uncaring. He was sleepy, so damn sleepy...

When he awoke, an elderly gray-haired man with a heavy square chin was sitting by the bed.

"Feeling better?" The man didn't wait for an answer. "The name is Keisler; 'Doctor' will do for brevity, although it isn't strictly true in the medical sense, it denotes a profession— I'm an expert in machines. Of course, I had to hold degrees in psychiatry and neurology, but it's not my specialization, if you follow me."

He paused and the long thin mouth turned up slightly at the corners as if he were smiling at some secret joke. "You're a mess, aren't you? Gash under the left eye, hands and feet out of commission, third degree body burns—how did it happen?"

"I—" Gilliad stopped. "I'm not quite sure."

"Wise man." Keisler smiled his secret smile. "You know and you don't know; I'm here to explain it." He lifted something from his lap and Gilliad recoiled, feeling slightly sick.

"Don't be alarmed, it's a dummy." He slid open the side. "Look, no works. I brought it along for demonstration purposes." He laid it carefully on the bed where Gilliad could see it. "As you see, it's nothing more than a small box with an antenna on top to give it realism. If it had works I could press that little switch on the side and it would begin to transmit an electrical impulse which would stimulate certain sections of our brains. That is all a dream machine does, so let's go into the details of the effects of that stimulation." He leaned back in the chair and folded his hands. "Ever been drunk, Mr. Gilliad!"

"Once or twice; I'm not really a drinking man."

"It's of no consequence, you know the effects. You know also, no doubt, the effect of heavy drinking over a long period: degeneration, hallucination and delirium tremens. The hallucinations, as far as we are concerned, are the important factor, the tired old joke about seeing pink elephants." He leaned forward suddenly. "*Think about pink elephants.*"

Gilliad's forehead puckered in a frown. "All right, I'm thinking."

"Good, you are visualizing them mentally, but you *know* they are products of your imagination—the alcoholic doesn't. The interesting part about this is that both groups of pink elephants are subjective, the difference being that you know it and the alcoholic does not. To him the elephants are *real*, the subjective has become objective; to him the animals are living fact."

He leaned back in this chair again. "This is what the machine does. It stimulates certain sections of the brain to such an extent that the subjective, or imaginative products of the mind, become, to the user, objective. A man wants a beautiful woman; he imagines her, and to him, she immediately appears. I cannot stress too strongly that she is still subjective; no one else can see her, but to the addict she *exists*. He can talk to her, touch her and, if he is that type of man, even possess her. His physical reactions, sensations and sexual satisfactions will be exactly the same as if she existed. If, on the other hand, he wishes to fly like a bird, he will fly, subjectively. No one will see him flying but, as far as he is concerned he will be soaring above the roofs."

Keisler paused and frowned absently in front of him. "This experience, whatever it may be, does not constitute an addiction. It may interest you to know that only one in five actual users become addicts and we have learned enough to classify the potential addict. The potential addict is the man with problems, the type of man who lives beyond his income, the man with an erring wife, or worries too much about this and that, the unrequited lover: in short anyone who has good reasons for wanting to escape either from himself or his problems.

"In the subjective world which the machine, responding to his imagination, creates for him, his problems are resolved. Naturally, once the effects of the machine's stimulation wears off, the real problems of the world loom even larger and he resorts to the machine again—once this

becomes habitual he is a second degree addict.

"It is not long before the second degree passes to the third, wherein he is convinced, or convinces himself, that the subjective world which the machine creates for him is the *real* world and the one from which he escapes a figment of his imagination. From there on the deterioration is swift; he gives up his job, omits to wash and shave and devotes his life to his world of illusion. His only detachments from his fantasies then are brief periods for eating and attending to his bodily functions and, in the final stages, these go by the board as well—you're following me?"

Gilliad nodded quickly. He had been completely absorbed in the subject. "The addict becomes catatonic—complete withdrawal symptoms."

Keisler frowned slightly but was obviously pleased. "Thank you. I was unaware that you were familiar with basic psychology."

"I'm not really, but I'm a great reader. Fiction wasn't encouraged but the libraries were well supplied with technical information."

"Why was fiction discouraged?"

"There was no official explanation but I concluded that an addict was bad enough on his own without the stimulus of imaginative literature. Incidentally, you have yet to explain that—how does it, in view of your claim that this dream world is subjective, take such a frightful toll of the innocent?" Keisler's mouth turned up at the corners again. "Quick, aren't you? I was coming to that after history. Be patient, well get there, but in an orderly fashion."

Chapter VI

KEISLER LEANED BACK and pressed the tips of his fingers together. "The dream machine was introduced to the world at what might be termed an appropriate period of history. The financial economy of the major powers, long due for overhaul, was tottering precariously on the verge of inflation. The nations were at each other's throats and to add to this, someone had discovered *Steconite* and everyone was stockpiling for all they were worth.

"In case you don't know about it, *Steconite* did for the incendiary weapon what nuclear energy did for the chemical explosive. A single

container of *Steconite*, no bigger than a hand grenade, could set up what they called a radical-ignition field which could bum everything to the ground within a seventy mile radius. Four such devices could have burned United London clean off the map. Worse, the substance was cheap and easy to manufacture and there was no possible means of detection.

"It was into the nightmare of sudden death and financial ruin, this cesspool of insecurity and nervous tension that the machine came into being. Can it be wondered that the mass of the people rushed for it as a means of temporary escape? They were going to die or starve, anyway, so what the hell did it matter?"

"The original discoverer—a certain Dr. Melchez—was supposed to have discovered the device while experimenting with new neurological techniques. The truth is, however, that the device was discovered in various parts of the world within a period of a few months."

Keisler paused and studied his fingernails absently. "Needless to say, the machine and its effects were immediately classified as top secret but, in the world of those days, nothing was secret. There was international espionage, industrial espionage—the great combines were utterly ruthless—and worst of all, black market espionage."

"Details of the machine leaked and underground peddlers went into business in a big way. At first the machines were sold secretly, for fabulous prices, to the wealthy but, as further black industrials got their hands on the blueprints, prices nose-dived."

"Within six months illicit models could be obtained well within the reach of the average wage-earner. There was even one illicit organization with an ingenious and extremely efficient rental purchase scheme."

Keisler shook his head sadly. "When the various governments woke to the danger in their midst it was too late and, worse, when they tried to do something about it, the trouble began.

"In the first place, once the threat became apparent, half-crazed addicts went to desperate lengths to retain their machines. They barricaded their homes and, in almost every case, resorted to violence when authority tried to remove their machines. This factor alone accounted for seven thousand deaths throughout the world in the course of a single week. At the same time, the suppliers, seeing the prices of their goods soaring again, began a

war on two fronts. The first was among themselves for the possession of lucrative markets while the second was waged against the government agents and police who threatened their means of livelihood. Pitched battles were fought in streets not only between rival gangs but between government forces and organized crime.

"These skirmishes added another ten or so thousand dead to those already mentioned and in the same period."

Keisler paused and began to tick off points with his fingers. "Just for the record and in round estimated figures. Four thousand addicts were so far gone they died of starvation, another eight thousand became insane and ran amok. Twenty-four thousand became third degree addicts for whom nothing could be done. Governments fell, commerce fell apart and, in the riots which followed, another thirty thousand was added to the death role. Within a year the world's population had been cut by exactly a quarter.

"By this time, however, the united cities were coming into being, a series of closely-knit fortresses dominating but not controlling the devastated countries which they once possessed. They were frightened cities, hiding themselves behind endless mine fields and automatic weapon pits. Blind, pilotless machines patrolled the air above, while their radar devices swept the horizons continuously for possible enemies. Behind these defenses, the cities began the surgery of self-purification with a ruthlessness born of desperation. Black industrialists, their entire staffs and associate criminal gangs were executed en masse. All known possessors of machines, their relatives, immediate friends and casual acquaintances were likewise executed.

"The results of these purges produced a death role greater than that of the world's last two major wars combined.

"Such methods should have stopped the rot completely but served only to reduce the casualties to slightly below survival limits. Someone was still peddling machines or supplying simple blueprints by which they could be made. Even today the casualty lists of the combined cities runs very close to a thousand a week despite the increasing ruthlessness and efficiency of the individual administrations. Only in rare cases are these losses out-stripped by the local birthrate; the overall picture is one of a slowly but inexorably diminishing humanity."

Keisler paused and almost smiled completely. "Only in this province is the birthrate rising; only in this province has mankind made good his losses and is climbing upward. Here addicts are certified, graded and rationed—just as drug addicts were once registered and rationed—and only here have we developed techniques which, in forty percent of our cases, produce an enduring cure.

"We made the machine legal—subject to certain medical and psychiatric restrictions. We studied its effects and, in many cases, used the machine as an instrument of rehabilitation."

Keisler made a clicking noise with his tongue. "Sorry, I'm running ahead of myself and, incidentally, evading part of your question.

"It was when the cities began their purification programs that the machines began to show unpleasant side-effects. As I have already told you, to an addict the subjective world is the real world but, generally speaking, he is not totally oblivious of the real one. As soon as addiction became an offense punishable by death, the addict took defensive measures—imaginary defensive measures, it was true—but defensive measures. He conceived—and the machine's stimulation made them real to him—a host of protectors. Some conceived veritable armies, others ingenious booby traps, outrageous monsters, lethal gases and heaven knows what else in case the real world invaded the illusory and he was dragged away for execution. In such an event the addict really believed his protectors would come to his aid."

Keisler cleared his throat and straightened in his chair. "It was only when several good men had met rather messy ends that the authorities began to wonder and, by the time they had finished wondering, the truth was all too clear. In a large number of cases, the addict's imaginary protectors *were coming to his aid*.

"No!" Keisler held up his hand quickly. "Don't ask me that question, Mr. Gilliad, because, to be frank, we have yet to come up with a satisfactory answer. Some speak glibly but a little obscurely of a 'retained hypnotic mental impression' while a more cautious school is engaged in physical research. They are working on the theory touched upon by most great physicists, that *thought has substance*.

"Which school of thought is right I'm not prepared to say, but this fact is inescapable—*if an advanced addict concentrates too long on a means*

of defense, this means of defense becomes objective to a Susceptible."

He paused and looked at Gilliad almost apologetically. "You stayed a few hours with an old man called Pitcher. Mr. Pitcher was a third degree addict; we checked his addiction but failed to cure his aberrations. While an addict he dreamed up a pet tiger; he dreamed it for so long it now exists for a Susceptible. In short, an illusory tiger by which you—as a vulnerable Susceptible—were attacked. From this attack you suffered a psychosomatic wound which manifested objectively in an open wound, but, Mr. Gilliad, your friend Kendal was right—*there was no actual tiger.*"

Keisler rose and began to pace slowly up and down beside the bed. "This city was not attacked from the air; there was no fire, yet the subjective impression from these projected images were so convincing to your mind that you suffered psychosomatic burns from which you nearly died."

Gilliad nodded quickly. "I understand everything you have told me, but why should anyone want to kill *me*? I'm just another Susceptible."

"No." Keisler stopped his pacing abruptly. "No, you're not. You're a Susceptible but a unique Susceptible—how can I put this? Listen, the thing your indoctrination taught you to dread most—addiction—could never happen to you. We didn't rush you up here for nothing, you know. We rushed you up here because our long-range checks suggested that you are a Susceptible/resistant. In brief you are a phenomena that occurs once in every twenty million births. We have one other in this province; we know there is another in the Bastion of Moscow and suspect the existence of a third in Chicago Citadel, but that is all."

"What am I exactly?"

"Exactly, we don't know. What we do know, however, is that you could go on using a machine for years, indulge every whim of your not inconsiderable imagination and still come out of the experience unaddicted. Maybe, in another age, you would have been an actor, or a writer. You have a quality of detachment, a mental recognition device which enables you to indulge but not become involved—we can use a man like you."

Gilliad looked at his bandaged arms. "Doesn't look like it."

"Not a fair test, you had no prior instruction or knowledge-care to

indulge in a simple experiment?"

"Depends what it is?"

"Something quite simple. I want you to concentrate on the thought that you are no longer afraid of the machine; try and convince yourself for just thirty seconds."

Gilliad shrugged. "If it helps."

"Fine." Keisler glanced at his watch. "Start now." He waited. "Okay." He bent down and lifted something from the floor. "Know what this is?"

"A dream-machine." Gilliad didn't recoil.

"Good." The secret smile was back. "This is a real one, I switched it on with my foot. Sorry to play it underhand but it was the only way to show you that we have learned to use the machine for *good*. Consider, thirty-five years—I understand that's your age—of indoctrination wiped away in seconds; not bad."

Chapter VII

GILLIAD FROWNED AT HIM. "Now what?"

"Now we carry it a step further. How would you like to get rid of those bandages and walk out of this room a whole man? It can be done with your cooperation and the machine. A simple reversal of order: listen; there was no raid—you know that now—no fire; you sustained no injuries. You are, therefore, perfectly whole; you have no burns. Just concentrate on that and nothing else."

Two minutes later Keisler said: "Okay, give it an hour and well send for the medics." He sat down again and folded his hands. "Gilliad, if anything, anything like the raid, happens again, fight it. You're prepared and informed now. Tell yourself it isn't real and fight the illusion."

"Who would want to kill me?"

"Someone who knew what you were."

"I'd arrived at that myself, but after that it becomes involved. I could

have been rubbed out in London and, more complicated still, just how did they have someone waiting in Canada when no one comes in and no one goes out?"

Keisler shook his head. "I don't know, Intelligence doesn't know, and, believe me, they're plenty worried. Naturally they're working on it, but if they've come up with anything they're keeping it very quiet."

Gilliad looked at his bandaged hands and frowned. "I'd like to work on it myself."

Keisler's eyebrows rose slightly. "Ambitious, aren't you? You've no local contacts, no previous experience and, furthermore, officially, you're dead."

"Dead!"

"Heart attack; we let it slip out. If they thought you were alive they'd probably keep trying."

"Well, thanks for the epitaph." Gilliad frowned at the bandages again. "I'm afraid, however, you've misunderstood me; I'm not cut out for an amateur detective or cloak-and-dagger intrigues. I just want time to *think*. There's an elusive idea in my head which I've never been able to put together, been needling me for years. All I need is a few pertinent facts and a little digging into records."

Keisler said: "Ah!" and stroked his chin thoughtfully. "You've intelligence, a very high intelligence according to our tests. Conditions never permitted you to develop it to the full but it's there—I'll have a word with Osterly about it." He stretched his arm and touched a section of the wall with the tip of his finger. "Time for the medics; well discuss this later."

Two white-coated men entered and began to cut away the bandages briskly. Gilliad tensed but the flesh revealed was white, normal and unmarked.

"I told you." Keisler was almost smug. "Couple of generations and we'll have this thing inverted completely; it will be a blessing instead of a curse."

Gilliad, who had been examining his unblemished hands, looked up.

"Not if what I think is happening gets to you first."

Keisler's eyes narrowed. "What the hell do you mean by that?"

Gilliad shrugged. "Nothing I can prove; it just fits in with the idea I had earlier."

"I think the sooner you discuss this with Intelligence the better."

"Give me a couple of hours—oh, yes, and I'd like some writing materials, please."

"You're crazy." Osterly's teeth grated audibly on his pipe.

"Possibly." Gilliad's voice was expressionless. "But you still haven't explained how they knew I was here."

"That doesn't prove your point."

"It doesn't disprove it either. As I have already pointed out, the cities were, and are, obsessed with stopping the machine. You, here in Canada, have devoted your energies to cause and cure; just ask yourself who got the most out of this whole lousy deal."

Osterly scowled at him but clearly he was uncertain and half convinced. "It seems simple enough; all I have to do is to run over to Government House and check a few records."

"I wouldn't advise that. Your interest, if I am right, will give the whole show away and, further, you're too valuable."

"You're not suggesting they'd try something on me?"

"I wouldn't care to take bets on it."

"Very well, I'll send a stranger. We have a man from the east here on official business; we'll give him a press card as a cover." He sighed. "Mr. Cantrell is going to hate me for wasting his time; I think he had a blonde lined up for this evening."

Gilliad didn't smile. "Let us hope he makes it. You know the next step if he doesn't."

"You should worry." Osterly strode towards the door. "I can't see it coming to that."

When he returned two hours later, however, his face was strained and grim. He wasted no time with apologies. "Cantrell is dead."

Gilliad looked at him, his eyes without triumph. "How?"

"He fell down the steps." Osterly removed his pipe from his pocket and studied the empty bowl, frowning. "Three lousy stone steps and he slips and breaks his back—guess how that happened?"

"They used a machine."

"We think that, yes. We think they let him in, let him get the facts and killed him as he came out." He shook his head slowly. "We've been blind, Gilliad; the whole damn world has been blind."

"Not blind, taught to look in the opposite direction and at the immediate danger, not the cause of it."

"Lucky we looked in time." Osterly began to fill his pipe slowly. "You prepared for phase two?"

"It was my idea."

"Doesn't mean you like it—scared?"

"Do I have to answer that—never mind—yes, I am scared."

Osterly grinned faintly. "You know something? I like honest men." He lit the pipe and became practical. "Don't worry, you'll be covered and the place is bugged. We'll see and hear everything."

"Right, don't forget my friend Kendal."

"It's fixed."

Gilliad scowled. "I wish you wouldn't speak as if I were saying goodbye to him forever."

Osterly straightened. "Let's face it, shall we? It could be, it could very well be—sure you want to go through with this?"

Gilliad averted his face and didn't answer.

Kendal came in smiling. "Good to see you; ridiculous rumor going around that you were dead."

"I was, nearly." Gilliad waved him to a chair. "Go into details later; time's limited now. I have a date with the local Intelligence people."

"Trouble? Kendal lit a cigarette.

"Yes and no—depends what they've arrived at. Can't talk about it, sorry."

"I understand, but I hope it goes all right. God, this place is wonderful when they let you loose; no M police, no squads, sheer heaven." He exhaled smoke. "Fully recovered now?"

"Completely—if you must know the truth, someone tried to kill me."

"What!" Kendal looked blank.

"Someone tried to kill me." Gilliad lit a cigarette himself. "According to the local experts I'm special."

"Sounds a bit odd to me." Kendal frowned. "No one comes in, no one goes out; even if you were special, as you say, who knew?"

"I thought about that myself." Gilliad studied the tip of his cigarette, then looked up. "Only one person knew and that was *you*."

"I?" Kendal nearly dropped his cigarette, then he frowned. "I don't think much of your humor; that isn't funny, not funny at all. Good God, Dave, we've been friends for years."

"You've stuck around for years; funny when I got moved so did you."

"You're imagining things."

"Am I also imagining that Immunes are the least suspected and the most privileged people in our society? Am I imagining that Immunes always hold positions where they can direct affairs without committing themselves, a power-behind-the-throne-technique, so that if anything blows up it's the poor bloody Susceptible who takes the can back?"

"Tell me, Kendal, why is it that Immunes always work in record and census offices? Is it so they can fake records, thus covering up the fact that they've lived about six times longer than any normal human?"

"Easy, easy." Kendal's voice was soothing but his face was flushed. "I think I'd better ring for a doctor, old chap."

Gilliad smiled at him bitterly. "Do that, you'll get a security man with a gun."

"I thought you were my friend." Kendal made a resigned gesture with his hand. "Seems I was mistaken but, despite your opinions, I'm damn sorry it had to end this way."

Gilliad's mouth thinned. "So am I. It's just bad luck that it had to be you who betrayed me to the other Immunes here." He shook his head slowly. "Quite ingenious really, link up with Canada which is getting dangerous and dispose of Gilliad at the same time."

"Really!" If Kendal was acting, he was doing it superbly. "Where the hell did you dig up these mad ideas, local Security been working you over?"

Gilliad ground out his cigarette; there were uneasy flutterings of doubt inside him but he had to follow it through. "I'll tell you; when my grandfather died he left a few old papers which belonged to his grandfather. One of these old papers had clearly been a recipe cut out by my great-great-grandmother in the days before the machine; it dealt with the making of raspberry and black currant jam. On the opposite side of that cutting was a photograph of a man standing outside the ancient Houses of Parliament. Underneath the picture were the words: "*F.T. Swift, independent candidate for-*" The words ended there but F.T. Swift bore a startling resemblance to you, even to the small mole just above the left eyebrow.

"Oh come now." Kendal's voice was almost friendly. "Really, Dave, you're stretching things to prove your point, aren't you? In any case why haven't you mentioned it before?"

"Because I thought it was as crazy as you're pretending it is now. To get away from you, personally, however, just where do all these machines or their construction details come from? All too obviously from Immunes; no one suspects Immunes, the elite, the untemptables. In any case they've

'built themselves in' so successfully that everyone thinks they're the saviors of mankind."

Chapter VIII

KENDAL FROWNED. "Aren't they?" He leaned forward. They kept civilization going when it was falling apart."

"By suggesting that the only way to survive was by ruthless self-surgery?" He lit another cigarette. "Oh yes, there was a great show of devotion in hospitals and institutions but they had to put up a front. Circumstantially, however, I think if this were given to Intelligence they might start probing."

"So you haven't given it to Intelligence yet?"

"As you mentioned, we have always been friends; I wanted to give you the chance to defend yourself."

"With a gunman outside the door?"

"He's there to defend me."

"Fancy." Kendal ground out his cigarette. "You always were a stupid bastard, Gilliad. Stupid and sentimental; you don't deserve to survive; none of you Susceptibles do. Good God, of all the-

It was then that part of the wall fell inwards with a crash and armed men crowded into the room.

Gilliad, reaching for the gun Osterly had given him, was totally unprepared for what followed.

With incredible speed Kendal spun around to meet his attackers, teeth bared like an animal. His shoulders bulged and his clenched fist swung in a short arc.

The leading man, gun pointed, exhaled breath whistlingly, a bubble of scarlet expanded grotesquely from his open mouth and he toppled sideways. Before he touched the ground, Kendal flung a heavy chair at the others and was wrenching something from his pocket.

Gilliad flung himself to the floor as the back of his chair exploded into flaring fragments. A flash came from the window and he had a confused impression of men toppling sideways and Kendal hurling himself through it.

Gilliad sprang up and ran to the now glassless frame. It was three stories to the street below and Kendal should have been lying still, but he wasn't. He was scrambling to his feet and beginning to run apparently unharmed.

From somewhere down this street there was a sharp report and Kendal clutched at his thigh and pitched forward on his face.

It was then that men sprang from doorways and flung themselves on the still figure. Metal gleamed, handcuffs clicked on wrists and ankles; someone appeared with a heavy chain and they dragged Kendal to his feet, still struggling desperately.

"Calm down, you!" A man swung a gun butt. "Calm down, blast you."

"Bring him back up here." Osterly was leaning out of the window, his lean face beaded with sweat. He turned to someone behind him. "Get a medic; we don't want the bastard dying on us at this point; he's been shot through the right thigh."

They dragged Kendal up and flung him in the only surviving chair. Two men held him down while a medic slit the trouser leg.

"Nothing much; missed the bone and all the main arteries." He busied himself with a tray of instruments.

"Best treatment, stop the pain." Osterly was puffing furiously at his pipe. "Oh, yes, you'd better take some of that blood and send it across to the path' labs for a check—I'm wondering if he's human." He shook his head, frowning. "Deeming is dead, chest stove in; Campbell has a fractured skull—"

He seemed to remember something and turned slowly to Gilliad. "Thanks." He held out his hand and his grip said far more than words. "Thanks a lot."

He turned back to Kendal. "Mr.-bloody-Kendal, you're going to sing for

us, loud and clear."

Kendal's eyes narrowed, then he smiled insolently. "Here's the first verse." Very deliberately he spat in the other's face.

Osterly's fists clenched, muscles in his neck stood out in ridges and his face turned dull red, then slowly and visibly he forced himself to relax. "No," he said, softly. "Oh, no, I'd be descending to your level if I hit you." Carefully he wiped the saliva from his face. "You're still going to sing, mister."

Kendal laughed hissingly. "What will you do—use a machine?"

Osterly smiled coldly. "Beating your little device has produced a whole line of interesting drugs." He turned to the medic. "Start with *Dresseline-barbitrate*."

"It won't work." Kendal sat upright, his shoulders bulged and a chain snapped with a twanging sound. "It won't work, I tell you."

"Shaddup and keep still." A man pressed a gun to Kendal's temple.

"Listen, listen." He looked pale and desperate now. "I can't talk, none of us can, no matter what drug you use; if you succeed you'll kill me."

"I'm crying my eyes out." The medic jammed a hypo into Kendal's wrist with unnecessary violence.

Osterly went closer; the effects of the drug were, he knew, almost instantaneous. "Who, or what, are you?"

"I'm—I'm—" Kendal looked up at him with blazing eyes, then he screamed. His body stiffened, jerked; vapor jetted from his nostrils and his head seemed to crumble and collapse.

Gilliad leaned out of the window and was violently sick. When he turned again to the room, white-faced men were laying the headless body carefully on the floor.

"Get the experts up here, touch nothing, a double guard until they come." Osterly turned away, his face bitter and despairing. "What next?"

"Next," said Gilliad. "It looks as if the entire city is on fire."

"What?" Osterly strode to the window and stared out.

Huge black columns of smoke were crawling towards the sky.

"My God, Government House, Records, Census Building, Provincial Defense—Immune strongholds; they're running and burning the evidence behind them." He thrust a still smoking pipe savagely into his pocket. "Kendal's death must have triggered an alarm system, but they won't get away with it; I'll have them blasted down as they run, I'll—"

"No!" Gilliad suddenly knew and was afraid. "Let them go; they'll have machines, types of machines we can't conceive; your entire force would be massacred."

Osterly turned, his eyes filled with a bitter but grudging respect. "Thank you, thank you for nothing, but you're right, so bloody right: God help us, what's going to happen now?"

Far beyond the city, something silvery floated upwards, tilted and arrowed suddenly towards the sky. It was followed almost immediately by a second and a third.

"So they were all ready, just in case. It's easy for them; they can drop in on any city. With the machines they can convince the defenders they never came, the local Immunes will have faked records all ready to show that the newcomers have lived there since birth."

He paused, fumbled in his pocket and swore horribly. "Damn thing's still alight; must be in a state, never done a thing like that in my life." He clamped the stem savagely between his teeth, "This means war, Gilliad; make no mistake about that; furthermore we can cut that six months to two, maybe less."

He turned from the window, frowning. "From right now Ontario is a beleaguered province; we stand alone." He pulled himself abruptly erect and grinned twistedly at the other. "The Mother Country stood alone more than once, guess we can, huh?—let's go and have a beer."

"A beer!" Gilliad, brought up in regimented society looked vaguely shocked. "Shouldn't we tape a report or something?"

"What the hell for?" Osterly tapped a small device strapped to his left

wrist. "Everything was recorded, they'll have it all; if they want me they'll send for me—come on."

In the almost deserted bar, Osterly poured the dark liquid almost straight down his throat and ordered another. "God, I needed that—drink up."

"Right." Gilliad sipped cautiously, found the liquid strong but to his liking and swallowed gratefully. He, too, had needed a drink badly.

A thought occurred to him and he looked up. "Didn't I hear there was another Susceptible like me in this province?"

Osterly, accepting his third glass, said: "Sure—why?"

"I'd like to meet him."

Osterly, now slightly flushed, frowned. "It isn't a him, it's a her," he said ungrammatically. He made suggestive curving movements with his hands. "Very much so, but you'd have to see Keisler."

"Why?"

"He's put her on a year's rest. She nearly worked herself to death in Rehabilitation and he had to get her out of it almost by force. She's living by herself at the moment in a place about ten miles out of town. It's guarded, needless to say, so you'd need about ten passes to get there." He swallowed noisily and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "If you got the passes you could be out of luck; she has special granted privileges and she could refuse to see you."

He shook his head sadly. "Probably she would; much to everyone's regret she doesn't seem to go for men, any man; timid, shies away like a fawn, if you understand me."

Gilliad nodded quickly but didn't. "What's her name?"

"Vanessa Stour; if it helps, most people call her Tessa, but only Keisler uses it to her face— she likes him as far as she's capable of liking any man. Of course, with the addicts and the mentally sick she's an angel of light, but once they get well—" He left the sentence unfinished meaningfully.

"I was just thinking—" began Gilliad.

"Sorry." Osterly touched a section of his jacket and inclined his head in an attitude of attention. "Yes— yes, Osterly receiving—message from Divisional H.Q.," he said to Gilliad from the corner of his mouth. "Yes, go ahead."

He listened for a long time, then slowly straightened and flicked at his coat.

"Well, that's that." He faced Gilliad somberly. "Preliminary report from the labs suggests that Kendal was quite human but manipulated organically to abnormal strength and supernormal longevity.

"They think he had a plastic device embedded in his skull which served a two-fold purpose. In the first place it made him what he was, an Immune. In the second it was a combined warning and—wholly impersonal—self-destruction unit."

"And just where did he get all that?" asked Gilliad.

"That's the key question, isn't it?" He frowned. "Know something, my friend? When I start asking myself questions like that I get scared, very scared indeed."

Gilliad stared at the remaining liquid in his glass and felt a curious constriction inside him. He, too, was very scared indeed—just what had they run up against?

Chapter IX

KEISLER LOOKED UP from his desk as Gilliad entered. "Ah, I've been expecting you; Osterly called me yesterday, said you might be coming." He laid a long black cigar carefully on an ash tray. "Sorry, but the answer is no—not yet." He smiled his curious smile. "Don't look so surprised; you want to see Vanessa Stour, don't you?"

Gilliad frowned slightly and said, directly: "Why not, why can't I see her?"

"Two reasons. One, she's resting. Two, although you have one unusual factor in common you have no references for discussion. She is an expert

in her field, you are not even a beginner. Anything she said to you would be so much jargon; you would be wasting your time and hers."

"What the hell do I have to do—obtain degrees?"

Keisler chuckled softly and picked up his cigar. "You have to know something about your subject—because you've been beamed once doesn't make you an expert."

Gilliad's fists clenched. "Look, I'm trying to help."

"Don't get aggressive; I know you are and I'm trying to help you—how do you feel about a session?"

"A session?" Gilliad paled slightly. "You mean use one of those damned machines?"

"Face it, man, how can you talk about something you've never experienced?"

He was introduced to his first test under what he considered frighteningly casual conditions.

They shut him in a bare room containing a camp bed and a bare table containing a machine.

"Just switch it on," said an unnecessarily genial technician. "Needs a couple of minutes to warm up, but after that just imagine what you like, nothing to it. Don't worry about time, I've incorporated a cut-out; an hour will do for a beginning-happy dreams."

"Do this often?" Suddenly Gilliad didn't want him to leave.

"Once or twice a week. We get a lot of research people in, you know, then there's a lot of psychs, medicos and what have you. They keep us quite busy. Got a medico coming into the next cubicle in ten minutes, have to hurry—as I said, happy dreams."

Gilliad watched the door slide shut behind him with a feeling of despair. It took him quite five minutes to summon up enough courage to press the tiny switch at the side of the machine.

Give it a couple of minutes to warm up—imagine something—imagine

what?—got to think of something—something nice—what was nice—everything was a blank—somewhere away perhaps—yes, that was it—somewhere away—like that coral island he had once seen in an old film—yes, that would be fine—a nice peaceful island far away from—Good God!

The sun was warm on his naked body and the sand felt soft against his back. Above him, slightly to his right, a palm rustled in a warm breeze.

He sat upright. In front of him the sun danced and repeated itself in the tiny waves. The sea was an incredible blue but far out was a line of foam as huge rollers crashed on an unseen reef.

He rose slowly and the wind ruffled his hair and caressed his body.

This isn't real, he told himself. *It isn't real.*

It felt real. He walked down to the shore and waves washed wetly over his feet. He could even feel the slight drag of the receding water sucking the sand from between his toes.

The sub, or unconscious mind, must supply a considerable amount of detail, he thought almost detachedly. Detail like the grains of silver sand still clinging to his body, the beads of clear water glittering like dewdrops on the hairs of his legs.

I could be stark raving mad, he thought. *I know this is a hallucination and yet—*

He had an hour—why not enjoy it?

He lifted his arms and plunged into a blue warm sea which he knew was a figment of his imagination. He swam beneath it and came up short of breath, shaking the water out of his hair and rubbing his pleasantly stinging eyes. He felt exhilarated; why not go under again? He didn't have to get short of breath, not here—here he could breathe underwater.

He swam, breathing easily, through a cool green world in which pillars and arches of pink coral brought a pastel and peaceful beauty. Schools of brightly colored tropical fish accompanied him as he swam.

When later, however, he broke surface, he was amazed to discover gills

behind his ears. He made a mental note of the phenomena. *I must have a curiously logical mind*, he told himself. *Despite my imagination some facet of my makeup couldn't accept the illogical concept of breathing in water without a means of doing so.*

He shook droplets of water from his hair and thought, *I think I'll fly.*

He arched out of the water but was not surprised to discover that he had sprouted huge white gracefully curved wings. He made a mental note of that, too.

In the middle of his flight, the sea below him became unreal and he sank downwards only to find himself suddenly awake and lying on the camp bed.

He lay there for some minutes, lost in thought, then he recorded his two brief observations and thought some more.

He understood completely now how a human personality could become addicted to the machine. Here was complete escape; the cripple, mental or physical, could become whole. With the machine one could become a God in a world of one's own creation. He could rule armies, destroy improbable giants, indulge to the limit his highest aspirations or wallow in his most bestial urges; every perversion, or for that matter every celestial ideal, could be his in this fantasy world of subjective imagery.

He frowned uneasily at the machine on the bare table. In another age at another time they would have called this sort of thing black magic. Perhaps in the dim and distant past such a machine had existed before. It could be that all the legends of giants, fairies, seven league boots and fire-breathing dragons had sprung from such a device. On the other hand, the basic conception was not new. Men had been influencing or attempting to influence the functioning of the mind for centuries and by all manner of methods. By induced hypnosis, various drugs—most of them dangerous—by fasting and even intense prayer. Many of these methods were, therefore, altruistic in motive, many more escapist or with intent to acquire power over their fellows. The irony here, however, rested in the fact that although the machine provided all these ends, altruistic or otherwise, the majority of users became enslaved by the very device that set them free.

Yes, yes, most certainly he could understand addiction particularly in

the midst of racial unrest and imminent danger.

He left the room and made his way to Keisler's office.

The doctor listened intently as he related his experiences.

"Of course, Mr. Gilliad, the notes you made concerning the gills and the wings are significant. You have put your finger on the vital factors which make *you* different. Your mind cannot accept the illogical and, therefore, your subconscious was compelled to provide the *means* whereby, even subjectively, you were called upon to do the impossible.

"This is the invisible but unbreakable barrier which prevents you becoming an addict, the conscious link between your mind and true reality."

He picked up the cigar and puffed at it thoughtfully. "What do you propose doing now?"

"I'd like your permission for further sessions. I have a vague plan in my mind and a lot of exploring to do. When I have finished I would be grateful if you would go through my notes and give me your opinion of my findings."

Gilliad had twenty-four sessions in all; the first dozen were purely exploratory and undertaken for experience.

He was a tycoon, a superman, an adventurer. He sweated across Texas, lean and bronzed, and fought a gun battle in a garish saloon. He rode with King Arthur and savagely unhorsed a black knight who challenged him.

Afterwards he visited the local library and later that day his observations shook Keisler considerably.

"The saloon battle," he observed, "was frighteningly convincing, even to the tension, the stale smell of liquor and the stink of burnt powder. My own emotions, of terror and ultimate triumph, were in keeping with the situation."

"On visiting the local library, however, I found that the six-gun I used was several years ahead of the period. At this point in American history, firing hammers were 'fanned' back by the free hand and did not re-cock

automatically as did my own."

"Even more to the point were the discrepancies of my appearance as a knight. The helmet was thirteenth century but the visor fourteenth and the rest of the costume a complete mess. The breastplate was of a design favored by the Teutonic Knights and never used in England at any period in history."

"As for the lance, it was standard equipment in the latter part of the eighteenth century but was certainly never used in Feudal England."

"I had a tentative theory that the stimulated mind might draw on racial memory for precise detail but this is not so. It draws not only upon its own knowledge but its own errors and misinformation."

The reports of the twelve final sessions, however, made Keisler sit upright in his chair, and he looked at Gilliad's notes with the shocked expression of a man who is not sure if he has misread, misunderstood or both.

He was going through the notes for a second time when Osterly entered and perched himself on the edge of the desk.

"Don't knock," said Keisler, testily; "I'm only sitting around dreaming."

"Yeah?" Osterly lit his pipe. "Been doing some dreaming, too."

Keisler frowned slightly, then shrugged. "What's on your mind?" He knew he had no way of removing Osterly, furthermore they had been close friends for years. In any case, *oh, damn the man*—he repeated his question.

"Don't know quite, just worried. You know how I think— I smoke, drink beer, smoke, drink some more beer and finally something floats to the surface. What finally came up I didn't like—seems to me those Immunes ran too fast and too easily."

The doctor stiffened, following quickly. "You mean some stayed behind?"

"Seems reasonable, doesn't it? An experienced organization like that doesn't run out on a potentially dangerous enemy without leaving experts

behind to report. The point is, how do we find them? All records are destroyed and there's no way of distinguishing them from anyone else apart from a medical check which would take too long."

He frowned, ejected small puffs of smoke from the corner of his mouth. "If you were an Immune where would you hide?"

Keisler, realizing it was a vital question, gave it some deep thought, then he looked up. "I think I'd pose as a second or third degree addict."

Chapter X

OSTERLY NODDED quickly. "I arrived at that, too. Who would bother to check every nut to see if it was the same nut who was originally admitted?" He grinned. "I would. Men are going through every nut house in the province—any other ideas?"

"Many ideas." Keisler leaned back tiredly. "But no practical scheme for flushing them out."

"My trouble, too." He relapsed into moody silence.

Keisler looked at him, frowned and extracted a cigar from his case, feeling vaguely irritated. Hadn't he enough to do? Of course, understandably, science, medicine and the province's Intelligence Service had always worked in the closest and friendliest cooperation, but even so—he frowned again at the notes and lit the cigar—and then a thought flickered; perhaps it might work...

His eyes blanked briefly and he put down the cigar. "Ben, I might have an idea."

"Can we use it?" Osterly sounded fatalistic.

"I don't know, but I think Gilliad has a completely new approach and, I might add, almost too many original angles." He inhaled smoke. "To be frank, some of the things he's done and, even more, intends to do, frighten me."

"Anything bearing on this problem?"

"I wouldn't know; I haven't asked him yet but he might have an idea."

Osterly took out his pipe and expelled a short puff of smoke. "Get him."

"All in good time; I think you'd better hear what he's done first. All of it, incidentally, without prompting or outside suggestion."

He paused and picked up the notes. "This man, in a course of twelve sessions, underwent a program of self-psychoanalysis. When, later, he submitted himself to experts to check his findings, they were not only found to be correct, they were more accurate, far more penetrating and definitely more precise than anything the psychs could come up with."

"With the machine!" Osterly slid off the desk and faced him. "How the hell did he do that?"

"He adopted the axiom of all religions and all the major philosophies, '*Know thyself*.' Using the machine he placed himself in various conditions of stress and noted the time he began to crack."

"Just how did he do that?" Osterly was interested now.

"In the first instance he placed himself in a position, say, of great danger, and—"

"But he could pull himself out of situations like that by a mere whim."

"Kindly refrain from interrupting—Gilliad instructed his mind to forget this escape route and, more amazing, instructed himself to switch out at the last minute. In short, he contrived a mental safety valve which, again, he instructed his mind to forget. To all intents and purposes, therefore, there was no escape from the conditions of stress in which Gilliad placed himself."

Osterly sat on the desk again and pointed the stem of his pipe. "This is a breakthrough, Ed, even I can see that." He jerked the pipe closer to Keisler's face. "Get him up here."

"As I said, all in good time. I've appointed one of my top men to work with him." He glanced at his watch. "In exactly fifteen minutes they're trying an experiment which Gilliad describes as 'phase two'—care to see it?"

Osterly slid off the desk. "Know anyone tough enough to keep me

away?" He grinned, thrusting his hands deep into his pockets.

Keisler smiled his secret smile. "Let's go then." He opened the door and led the way towards the laboratories.

Inside the experimental room several techs busied themselves around the screen, another group were crouched around a projector.

Keisler waved a vague introduction. "You've met Keldren before, I believe, one of my right hand men—explain the experiment to Mr. Osterly, Keldren."

Keldren had red hair, and a thin red laconic face to match it which, at the moment, was worried, "I'll put it simply, sir; as you know, Gilliad was beamed on arrival and nearly died. He now wants to be beamed again to see if he can survive on his own initiative."

He paused, fingering his lower lip nervously. "He has a theory, probably correct, that even a Susceptible/resistant cannot resist a beam by force of will—the subjective impressions are too damn real and overcome the inner conviction."

"So?"

"He thinks he has found the subjective answer, sir."

"You sound damn dubious."

"I am, sir. In the first place, he's playing it tight to his chest and won't tell me what the answer is. In the second, I got caught, sir; I had no idea what he had in mind."

"Explain that, please."

Keldren hesitated before answering. "Well, sir, he asked me to record the most horrible subjective tape I could think up. He implied he only wanted it for visual study on the screen, so I really went to town. I didn't realize the real purpose, of course—trouble is, sir, I read a lot of off-beat literature and have a particularly vivid imagination."

"There will be safety precautions, surely."

"Naturally, sir, various cut-outs have been hooked to a hysteria index

attached to Gilliad's body but, even with these, it's still damn dangerous."

Men started bringing in chairs and Keisler sat down. "You know the set up, don't you? The beamed picture will appear, complete with sound effects, on the wall-screen opposite. As the beam is directed at, and tuned to, Gilliad's mental cycles he will appear in the foreground. All his reactions, all his subjective responses, will be depicted for us visually."

"I follow." Osterly found that another chair had arrived and sat down. "Where's Gilliad?"

"In the next room—he doesn't like an audience."

"No." Keldren leaned forward. "Right now he's walking— subjectively that is—into a situation I feel guilty about dreaming up." He pointed. "Take a look at the screen—"

They looked and Osterly said: "My God, Keldren, where the hell did you dig up a scene like that?"

Keldren made a tittering sound and shifted uncomfortably. "Guess I must have a horrible mind."

Osterly scowled at him. "You can say that again."

To Gilliad, virtually there in the subjective state, it was more than a product of the imagination, it was reality. He knew, of course, that the scene was a projection and lacked concrete or objective reality. He knew also nothing he was seeing and experiencing existed beyond his contrived and stimulated imagination yet, despite this, there was danger. There might be things in this imaginary environment capable of inflicting subjective or psychosomatic injury which in turn might bring about actual bodily injury. Again, the danger or horror might be so great as to warrant permanent mental unbalance.

He shivered but it was not cold, it was hot here, turgid, stifling and definitely not Earth—Keldren had drawn freely on his vivid imagination and his off-beat taste in literature.

Gilliad sighed, squared his shoulders and the mud squelched about his feet at the slightest movement. Here there seemed nothing but mud, mud and pools of stagnant water stretching away to an unnaturally close

horizon.

A low, red and sullenly savage sun burned low in the sky, its light turning the mud and pools of water to an angry crimson. Even the stray wisps of vapor rising from the desolate landscape had the same sullen crimson.

Gilliad was vaguely aware of a twitching in his thighs and an unnatural lack of support in his knees and realized suddenly that he was terrified. If Keldren had obeyed his instructions, he had not only set a scene, he had put something into that scene which—*Oh, my God!*

The thing which rose slowly above the black line of the horizon had a vicious tiny head perched on a curved, swan-like neck and long as a factory chimney. The body which followed seemed almost as big as the planet itself, huge, undulating and wickedly spiked. He lumbered towards him, the huge feet flinging up gigantic gouts of mud and water.

Gilliad's first impulse was to turn and run but some inexplicable stubbornness made him stand his ground. This *had* to be beaten; there *had* to be an answer—concentrate— *concentrate*—

It was then that something shrieked from the sky and a long gleaming object squelched in the mud at his side.

Keldren, watching the screen, sprang to his feet. "Hey! That's not in it. I never put that in."

Osterly swung his arms knocking the other back to his seat. "Sit down and shut up."

They watched as Gilliad jumped for the gleaming object and raised it to his shoulder.

There was a flash, then another and another. Huge smoking holes began to appear in the monster's side and it rose on its hind legs clawing desperately at nothing.

More holes appeared, then the vast swan-like neck went suddenly limp and collapsed on itself like a suddenly severed rope. Slowly, the numerous legs seemed to give way, the vast body toppled ponderously sideways and lay still.

The screen blanked abruptly and there was an audible sign of relief from the watchers.

"My God, he did it" Keisler's voice was a curious mixture of respect and irritation. "How the hell did he manage it?"

They crowded into the next room and Osterly immediately ordered most of them out "Classified," he said coldly and shut the door.

He turned to Gilliad. "How do you feel?"

"Not keen for a repeat." He lit a cigarette.

"I have the outline now." Keisler drew up a chair. "Please correct me if I am wrong. The projector beamed an imposed situation but in order to make it subjectively convincing it had to stimulate the mind, like a direct session with the machine. You used this stimulation to introduce your own fantasy or, if you prefer it, imaginative counter-weapon –right?"

Gilliad inhaled deeply. "Correct. Clearly Keldren had dreamed up an alien planet complete with monster so I had to counter it with a classic answer. I was a space adventurer so I sent an urgent call to the mother ship for a weapon which was obligingly delivered just in time."

Osterly said: "I don't get it. You knew it wasn't real; why couldn't you just tell yourself it was an illusion? After all, you are a resistant."

"I couldn't; no one can. The only answer is to counter one fantasy with another."

Chapter XI

"SPELL AND counter spell." Keldren was tugging nervously at the lobe of his right ear and his voice was a little shaky with relief. "I'm sorry, Mr. Gilliad, very sorry."

"Skip it; you did a good job."

Osterly scowled. "He can keep jobs like that for himself in the future."

Gilliad sat upright and swung his feet to the floor. "Well get worse than that, far worse."

"I don't follow you."

"Then you should." Keisler lit one of his long cigars. "What do you think the Immunes are going to do when they start—launch rockets, throw heat bombs at us? No, my friend, when they attack it will be a subjective assault; they'll beam us. Their fantasies will come marching into our minds and we shall be defeated before we know what has hit us. So far, Dave Gilliad is the only man to come up with any sort of answer."

"He's a resistant." Osterly's face had lost some of its color.

"True, but perhaps the normal mind can be trained; we'll have to work on it."

"Let's hope you're right—what about the immediate problem?"

"Better tell him about it." Keisler failed in an attempt to blow a smoke ring.

"Right." Osterly went into details regarding his suspicions of an immune espionage organization remaining in the province.

Gilliad thought about it, frowning. "I'm no real expert but to me it becomes more and more obvious that this machine is a two-edged sword—could you beam the whole city?"

"We could but it would be damn dangerous."

"Then I'd better discuss it with the experts first." He turned to Keisler. "This is roughly what I would suggest; it won't hook them all but it should hook quite a number."

As Gilliad outlined his plan and Keisler began to nod Osterly became excited. "By God, it could work!" He began to pace up and down. Finally he tripped over an object in the corner and swore. "What the hell's that thing?" He rubbed a bruised shin angrily.

Gilliad grinned. "It's a barbell; athletes use them for weight-lifting."

"What sort of strong man would lift that? Got enough weights on to defeat an elephant—what gives?"

Keldren smiled sweetly. "Sorry, classified information, Mr. Osterly."

The security man reddened, then grinned ruefully. "I guess I was due for that crack, Keldren; let's get back to business. We could set it up in three days."

"And in four, perhaps less," said Gilliad, "I should be able to tell you about the barbell." He ground out his cigarette. "In the meantime, we could start this thing early in the morning, say seven o'clock."

Osterly glanced at his watch, nodded and turned up his coat collar against the early morning rain. "This is it; let's hope it works. I've every available man on this including the entire police force and three quarters of the armed forces."

Gilliad flicked a spent cigarette at the street disposal bin and missed. "We could have trouble."

"My orders were not to shoot but to identify and pinpoint; well pick 'em up where innocent bystanders—" He stopped. "*There's one.*"

Gilliad, given a hurried briefing before hand, did not look. "Know him?"

"Sure; power-technician, name of Royce." He waited. "Right, let's go."

George Royce let himself into his small two-room apartment quite unaware that he had been followed.

Once inside, he switched on the auto-coffee, dropped an egg and some slices of bacon into the cook-chef and waited for the meal to be served.

He was a nondescript looking man with a shapeless nose and deep-set brown eyes. When he moved, he moved in a curious shuffling way with his long arms limp and slightly bent. The shoulders above the arms looked hunched but powerful.

The door chimes sounded as the cook-chef delivered and Royce swore. Who the hell—?

He went to the door and opened it. "Yes."

"Mr. Royce?" Osterly flashed his credentials. "Sorry to trouble you, routine inquiries—may we come in?"

"Just about to eat." Royce held open the door ungraciously. "Make it

quick."

"Go ahead and eat." Osterly stepped inside. "Just wondered if you heard anything of a fight outside here last night."

"Fight?" Royce was already filling his mouth. "You've come to the wrong place; I work nights, haven't been in more than ten minutes."

"Too bad." Osterly was addressing Gilliad now. "Not our lucky day at all; the rain must have muffled the noise completely." He turned to Royce. "Sorry to have troubled you." Then, as an apparent afterthought: "Don't you think you ought to get out of those wet clothes pretty soon, friend?"

Royce, chewing bacon noisily, swallowed and scowled.

"What the hell are you talking about? It's bright, sunny—" He stopped. Slowly he laid down his knife and fork, rose and crossed to the window.

"Well, well." His voice had changed strangely. "The good folk of our fair city in raincoats and capes and nowhere but nowhere a single drop of rain."

Suddenly and with terrifying speed he turned and leapt. There was a brittle snapping sound and Osterly staggered sideways moaning.

"It hurts—yes?" Royce's smile held a certain sadistic pleasure. "Broken arms have that tendency I'm told. You won't be able to draw that gun with that arm, will you, officer?" He ripped the pocket and tossed the weapon into the corner of the room. "Save you further temptation and perhaps another broken arm, yes?" He smiled again. "If I have to toss you around I'll be merciful; I'll tug on the bad arm. It will hurt more but you will always have one good arm to wave with."

He leaned against the wall and lit a cigarette. "You Susceptibles trying to be clever?" He exhaled smoke noisily through his nostrils. "All right, I'll give you full credit for what it's worth. It worked. In truth, however, you're amateurs, children at play; one lucky blow in a fifteen round contest doesn't win a fight, especially a little creampuff blow like this one."

He looked Osterly up and down. "Intelligence agent, my God!" He exhaled smoke into the other's face. "You're sweating, man; you can't take pain. You people are not built for survival: as a lesser species you're on

your way out."

He turned to Gilliad. "And you, my good friend, you seem to have lost your nerve; why don't you reach for your gun?"

Gilliad, feeling cold inside and trying desperately to keep his voice steady, said: "I don't have to; I can take you without one."

Osterly straightened. "For God's sake, Dave—" The pain in his arm was blurring his mind but he had to shout a warning. "For God's sake, don't push your luck; can't you see he's aching to tear us apart?"

"Now you're being unkind, officer." Royce was clearly on the verge of licking his lips with satisfaction. He turned to Gilliad again. "Would you be good enough to repeat that statement?"

"I said I could take you without a gun."

"You brag but you sound none too confident—just how?"

Gilliad straightened. "For your personal satisfaction I *feel* none too confident but back in London I did quite a lot of boxing—I'll have a go."

"London! Ah, yes, I thought you looked familiar; you're the resistant strain; I remember—how kind of you to present yourself."

He laughed suddenly and rudely. "Boxing! What next! You have delusions of grandeur, perhaps? You would beat me to my knees with a feather or club me to death with a paper bag?"

He came forward, arms at his sides, chin exposed. "I will do you a favor, Gilliad; I will give you a warning. I am ten times as strong as you and my reflexes probably twenty times faster. Therefore, before you posture, before you weary yourself, and me, with mock heroics, pause to consider that I can pinch out your life with finger and thumb. I can tear off your arm with a casual twist of the wrist or cave in the side of your head with a slap of the hand."

He came forward even more. "You should be put in a box, Gilliad, packed in cotton wool, marked 'fragile' and buried. All Susceptibles should; biologically they're on the decline, superceded by a superior strain."

"Mentally?" Angry spots of color burned in Gilliad's cheeks. "To me you display all the symptoms of an advanced paranoiac."

Royce's face darkened. "You're obtuse, my friend, obtuse and ungrateful. You answer my timely warnings with insults." He smiled unpleasantly. "Nonetheless I am still inclined to mercy; I will give you a sporting chance—not that you deserve it—I will permit you to strike the first blow."

He almost pushed his chin into Gilliad's face. "Go ahead, my friend, hit me."

Gilliad hit him.

Osterly, still sick with pain, tried to shout, "Don't," but it was too late.

He saw Gilliad's fist come around in a short arc. It was a blow which, all too clearly, was restricted by Royce's closeness and lacked real force but somehow it connected.

Osterly was shocked to see Royce stagger slightly.

"Want another?" Gilliad stabbed out a left and crossed savagely with his right.

This time Royce did more than stagger. He tottered uncertainly backwards, was stopped by the low table and clutched at it desperately. A cup, two plates and silverware crashed to the floor.

Somehow Royce held himself erect; he shook his head two or three times, wiped blood from the corner of his mouth and finally managed to stand upright. He looked stunned and almost stupefied with surprise.

He said, "My God!" in a thick voice and then: "You'll pay for that, you bastard; I don't know how you did it but, by God, you're going to pay for it. No one uses skin-metal gloves on me and gets away with it." He rushed forward.

To Osterly the speed of the attack was incredible but Gilliad seemed to move with equal speed.

He picked him off with three lefts as he came in and jabbed home a

heavy punch to the solar plexus.

Royce's mouth came open in a huge gasp, then abruptly he folded in half and crumpled to the floor.

Gilliad looked down at him, rubbing his knuckles. "Superman," he said almost sadly.

Chapter XII

HE PICKED UP a chair and carried it to Osterly. "You'd better sit down."

"Thanks." He lowered himself into it gratefully. "Made a mess of my arm—bone has come through the skin in two places. In my right hand top pocket you'll find a green capsule; break it under my nose, please."

Gilliad complied and Osterly inhaled deeply. "God, that's better." Color was slowly returning to his cheeks.

On the floor, Royce groaned, rolled over and sat upright.

Gilliad waited until he had staggered upright then hit him again. The blow to the jaw made a hollow choking sound and Royce went down again as if clubbed.

Osterly paused in the act of sending out a message and said: "How the hell did you do it?"

"You saw how I did it; I punched his damned head."

Osterly finished the message and scowled. "I know that, you fool; how come your fists didn't bounce off him or break like egg shells? How was it that you were faster than he was?"

Gilliad laughed, then he said: "Sorry, not trying to be deliberately irritating; no need to explain the barbell now— I did this with the machine. As you know, if you concentrate for long periods on a particular subject it becomes real to a Susceptible. I had a theory that there was a middle or compromise road. I concentrated on the fact that, in fantasy, I was as strong as an Immune. I then added to this that I should remain strong. Presumably the process effects the id, for, after six sessions, I could

press that barbell above my head with one hand. The weight involved, incidentally, is a quarter as much again as the last recorded world record for a jerk with both hands."

He smiled almost apologetically. "Reflexes were clearly speeded up too, but whether I have prolonged my life-expectation remains to be seen."

"Hell." Osterly's expression was an odd mixture of respect and disapproval. "You took some chances, didn't you? You might have upset your normal metabolism completely. You may have permanently injured certain sections of the brain."

Gilliad shrugged. "I had expert supervision, only the idea was mine. Scientific investigation suggests that anyone can follow suit."

Before Osterly could comment, armed men burst in at the door. "All right, sir? We got your call."

"Apart from a mangled arm, fine—get our friend chained down before he comes around."

He waited until Royce was securely manacled; then he said: "Any reports come in?"

'We flushed out twenty-seven, sir, but the general picture is not a happy one. Six got clean away; eighteen we had to blast in self-defense and we got three alive." He sighed. "Kind of an expensive operation; including fifty-one of the military, we lost seventy-nine killed and twelve wounded. These figures exclude about forty-five civilians who got beamed in Toronto Street when one of the Immies stood and fought. Fortunately one of my boys picked him off from a roof before he beamed the entire street."

Osterly rose unsteadily, his eyes bleak. "Get me to a medic, I need patching fast; there's work to do." He grinned twistedly at Gilliad. "Next time, we make sure we don't bite off more than we can chew, eh?"

Four hours later, his arm encased in a pliable cast, Osterly was discussing the situation with Keisler.

"Somehow we've got to make the prisoners talk. The question is—how? If they talk they're dead before we can extract any information. Tests suggest that if we remove the device embedded in their skulls they will

also die—what the hell can we do?"

Keisler's brow creased in broken lines. "Seems as if—no, wait a minute—what was the name—Polter?—Pollard?" He pressed a section of his desk. "Hello, get me the Encyc department—yes, right, call me back."

He lit a cigar and puffed until a section of the desk lit redly. "Hello, is that—oh, it is you, Leparn; good. Listen this one is just up your street. I am trying to trace the American scientist who perfected the electronic-interrogator. Date of birth would be pre-machine and around 2010. I think the name was Polling but I'm not sure."

Leparn made vague tongue-clicking noises, then he said: "Pollard, I think—no, certain, Andrew Pollard. Give me ten minutes to do some digging; I think we have a complete biography somewhere."

He called back in seven minutes. "We have it, a complete biography plus blueprints and specifications—"

Keisler said: "Perfect, thank you." He turned to Osterly. "Our friends are going to talk without saying a word."

"I don't follow you."

"Then, my friend, you must listen. Around two thousand and forty a U.S. electronic genius perfected a device called the electronic interrogator. This piece of machinery was, in truth, a lie-detector which went far beyond anything conceived or constructed on these lines before. To put it briefly, It did not need a verbal answer but was capable of interpreting emotional reactions. Therefore, all that was required was the suspect to be linked with the machine and asked questions. It made no difference whether the questions were answered or ignored, the emotional responses were the same and the machine recorded them. After the interrogation the tape was removed and inserted into a G-type police computer which was capable of interpreting the session."

"Let me give you an example; let us assume the suspect guilty of murder. The question, therefore, might be, 'Did you kill John Smith?*' Whether the suspect answered that question or not is immaterial; the point is, when he heard it, his emotional responses would be the same and the machine would pick them up."

"Again, with careful and prolonged questioning, not only the exact date and time could be arrived at but the method employed. It meant of course, long and precise interrogation with prepared questions but the results were exact."

"Once more to quote an example, the questions might be: 'Did you strangle him, shoot him, stab him, poison him, etc.? Was it in the morning, afternoon, evening? Did you kill him for gain, for revenge, jealousy, or acting on instructions?'"

"When the recorded tape gets to the computer, all the negative answers are already deleted so we'd get something like this." Keisler drew a note pad towards him and began to write. After a minute or so he pushed it across the desk."

Osterly turned it around and read it.

Question: Did you kill John Smith?

Answer: Yes.

Question: By what method?

Answer-. Strangulation.

Question: When?

Answer: Saturday evening, May 10th.

Question: Why?

Answer: Jealousy.

Osterly returned the pad to the desk with a hand that shook slightly. "My God, if this works we've got 'em; they'll sing a beautiful song without knowing it. We can find out if they're human or not, where they come from, what they intend to do."

"Don't jump ahead of yourself," said Keisler, quickly. "To arrive at precise questions like that would take about ten hours solid interrogation with prepared questions."

"Could you build the interrogator?"

"We have the specifications; I've no doubt the techs could put one together in a day or so."

"Get them working on it; give them a call." He managed to fill and light his pipe with one hand while the other corn-lied. Then he said. "Did you hear how Gilliad punched Royce to a full stop?"

"I heard."

"You don't think Gilliad is pushing himself a bit?"

Keisler shook his head. "He's done nothing without first consulting me." He smiled. "I know what's worrying you, this super strength, but don't worry. He healed himself under my supervision, increasing his physical abilities was a logical sequence to his type of mind."

"Don't misunderstand me." Osterly was frowning. "Frankly, I like him and that's quite irrespective of the fact that he saved my life. It's just that—to me at any rate—he seems kind of reckless. He goes plunging into this and that in a way that makes my hair stand on end. On top of this he comes up with so many new angles I can't keep pace and, good God, the man's a novice."

"Was a novice," corrected Keisler carefully. He frowned and clasped his hands together. "Let's get one thing straight first; Gilliad takes risks, yes, but, generally speaking, they are calculated risks. He never does anything without consulting my staff first. In the second place, this flood of ideas which seems to bother you is very simply explained. Gilliad has been bottled up and held down for most of his life, given no scope for his obvious intelligence. Consequently, in a free society where he could ask questions and get answers, his mind expanded. Freedom was like rain on dry ground and his mind immediately became productive."

Osterly puffed a huge cloud of smoke. "You've relieved my mind."

Keisler said: "Good, enjoy the relief while it lasts."

"What the hell do you mean by that."

"I mean that we have other problems, less personal but far more urgent. As I see it, we have perhaps eight weeks before we find ourselves with our backs to the wall."

Osterly knocked out his pipe carefully. "You don't have to remind me of that."

"But I do because what we decide in the next few hours may mean the difference between elimination and victory. The Immies won't play, you know; they're not going to take prisoners or jabber about surrender: they're going to try and wipe us out."

Osterly hunched forward. "You have ideas?"

"Some." Keisler pulled a folder file out of the desk drawer. "In the first place, I think we ought to get down to a training scheme on subjective defense right away."

"Subjective defense?"

"You saw it when Gilliad demonstrated it. We have to teach our people how to counter a beamed impression in such a way that they retain their sanity."

"Can we?"

"Given the time—yes. Preliminary research is encouraging. This, however, covers only twenty-five percent of the population. It is useless for the addicts and the potential addict. It is useless also for the aged, the sick, for children and for infants who would be permanently deranged by a beam attack."

"What do we do?" Osterly's face was grim and had lost a great deal of color.

Keisler looked at him directly. "Well have to turn them into Immunes," he said.

Chapter XIII

HE HAD PASSED, it seemed, through countless check-points and his papers had been scrutinized suspiciously by numerous guards.

Now, at last, he had topped a slight rise and could see the house. It was a long, low timbered affair set against a pleasing background of high pine.

To Gilliad, however, it looked unreal, dated and better suited to tradition than reality. It was an elaborate shack, centuries out of date, with window shutters, a wide porch and, most incredible of all, a chimney from which came a lazy curl of blue smoke.

She's a nut, he thought irritably and trudged up the gravel path towards a garden of small lawns, lily ponds and rose arbors.

The grass and the ponds were real, he noted. The lilies and the roses were not—at least not for himself or an Immune. He stopped briefly to examine the roses which, he had to admit, were good. It must have taken many hours of intense concentration to produce subjective blooms of such delicacy.

He revised his opinions slightly—nut or not, her powers of concentration and visualization must be unique.

He looked up from the roses and saw her. She was standing on the porch leaning against one of the upright supports, her face averted.

She was not at all like his mental picture of her. She wore dark slacks and a fluffy sort of—jumper?—pullover?—which clung to her figure.

She didn't look—as he had imagined—coldly and aloofly indifferent. She looked tiny, slender and almost elfin. The large, dark eyes slanted slightly; the mouth was full, beautifully shaped and inclined to laughter and her skin had the warm bloom of youth. He put her down as having both North American Indian and Chinese blood in her veins: the dark hair, the— He checked himself irritably, then compromised with himself, better get a clear picture first.

He coughed politely as he approached. "Excuse me—"

"Mr. Gilliad?" Her voice was low, gentle and possessed a curiously lilting intonation.

He said: "Er—yes—yes," quickly and felt vaguely ill at ease.

"Keisler said you were coming; I've been looking out for you."

She didn't look as if she had; she was still staring into the distance.

"Won't you come in?" She turned and, still without looking at him, led the way into the house.

He followed meekly, acutely aware that mentally he was twisting a nonexistent hat in his hands in an agony of incomprehensible embarrassment.

She waved a slender hand vaguely. "Make yourself at home; you'll find that chair in the corner most comfortable, I think. The fire may be a little trying at first but it gets cold in the evening; we'll be glad it's there."

"Thank you." He sat down and tried to smile naturally.

"You must be hungry so I have a meal ready—no, don't move; we'll eat informally. You'll find an eat-tray at the side of your chair, just clamp it to both arms and I'll bring the food in on a trolley."

He obeyed and a thought struck him that he must look rather like an infant in a high chair. She'd feed him with a spoon, perhaps, or give him some revolting substance to strengthen his teeth. Suddenly and uncontrollably he burst out laughing.

She turned, her face severe. "You find something amusing here?"

"Only myself. I've never seen one of these things before; it struck me that I must look like a baby in a high chair."

She frowned briefly and then, surprisingly, her mouth twitched. "I like people who can laugh at themselves."

She returned with the meal a few seconds later and they ate in silence until it was finished.

"Coffee when I've cleared away?"

"Please—may I smoke?"

"By all means." She looked at him directly. "They have been telling you things about me, I can tell that."

"Oh, really—"

"Don't deny it; men do—what did they tell you? That I was not

interested in the opposite sex? That is the usual story; probably they are right but does that mean we cannot work together?"

"Did I suggest that?" Suddenly he was sure of himself again.

"No, but you are guarded and tense." She shook her head slowly. "Perhaps It is my fault; I am guarded and the infection spreads. I have what some people call 'an unfortunate manner' which is a kind of way of saying I'm off-hand and rather rude. I suppose it's true but perhaps you can learn to accept me as I am."

He grinned faintly. "Perhaps I have."

She looked at him directly. "I think I could like you."

He exhaled smoke. "Subject to and providing that I interpret the term 'like' in its purest terms."

She accepted the remark calmly. "You said that detachedly and without malice. There was even understanding and compassion for which I thank you, but, yes, you are right."

She sat on the arm of his chair and looked at him thoughtfully. "You don't look sensitive; you have a cropped head and an aggressive jaw; at a glance I should take you for a professional fighter. Your eyes and mouth, however, say otherwise." She laughed softly. "Yes, yes, too frank, too personal, but I'm like that—unfortunate."

Gilliad smiled. "Wouldn't it be easier to leave such conclusions to the recipient?"

She nodded. "You are kind and I am not really being clever. Keisler told me all about you and furnished me with copies of all your activities."

"Including the self-analysis?"

"Including everything."

"And you still agreed to see me?" He had colored slightly.

"Don't be embarrassed; I have worked in the sphere of the human mind too long either to be shocked or to form judgments. It is not single factors which make the personality; many great and wonderful men have been

over-sexed. It is the *balance* of factors which make a personality."

"Thanks for the compassionate justification; I must make it plain, however, that I wouldn't change that side of my nature if I could. I know my own personality, mildly deplore certain aspects of it, but have no wish to alter."

She smiled faintly. "I should call you, Mr. Gilliad, a glutton for punishment; you had delved deeply and with immense courage into your weaknesses and excesses but your examination of compensating factors has been superficial." He sighed and ground out the cigarette. "As I suspected, you are gentle." He flicked a speck of ash from his coat and met her eyes. "You are also terrified and very lonely."

Some of the color drained from her cheeks. "Keisler told you that."

"Keisler told me nothing. Fear is something one can feel even if it is disguised as directness and what you choose to call an off-hand manner."

He rose and stood with his back to the fire, looking down at her. "If we are going to work together there must be a certain trust."

"Is this an original angle, Mr. Gilliad? If it is, save it. It is true I understand, even sympathize with your urges, but I have no intention of easing them."

Gilliad might have been forgiven for losing his temper but, strangely, he smiled. "Miss Stour, either you are handing me the key to your psychology on a platter or you are woefully misreading mine. Alternatively you are being willfully provocative—which?"

Her body tensed and she flushed, then slowly she relaxed. "I'm sorry, I deserved that. As I told you, I have an unfortunate manner and I am always on the defensive. Attack being the best form of defense, I am apt to attack first and regret it later."

He said, gently, "Work from my psychology; you'll find it easier."

"I should have done so; I am being inefficient." She hesitated, then with an obvious effort: "Am I forgiven?"

"It's forgotten."

"You're gentle as I've said before, but inwardly I sense tension—what is so important?"

He lit another cigarette. "In brief, in a month or two from now we shall be at war. In all probability, since we are opposed to the Immunes, it will be a subjective war. As we are the only Susceptible Resistants in freedom, the safety of the entire province may depend on us."

She frowned. "You don't pull any punches, do you?" She shook her head quickly and went on before he could answer. "By logical sequence, it also makes us both a priority target before the attack."

She stood up. "Seven attempts have already been made on my life, two subjectively and one by a man who professed to love me. The rest were ingenious but routine assassination runs." She smiled, apparently quite calm and changed the subject. "As a matter of direct curiosity, does the province intend defying ten thousand cities unaided?"

He winced slightly. Trust a woman to point to the core of the problem. "I don't know."

"I suppose you conclude we haven't much choice, fight or die or both. It's a heroic conception but heroics don't win wars—I hate war, incidentally."

For the first time she smiled with genuine sincerity. "Let's clear the remains of this meal away. After which we can get down to something."

She returned a few minutes later and curled herself up in the opposite chair. "I'd like to put the problem as I see it. We can fight alone but alone we shall be defeated. We therefore need a miracle or allies; the latter seems the most practical."

He nodded. "How?"

She smiled. "This is not my idea, but an extension of yours. Our principal city was beamed; subjectively it rained cats and dogs. All the Susceptibles put on their coats, but the rest who were immune to subjective influences carried on as usual thus betraying themselves."

"So?"

"So couldn't we strike the first blow? Couldn't we beam Fortress New York, Chicago Citadel or even United London? We could beam a message revealing the true situation."

He stiffened. It made sense, startling sense, almost inspired sense. A subjective message would be received only by the Susceptibles thus giving them time to prepare. The opposition, on the other hand, being immune to subjective impressions would be quite unaware that a message had been sent. The machine was, as he concluded earlier, a two-edged weapon and, in an application like this, the Immunes were at a disadvantage. They were almost, he thought, in a case like this, as restricted as normal people in a telepathic society.

Chapter XIV

HE SAID: "By God, that's good—mind if I call the powers-that-be?"

She laughed, softly. "You don't believe in wasting time, do you?"

"There's little time to waste—where is it?"

"Over there in the alcove—dial 3M. It's a priority line."

When he had finished, he dropped into the opposite chair and lit a cigarette. "They were shaken at the other end."

"I was shaken at this end; you gave all the credit to me."

"It was your idea." Then with a hint of anger: "What the hell do you take me for?"

"Don't get uppity; I've a funny way of saying thank you— it was very sweet of you."

"Oh, was it?" He was scowling.

She shook her head reprovingly. "You have a quick temper. When you lose your temper you look very, very young, like an angry little boy."

"And that's a funny way of saying what?" He was still slightly flushed.

"If you can take it, that I like you. You're direct, very human, very honest and refuse to put on an act for anyone. I admire that." She smiled

suddenly in a way that seemed to light her face from within. "Relax, please, I think you're entitled to an explanation."

He said, quickly, "That isn't necessary; when I spoke of trust I wasn't referring to your private life."

"I realize that but I'd like to tell you." She sighed. "Never told any but Ed Keisler—strange—may I have a cigarette, please?"

He gave her one and she puffed nervously. "I don't really smoke but now—where do I begin? Where does anyone begin? With the young bucks guffawing, swaggering, crude to the point of vulgarity, the wolf-whistle from the side street? No, life does not begin here in the agonizing self-consciousness of the early teens. Perhaps later, in the image of romance, before the dream becomes confused with sex, when every contact is like something in a novel. It goes on and on, even in a constricted and guarded life like mine. The handsome young man at the dance, the lean bronzed man with the gun on guard beneath your window. Kid stuff; you're in love with love, with romance, with images, not individuals until one day you wake up, someone comes along."

She ground out the cigarette. "His name was Gordon; we thought we were in love; maybe we were; it's a long time ago. One day he forgot to meet me, then another—oh no, not another woman, not a real one. Gordon was one of those they failed to check on in time; he had a machine hidden in a barn; he became a second degree addict before they found and cured him. After a subjective love-affair, addicts become halfhearted about the real thing and that was the end of that.

"The next one was Jacques—I always called him Jack—he was lithe, dark-skinned, always laughing and had wonderful dark eyes. He almost swept me off my feet, but before he did, Intelligence checked on him and dug up one legitimate and two bigamous wives back east; nine children were divided almost equally between the three of them.

"It hurt—it hurt primarily because he had lied to me from beginning to end.

"After that—to my shame—I tried to escape via the machine. I knew I could never become an addict so it was easy to justify my weakness. Subjectively and with great care I built up the perfect man—the kind of a man a girl dreams about for years, tall, God-like, gentle, charming. We

lived in a fairy tale world of sunlight, exotic flowers, perfumed forests and silver lakes. We used to meet in an arbor of roses and sit and hold hands. We discussed love, art, poetry and the beauty of the stars."

She paused and met his eyes. "I, too, have a degree of self-honesty. I, too, am human and, as you are aware, primal urges appear all too readily in the subjective. I suppose, subconsciously, I was wearying of this perfect but impossible fairy tale world I had created."

"One day, in our arbor of roses, he put his arms around me and kissed me in a way that was neither fairy tale or romantic. Theoretically, I suppose, I should have responded. These were, after all, my basic yearnings, my own physical needs expressing themselves through the subconscious. Instead, I cut; I couldn't stand what was, in truth, myself. It would have been safe; I might have found happiness of a kind but I felt suddenly sick and defiled—that was the last of my fantasy world and my dream man."

"A year or so later, Todd came along. From the knowledge in our possession now he must have been an Immune but I didn't know it at the time. He seemed quiet, gentle and considerate."

"One day, however—in this room, as a matter of fact—he slipped something into my drink. It wasn't a very pleasant something: it was a culture, a mutated culture which would have taken several months to become malignant by which time he could have got clear away and remained quite unsuspected."

Gilliad frowned. "You saw him, caught him in the act?"

"I didn't; Intelligence did."

"They're watching!"

She colored slightly. "Yes, I'm afraid they are." She made a slight movement with her hand. "They never stop watching and there are weapons embedded in the walls."

"You mean I am covered by weapons every second?"

"Every second. I have privacy in my bedroom and in the bathroom but they check both before I enter—the door won't open until they have."

"Well, thanks. I really feel at home now." He smiled, taking the sting from the remark. "I take it they spotted him doing the job?"

She nodded, suddenly pale. "Yes, it still haunts me. He said, "Here's your drink on the table, and suddenly there was a crackling sound and a flash of light from the wall. One moment he was walking toward me smiling and the next he only had half a face. He just crumpled up and lay at my feet—Oh God!" Briefly she put her hands over her face, then she took a deep breath and almost managed to smile. "I'm sorry, it still makes me a little sick to talk about it."

He said, very gently, "You're afraid; you don't dislike men, but the associations."

"I know that, know it intellectually, but it doesn't do any good. As soon as a man comes near—in that way—I freeze up and something inside me wants to shout 'keep your distance.' I can't help it."

He lit a cigarette. "Shock, you know it's shock—surely they've told you that?"

She nodded soberly. "Oh yes, they've told me, but it's such a long time—it was nearly two years ago."

He studied the tip of his cigarette, frowning. "As you are no doubt aware I am not a psychologist and furthermore it's none of my business but in your place—" He stopped, suddenly embarrassed. "Sorry—"

"Please go on." She was leaning forward, face intent.

"Very well, but you won't like it. It isn't even good advice; your medical advisers will probably cut my throat and it cuts directly across accepted behavior patterns."

He rose and stood looking down at her. "Stop fighting, girl; stop trying to live up to your own image. You're a human being; you've done magnificent work in hospitals; no one doubts your courage or your compassion but yourself."

She looked up at him, her face pale and tense. "I don't understand you."

"Then I'll spell it out for you. You're trying to live up to the image of

what you think you should be, not what you are. I'll lay fifty to one you fought tears, fought nerves, fought remorse, fought every natural reaction and bottled them up inside." He leaned forward. "Forget it, let go, cry your damned eyes out, shut yourself up in your room and scream blue murder. Tear your sheets to bits and don't fight self-pity, wallow in it until it sickens you. No one will know, only you; crack before tension cracks you; only *you* think you have to be so damn perfect and so damn self-controlled."

She stared up at him, her face colorless, strange shadows and hollows in her cheeks. "You bastard," she said softly. "You brutal, compassionate, understanding bastard." A tear ran down her lashes and coursed down her cheek. Then suddenly she put both hands to her face and began to sob.

He put his hand beneath her arm and helped her gently from the chair. "Go to your room, girl; cry your heart out."

He guided her to the door which opened almost immediately and closed as soon as she was inside.

He stood looking at it for some seconds, shrugged faintly and began to wander absently around the room.

"The guest room is through the door on the right," said a polite male voice which appeared to come from the wall.

He smiled faintly. "Thank you for the advice and the implied slur."

"Think nothing of it—no one speaks to Miss Stour like that without a reprimand. Everything you said to her has been recorded and will be forwarded to her medical advisers. God help you if there are psychological repercussions."

"I am entitled to my opinions."

"Mister, you don't know how close you came to having your head blown off. But for your Intelligence rating you'd be lying flat on your back by now."

Gilliad only laughed amusedly. "Sharp on bedroom doors, aren't you? You're obviously descended from a long line of maiden aunts."

The wall used an obscene word and then there was silence.

He found the guest room, undressed and, on impulse, tried the door. It was, as he had suspected, locked behind him.

He said: "Thanks very much," to the wall, climbed into bed and added, "Spoilsport" as an afterthought.

Once still, in the darkness, however, he began to wonder why he had said it. He had felt nothing but a deep, although wholly novel, compassion for the girl. Why had he sought to hide behind a cheap and typically male sexual bravado? Male pride? A subconscious longing to conform—what? Even the swift wisecrack had not been original. It had been directed by a critic, if he remembered rightly, centuries ago at a certain British poet whose talent had granted him immortality despite the *barb*—"*The author is obviously descended from a long line of maiden aunts...*"

Still wondering, he fell asleep.

He was awakened, it seemed, only a few seconds later by the same polite voice from the wall, only this time it was not accusing, it was urgent.

"Wake up, Mr. Gilliad. Wake up!"

"Receiving you—what's up?" He was already out of bed and struggling into his clothes.

"We've a yellow alert on here. We don't know the source; we don't know if it's direct or subjective but, as our instruments are dancing, it's probably a bit of each. Naturally we're closing up; naturally we've activated all the mine fields and weapons but it may not be enough—"

Chapter XV

IN THE CITY, Osterly sat in front of a row of caller-screens, sweating. Somehow suddenly there was so much to do; authority, executive authority, had been thrust upon him from nowhere. He was not cut out for it; he had always liked to plod along, taking his time. Now, without warning, several different responsibilities had been thrust upon him at once forcing him to make snap decisions which he instinctively distrusted—no time to think things out, snap shots, blind thrusts into the darkness dependent only on a faith he did not possess.

I'm out of my class, he thought sadly. This high-pressure stuff is not for me. Come to think of it, I'm not even a real Intelligence man, at heart I'm a small town policeman, maybe in plain clothes, but policeman nonetheless. Cod, one day you were doing your job and minding your own business, the next, how many things?

They were interrogating Immunes, teams of experts with carefully prepared questions checking, cross-examining—he was waiting for a report about that.

The lab boys had beamed Chicago; they had beamed New York; they had cooked up some sort of contrivance to boost power and had pushed the subjective warning around the curvature of the Earth straight into United London.

Nearer home, Jose Gavant, in electronics, had cooked up a helmet which, it was hoped, would make a human being immune to subjective attack. Would it work and if so would it be suitable for children, infants and the aged? How many could be manufactured in a given time? Osterly chewed the stem of his unlit pipe and scowled.

He had not even the relief of Keisler's company. Keisler was supervising teams of instructors—themselves crash-trained—who would, in due course, educate the public in the techniques of subjective defense. Already the top brass of the military, key men in Intelligence and certain members of the government had been through it. He had been through it himself but the whole thing had a touch of fantasy. If a subjective lion attacked you, you willed into existence a subjective gun to kill it.

Osterly saw and had experienced in the test the practical proof of such a method but he was still dubious. When the real test came would he, would anyone, remember what to do? He had only just remembered in time himself; the lion had seemed so damned *real* and, by God, the Immies wouldn't make it that simple, not by any means.

One of the screens lit and he flicked the switch. "Yes?"

"Harris, communications, here, sir. We're getting a message, straight radio, which we believe is coming from Chicago Citadel. Hold on; well run it up; it's jerky but apparently genuine—now—"

Words appeared on the screen: CALLING TORONTO—YOUR

—ADVICE PUT TO TEST—IMMIES REACTED VIOLENTLY—HEAVY FIGHTING—THANKS—WISH US LUCK—CHICAGO CITADEL.

Osterly began to fill his pipe slowly. It had worked, in one city at least; the message had got through, been acted on; why hadn't someone thought of it before? The answer was, of course, everyone had been too busy trying to survive and the Immies had been singularly skillful in manipulation.

He lit the pipe and scowled suddenly. Why—why manipulation when they had a weapon which, if skillfully applied, could have wiped out the opposition inside ten years? Somewhere, somehow, something was wrong; part of the puzzle was missing.

One of the screens lit and a voice said: "Interrogation completed, sir. About to feed data to the computers."

"Hold it until I get there." He punched a stud. "Brogue, come up here and take over. Call me if anything breaks."

By the time he arrived in the computer section they had fed in the data, but they waited until the door closed behind Osterly before they pressed the activating stud.

There was a purring sound; the squat bulk of the old-fashioned computer made muffled chuckling sounds and began to exhale typed paper.

Question: What is your name? Answer: Marley.

Question: Why do you call yourself Royce?

Answer: I changed my name to conceal my identity.

Osterly wondered briefly just how many questions had been asked to arrive at the three simple answers.

Question: Why did you wish to conceal your identity?

Answer: It was a prepared policy.

Question: Did all the Immunes adopt it?

Answer: Yes.

Question: How old are you?

Answer: Two hundred and eighteen.

Question: How old do you hope to be?

Answer: Around three thousand.

Question: How did this come about?

Answer: I underwent special treatment.

Question: Who performed this treatment?

Answer: Some doctors—I do not know their names.

Question: Are you human?

Answer: Yes, I am human, a superior human.

Question: Are all Immunes superior humans?

Answer: Yes.

Question: The Immunes are also an organization?

Answer: Yes.

Question: For world domination?

Answer: They have world domination.

Question: You have a government?

Answer: A directorate.

Question: With a leader?

Answer: Yes.

Question: What is his name?

Answer: He is anonymous—we are all anonymous.

Question : Is there anyone above the leader?

Answer: Yes, the Supreme.

Question-. This is another Immune?

Answer: I do not know—I do not think so.

Question-. It is human?

Answer: I do not know—I do not think so.

Question: It is alien?

Answer: I do not know.

Question-. Can you describe it?

Answer: No, I have never seen it.

Question: What does it do?

Answer: It is the source of power.

Suddenly the paper stopped with a few printed words: *Data concluded; negative responses three thousand, five hundred and seventy-five.*

"My God!" said someone in a shocked voice. "No wonder they took so damn long."

Osterly, however, was more concerned with the answers and they made him sweat. The Immunes were an organization—numbers unknown—of supermen. An organization which had got the world under its thumb and virtually imprisoned almost without effort. This same organization was now rapidly reducing the population with the same cynical lack of effort—peddling dream-machines and callously manipulating the frightened end hard-pressed survivors. The Immies could afford to take their time, they were, by normal standards, virtually immortal.

What worried Osterly was the unknown—who, or what, was the Supreme? Clearly there was no religious significance; the Supreme, therefore, was what?

He suppressed a shudder—something distinctly unpleasant Something which had given a group of normal people powers above the norm. An entity which had taught them advanced surgery, handed them—presumably in return for something—incredible strength and near immortality. And, as if these weren't enough, provided them with the most diabolical method of conquest it was possible to conceive.

Presumably the application of this same weapon had its source there also—the dream-machine was nothing more than a home self-destruction unit.

He paused in his thoughts, frowning, vague understanding filtering slowly through his mind. There was no perfect weapon, no weapon yet devised which could not be turned against its creator. That was why the Immies wanted to get rid of the Susceptible/resistants as quickly as possible. Maybe they had been useful in the early days as objects of study but now they were a menace; better get rid of them before they learned too much.

Gilliad already had; he had demonstrated successfully that the cutting sword had two edges. If he ever got around to wielding it with skill—God, they couldn't afford to let him— could they?—nor could the Supreme, whatever *it* was.

He crossed the room and made a brief call. "Room six? Change the questioning; drop the personal; concentrate on priorities. I want an exact or approximate figure of living Immunes and I want every scrap of data available on the Supreme: whereabouts, nature, origin, everything. Pass that on to the Interrogation room and let them draw up a new set of questions. This is an emergency, so press it hard."

He had barely broken contact when he received another call. "New York has just come through, sir. Message reads:

**FROM THE FREE CITIZENS OF NEW YORK TO FREE
TORONTO-STOP—OWE YOU GREAT DEBT—STOP—YOUR
MESSAGE RECEIVED—STOP—COUP PLANNED AND
EXECUTED—STOP—IMMIES FOUGHT BACK FIERCELY BUT
WERE CAUGHT ON ONE LEG-STOP—WE THREW THE
ROBOTS AT THEM FIRST—STOP-COORDINATED DEFENSE
COLLAPSED AND SURVIVORS NOW ON THE
RUN—STOP—SEVERAL THOUSAND ESCAPED—STOP—ADVISE**

**SHOOT DOWN ANYTHING WHICH PASSES OVER YOU
UNLESS IDENTIFIED AS FRIENDLY—STOP—MESSAGE
ENDS—STOP.**

Osterly grinned faintly, hope growing inside him. "How did they send that one—smoke signals?"

"No, sir, the old intercontinental beam; equipment hasn't been used for over two hundred years but apparently they've managed to get it working. The beauty of it is, sir, as far as we know, it's tight and can't be tapped. Anyway, with equipment that old, I doubt if anyone would know how."

"Encouraging news. How do you think United London will notify us—carrier pigeons?"

He broke contact, conscious of a fluttering inside him. They were no longer alone, they had allies. Chicago probably contained six million citizens; New York about twelve million and, if United London threw out the Immies they would be assured of another twenty million. London covered the entire southeastern sector of the British Isles right down to the coastline.

His thoughts were cut suddenly as the entire left wall of the laboratory glowed suddenly red.

"Emergency! All defense units. Red alert—G3."

G3! Osterly felt fear chill his body like an arctic wind. G3 was the bungalow; in it were David Gilliad and Vanessa Stour. God, of course the Immies had been waiting for a chance like this, his two trump cards together in one place.

Chapter XVI

THEY SHOULD HAVE been kept apart—too late now—one would have thought that nearly two hundred guards plus the mine fields—but it wouldn't be that kind of attack, would it? It would be a subjective assault by trained experts whose knowledge of beaming death began where his own people's knowledge left off.

He began to bark brisk defense orders which even to him seemed pointless and lacking in hope. But the time he got the reserves there, by

the time—God, what was the use? It could all be over.

In the bungalow, Gilliad said; "Open the damn door."

"Open; the girl's is open, too."

"Any arms in the place?"

"Opening wall cupboard opposite. There's two Leston side arms and a Warrington."

"Have to be the Warrington, never handled a Leston."

"Okay, but watch it; it's not a gun for confined spaces."

"Too late to worry," Gilliad slipped the squat weapon into his pocket. "What's the angle?"

"We've got a group of dots—unidentified—on our long range detector system."

"How far away?"

"At the speed they're making, about three minutes."

"Thanks for nothing." He hesitated. "Sorry about the crack I made earlier."

He went into the next room. The girl was already there, standing by the table.

She smiled wanly. "This is it?" She looked pale but calm. "In case we don't come out of this, thanks. I cried buckets. I don't know if it's changed my attitude but it eased a lot of tension." She paused, her head on one side, obviously listening. "I can hear something."

He strained his ears and could just hear a thin high whine like a swarm of distant mosquitoes.

"How far away?" he addressed the wall.

"Still two minutes, Mr. Gilliad."

He looked at the girl. "Brace yourself, this is a subjective attack."

"How do you know?"

"If they are still two minutes flying distance away we couldn't hear them."

The voice from the wall interrupted. "Mr. Gilliad, we've got them on the screen, our instruments are measuring height and angle. We've already released two interceptors."

"Save them, you're being beamed, my friend, beamed by experts; you're seeing what they want you to see and that included the oscillations of your instruments."

"Are you quite sure?"

"Sure enough to try to prove it." He turned towards the girl. "Think this very hard. The walls of this bungalow have been proofed against blast and are about four feet thick and radiation resistant. Thick metal shutters slide across the windows in case of attack. A repellent device is incorporated in the roof to deflect missiles; the place is gas proof and has its own independent air supply—"

The voice from the wall interrupted him. "My God, your bungalow has changed color and shape."

"I told you it was a subjective attack; we're merely using the stimulation of the beam to build up a defense."

"Fine for you; we feel kind of exposed out here."

"Then build defenses. I understand you've been through the course. Visualize and will into being bomb-proof emplacements on the same lines as we have."

There was a period of silence, then a shocked and faintly disbelieving voice said: "I've got a roof over my head. It doesn't seem possible; I can stretch up my hand and *touch* it."

"Did you visualize it as bomb-proof?"

"Visualize it, brother, I *prayed* for it."

"Have the others followed suit?"

"Walt, my partner, says we look like the Maginot line, whatever that is."

"Fine." Gilliad was conscious that he was sweating. The noise of the approaching aircraft had risen to a heavy and menacing drone.

He motioned to the girl with his hand. "Get down behind that chair; when this is over they'll come in to make sure we're dead. If we're not dead there will be some shooting."

He took up a position behind the table. "Pray that they come through that door."

"I'll cover your back." She was beside him with a tiny silver weapon in her hand.

"I told you to get behind the chair."

"I know, but I feel safer this way."

He shrugged, irritated that his hands were shaking and that he was unable to keep them still. "I'm scared."

"I know." Briefly she touched his hand with her fingertips. "So am I, but I can use this."

"Use it on yourself if you have to."

As he spoke there was a curious rending sound which gradually climbed the scale to a high shriek.

He stiffened, bracing himself and then an enormous impact seemed to press down on the top of his head. The building shook, a picture of a galloping brown horse leapt from the wall and crashed to the floor. At the back of the building it sounded as if a pile of crockery had been hurled from a cupboard; individual tinkling sounds went on for some time.

He counted eight heavy impacts before the drone of aircraft began to recede and the silence crept slowly back.

He was, however, compelled to remind himself that there had been no aircraft and no bombs. Somewhere out there, within reasonable distance,

were a group of Immie operators using a machine to stimulate his mind into believing there had been such a raid. He, in his turn, had used that same stimulation to build up a mental defense—an imaginary bomb-proof bungalow.

The opposition, when they arrived, would not, being Immune, be able to see his mental defenses. They would not know that above him was a roof, four feet thick, which existed only in the minds of the two people within. Two people who should have been so convinced that the subjective attack had blown them to fragments that the mental shock should have stopped their hearts forever.

He laid his hand quickly on the girl's shoulder. "Cover my back."

The door was opening slowly.

Two men came into the room. They came in almost casually, weapons held loosely in their hands. Clearly they expected to find the victims dead.

Gilliad steadied the weapon on the table and, still crouching, pulled the trigger.

The gout of searing flame sent the men stumbling backward like a jet of water from a powerful hose. They tried to raise their arms and then they were black flaring outlines literally crumbling before his eyes. Flaring fragments, a gush of heat and black smoke swirled around the room.

Gilliad coughed, rubbing his smarting eyes and then, behind him, the girl's weapon made a barking sound.

He twisted awkwardly around just in time to see another man, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, falling slowly forwards as stiffly as a wooden soldier. The body struck the floor, bounced grotesquely and lay still.

He clawed for the Warrington, grasped it and crouched ready, but there were no more attackers.

"I think he came in through the kitchen." Still kneeling, she placed the gun shakily on the floor. Then suddenly, she went limp and pitched sideways.

He caught her before she struck the floor but she seemed to regain consciousness almost at once.

"I'm worried—I've never—killed a man before." She shuddered slightly, detaching herself from his arms. "The weapon alters the chemical balance of the human body; using it made me feel sick."

He laid his hand gently on her shoulder. "I didn't feel any too comfortable about burning two people to death; blame yourself. In any case you saved my life."

"And my own," she said.

"Could have missed and lost your nerve." He rose and helped her to her feet.

"You all right out there?" he addressed the wall.

"Fine, thanks to your advice, Mr. Gilliad; not a casualty among us. Sorry you had to handle those three alone; there was so much smoke we couldn't use the wall weapons; we might have got you by mistake."

"Understood—oh, by the way, the machine is still operating."

"We've discovered that; pinpointing it now."

"Watch it; there may be an operator still with it. In your position I'd blast the area first."

"Good point—oh, Mr. Gilliad." The voice hesitated. "About those remarks earlier—no hard feelings?"

"Good God, no."

"Well, thanks; guess I pushed it a bit but I have my just desserts; I'll be known as 'Auntie' Miller until the day I die -Ah!"

In the distance came a sharp report then a number of crunching explosions.

In a few seconds the voice came back. "You were right— a machine and two operators. They were calmly leaning against a tree, smoking. We got them both."

Twenty minutes later Osterly arrived, teeth clamped tight on the stem of his pipe. "I heard you were safe on my way over but I had to come and see for myself. Much more of this and I'll have the world's prize crop of ulcers. What happened?"

Gilliad told him as briefly as possible.

Osterly made plopping noises with his pipe. "Looks as if we're beginning to find an answer but, God, for the last two weeks I've been sweating blood." He told Gilliad about the interrogation. "I switched the questioning; answers began to come in just before I left. It seems the Immies have an elected leader, elected on the grounds that he made first contact with the Supreme. No one knows what the Supreme is. They don't know if it's human, alien, a group, an entity. All they know is that it is the source of power, of knowledge and, by inference, despite all it has done for them, they're terrified of it."

"Could be a policy. Perhaps there is no Supreme, just a deliberate rumor to keep the rank and file in line."

"Could be, but I don't think so. I—" Osterly stopped as his personal caller interrupted. "Yes?" He listened, then he said: "Sure it's real? Sure it isn't a trick, eh? Well, we'll have a chance at it, won't we?" He looked tiredly at Gilliad as he broke contact. "Detection has picked up a flying machine coming in from the—bay—it's radioing that it's peaceful. It claims to be British."

Chapter XVII

BY THE TIME the machine had been guided to a suitable landing place, Osterly was there to meet it.

The machine did not look like a trick. It looked, he thought, like an industrial period-piece thrown together in a hurry. He would not have been surprised if certain vital sections had been tied on with string.

The vessel made an appalling noise, the motive power apparently supplied by ram-jets. Once over the landing area, however, the noise stopped and the machine sprouted three rotors which, although howling like fiends, brought the vessel down almost lightly.

Armed men surrounded it instantly, weapons pointed and then a

section of the body swung open.

A man stepped out of the opening and dropped lightly to the ground. He had his hands raised prudently above his head but he was grinning happily.

Osterly swore and pushed his way through the armed men. "Who the hell are you?"

The other smiled, "I suppose you could call me an emissary. I represent the Free Committee of United London—we owe you a great debt."

"You took a chance coming in that thing."

"It was a bit dicey; I lost my way three times; had to fly like the ancient mariners, dead reckoning and the stars; sounds easy until you try it."

"Why did you come? All right, you can lower your hands."

"Thank you. We felt we should establish direct contact as soon as possible."

"The Immies are on the run?"

"Oh, they're on the run but there will be chaos for months and we lost a hell of a lot of good people."

Osterly frowned. "We got the same story from New York and Chicago; didn't you catch the Immies by surprise?"

"By surprise!" The other smiled sadly and shook his head. "You don't quite understand, do you? You have a free community here and, understandably, you over-simplify. You think we plotted, planned and rose in an organized revolt? It wasn't like that. A few groups sprang up, but generally it was the individual killing the first Immie he knew, as soon as he got the message. Figuratively speaking, we pulled the temple down on our own heads."

"I'm afraid I don't follow."

"Civilization; even an Immie civilization is a structure and not all the prime supports were occupied by the opposition. You must know how the Immunes work, they favor the power-behind-the-throne technique. The

Susceptibles who thought they were in power, although they got the message, too, wanted to stay that way. Leaders, local governors, area managers and so on came down with a forty-five percent majority in favor of the status quo. Then there were the police and the militia both trained to obey orders. Bluntly, there was a hell of a lot of fighting with too many Susceptibles killing each other."

Osterly frowned at him. "It's a miracle you won out."

"Hate won out; too much persecution, too many cruelties; a lot of people, men and women, literally went berserk as soon as the truth sank in. I saw one man armed only with an ax charge a group of twenty police like a madman. He cut down five of them before they managed to shoot him to pieces. Things like that were going on all the time. A woman, no more than twenty, walked into a records building in the southeast. The record office was filled with Immies but her dress was packed with explosives—apparently she worked in a police arsenal. Before they could kill her she deliberately blew herself and the entire building to fragments.

"It is because of things like that that we began to win. The Immies sowed the seeds of defeat themselves; too many wives, husbands and sons executed publicly. This resulted in insane but inspiring acts of individual bravery which brought the waverers into our fold. When I left, the militia were beginning to desert in droves and certain sections of the police were refusing to fire on the insurgents."

Osterly nodded. He understood but he was shocked. "Your name?"

"Inappropriately—Makepeace."

"You'll be screened, Mr. Makepeace, as a security precaution, but, apart from that, welcome to Toronto." He scowled at the flying machine. "You've certainly got nerve."

The other grinned wryly. "I had once, perhaps, but not now, not after flying that. We had repellors of course; the one we had worked all right on ascent but got the jumps coming down; consequently we had to fit rotors. The whole thing was put together by a group of third class techs under the supervision of a historian and two experts from robot construction."

At the bungalow, as the effects of the mental stimulation of the beam wore off, things began to resume their normal appearance. The huge

blackened craters which had surrounded the building became hazy, unreal and the earth slowly resumed its normal contours. The Maginot-effect of the guard posts faded and the normal hutments and sentry posts appeared as before.

The bungalow itself lost its squatness and, inside, Gilliad watched the picture of the running brown horse rise slowly from the floor and resume its normal place on the wall.

He was fully alive to the fact that factually it had never left the wall but such a grotesque return to normal was not a little disturbing.

Men had come and removed bodies; workmen had fussed busily above removing blackened fixtures and washing away stains, but he was unable to rid his nostrils of the sickly smell of burned flesh or wash the picture of their deaths from his mind. Some people, no doubt, found killing easy or, if not easy, convincingly justified, but he was not one of them.

He absently helped himself to a drink and gulped it back almost without thinking. This was only the beginning; he had to get used to it, because this was only the first episode.

"Feel bad?" She was beside him and looking up into his face.

"Horrible." He began to refill the glass and then changed his mind. "At least it's not so bad as watching a man publicly burned to death in a heat cubicle. You're supposed to applaud, you know; it's a sacrifice, a burnt offering to cleanse the race from addiction—let's talk about something else."

"I was going to; I was going to thank you for your advice. I called you some things. I called you brutal because you were and because you had to be. I called you compassionate because you are that also and, David, you were so right—thank you."

He said, "Forget it," brusquely.

She laughed, gently. "I'm beginning to understand you so well; you bark but you don't bite."

"Don't be maternal—or should it be sisterly? I'm not the type." He lit a cigarette and changed the subject. "Osterly tells me the Immies have a

leader; I wonder what he's like!"

The leader of the Immunes was, perhaps, like no one either of them imagined. His name Gene Welt—a name which Ontario and her allies were going to discover by continued interrogation in the course of the next few weeks.

He was a squat dark man with a curious habit of hunching his shoulders so that on many occasions he had been mistaken for a hunchback. His clothes never seemed to fit him and bagged loosely and untidily about his body. To add to the general appearance of disreputability he favored a Van Dyke beard which he seldom remembered to trim. Behind his back his opponents jeered him, primarily due to his nervous habit of continually washing his hands in invisible soap and water.

He was not leader from choice, rather he had been ejected from obscurity by pressure from each side and below. Welt could contact the Supreme; Welt was a gifted organizer; he was an intellectual, an ingenious strategist—the Directorate had booted him arbitrarily into the throne of absolute power.

Welt was not happy in it; he preferred to exercise his talents from obscurity. He liked to manipulate, to control unseen, to crack the whip in the hands of others. He liked to move men like pawns, to be sly and unseen and subtle and ruthless.

As a visible leader he was exposed, open to criticism, made responsible and, worst of all, answerable. The Directorate always wanted to know why—how—where? Welt had a devious mind and detested answering. It always felt to him like prying on their side and personal self-betrayal on his own.

At the moment he was more disturbed than usual. Refugees were pouring in from New York, Chicago and London telling frightening tales of frenzied and suicidal revolution from which, despite their own personal heroism, they had been compelled to withdraw. They poured in, demanding answers, reprisals and immediate results.

Unfortunately, for reasons unknown, no reports had yet come in from Canada. If only he had known what had been going on over there sooner; but who would have thought one damn province in a continent as huge as

that could have got so far in so short a time? Of course, he'd had his own people there, but that damned jamming system had stopped any messages going in or coming out.

Welt slumped a little at his desk and "washed" his hands nervously. Any minute, any day now, some fool of a member would suggest he consult the Supreme again. It was no use trying to explain how the Supreme worked; no use trying to tell them that...

He shivered slightly and admitted to himself for the first time that he was terrified of such interviews. It was not exactly the answers, it was the way they were phrased, and to him they seemed to convey a withering contempt.

There was no emphasis, of course; no overtones, no overt sarcasms and yet—

"You asked me how to build a bomb—correct?"

"Yes, but—"

"And I told you and you built one."

"Yes, but—"

"And then you pulled the pin out and it exploded?"

"Yes, but—"

"Anything further you may say will be considered irrelevant. You asked how to build a bomb; I told you. It was tested and fulfilled its purpose. As far as I am concerned I have fulfilled my obligations."

That was a simplified version of every interview he had ever had with the Supreme. You were mocked with unanswerable logic, goaded with precise indifference, whipped with your own birch.

To carry the example further: if you tried to point out that the bomb had blown up half a continent, it simply cut you down with logic.

"Did I instruct you to remove the pin? Did you specify the explosive power of the device? Your acts and your insufficiency of precise data are not my responsibility."

For the first time in many years, Welt asked himself the most frightening question of all—what was the Supreme? You went in and there was light—bright light—and a voice, but who the hell was speaking?

Chapter XVIII

WELT'S THOUGHTS were interrupted by Bridgeman, his alleged aide.

Bridgeman placed a pile of reports on the desk, dropped into the nearest chair and scowled at his fingernails. "Damn bad. "Welt didn't answer. He looked at the reports, at Bridgeman, and, suddenly weary, tried to decide which he hated most. Not that he had anything against the man directly, it was just that his very presence set him on edge. The cropped head, the bulging vacuous blue eyes, the short thick neck- after an association of a century and a half you couldn't help hating a man, could you? Bridgeman's nervous pomposity, the "fat" voice, his infuriating habit of clearing his throat noisily in mid-sentence, his inexhaustible repertoire of banalities.

Welt sighed inwardly. It was the same with everything, wasn't it? Like his last wife, the one before and the one before that. You not only knew what they were going to say but how they were going to say it. You got to know them so well that life became a series of endless and wearisome repetitions. Somehow, suddenly and frighteningly, you were trapped by longevity; you were afraid to die but burdened with living; the years stretched endlessly ahead apparently with no goal.

He was not alone in this feeling, all of them—that was another thing.

He had gone to the Supreme about that.

"You demanded longevity. I gave it to you."

"Many of us are suffering nervous reactions."

"Did you, at the time of your demand, inquire as to possible side effects?"

"No, we had no idea that—"

"Then the omission was yours, not mine. The subject is closed."

Welt shivered, recalling many such interviews, and, more as an escape than anything else, he reached for the reports.

They did not make happy reading and the reactions of the Susceptibles was terrifying. It did not seem possible that such short-lived inferior entities could harbor such hate. There was an undercurrent of insanity in some of their actions. This one, for example—Chicago, wasn't it? yes—some madman springing out on twenty armed police with only a metal bar. Somehow he had brained four and seriously injured another before they got him.

The attack on Canada would have to be brought forward; that was the trouble spot; blot that out and they could retake the cities at their leisure.

His thoughts turned to Gilliad. They ought to have killed him at birth. He, Welt, had advocated the move but Science had overruled him. They had to, they said, find out what made Gilliad tick, what made him a natural resistant. Their arguments had carried weight—suppose others were born? Data was essential. This threat must be met and studied. The only trouble was that all they'd arrived at was theory, and, in the end, this elaborate disposal plan which had landed them in their present mess.

Bridgeman interrupted his train of thought. "The Directorate is calling an emergency meeting tonight; sounds bad, what."

"It sounds damn stupid; we can't do anything yet."

"Keem thinks we can. Keem thinks we should smear Canada within eight days."

"Let him try it; long range beaming equipment takes time to manufacture."

"Hal Keem thought of that; he suggests deluging the area with short range transmitters."

"Really!" Welt scowled and plucked at his beard. It might work, why hadn't *he* thought of that? He felt a faint surge of hope; maybe they'd censor him and depose him. Big-brain Keem could step into his shoes—only he wouldn't, would he? No one would; no one wanted the damn job; no one wanted a scapegoat-throne.

A message appeared suddenly on the screen set in the surface of his desk:

All reports on Special Mission, negative. Absence of reports suggests agents perished in line of duty. Operation Gilliad must therefore be considered abortive. Submitted by J. Winters, Area Commander.

Before Welt had time to consider the implications several more messages appeared.

Tactical withdrawal from Chicago Citadel successfully accomplished in the face of repeated fanatical assault. C.G. Sherborne, Governor.

Welt swore aloud and with intensity. What the hell did Sherborne think he was doing—writing a propaganda line for a nineteenth century newspaper? Tactical withdrawal be damned! Sherborne had been routed and what remained of his coherent force, if any, had been flung out on its collective neck.

Flying machine from United London landed Toronto today. Two large craft following. Suspect full scale communication Ontario/New York, but unable to detect source. Agent 10/5.

Welt half rose, then dropped back heavily into the chair. "Bridgeman!" His face was flushed.

The other jumped. "Sir?"

"You will call an extraordinary meeting of the Directorate to take place one hour from now—clear?"

"But, sir, one hour is—"

"One blasted hour. You may also inform Mr. Keem that I propose adopting his suggestion subject to majority approval."

At the extraordinary meeting an hour later Hubert Keem seemed less bombastic and even less assured.

"It was a suggestion, not a statement of proposed policy." Keem was a tall, balding man with thick black eyebrows which were always twitching nervously. "It seemed to me, at the time, that the sooner we acted the

better."

Welt glowered at him. "God preserve me from armchair strategists."

Keem's eyebrows danced briefly and he colored. "Really, I see no reason—"

"Shut up and listen." Welt's voice was deliberately rasping.

Someone shouted: "Order! Order!" but without particular enthusiasm and no one took it up.

Welt ignored the interruption. "As I understand it, you propose deluging Ontario with short range transmitters?"

"Well, yes, that was the general—"

"How did you propose getting them there? You appreciate, I hope, that our supply of aircraft is, by military standards, nonexistent. Those few aircraft we do possess are civil machines and not equipped for what is virtually a bombing mission. Secondly, even if they were, how does the honorable member propose getting them past the interceptor defenses which, we now know, guard Ontario's borders?"

Keem did not answer and Welt demolished the idea piece by piece. "The adaptation of our civil aircraft to military use would take eight weeks longer than the proposals for beam assault already in course of production. Special devices would have to be conceived and manufactured in bulk to protect these aircraft against interceptors. We have no pilots with battle experience, no one capable of directing operations and most certainly very few eager volunteers for such a hazardous mission. What, apparently, the honorable member had in mind was a reversal into time. He would have us turn the clock back; he would abandon the subtleties which won us the world and resort once again to conventional weapons which would place our lesser—although numerically superior—enemies on an almost equal footing."

He paused, flushed and slightly short of breath. He was particularly incensed because he had almost fallen for the idea himself. Later, of course, on reflection the fallacies had appeared only too clearly, but nonetheless at first...

He said, savagely, "Any questions?"

No one answered and no one met his eyes but he sensed they hated him. Ah, well, it was mutual; everyone hated, despised or was contemptuous of someone else. He wondered, briefly, what held them together: fear, a sense of superiority, a general malignant sickness or the whole damn lot?

The trouble was they knew each other so damn well, nothing was *hidden*, there was no mystery, only the revolting nakedness of reality.

He looked from one member to another. Hulver, greasily charming, but a specialist in refined sadism. Bolger, the pervert, whose entire life was a pornographic repetition. Dela Menkin who, at the age of two hundred looked—and behaved—like a girl of eighteen. A nymphomaniac girl of eighteen with a mentality to match; some of them had learned in two centuries of living but not Dela—Dela was still unutterably stupid.

His criticism was tinged with a certain venom. Dela had been his mistress once until he had discovered she was sharing her favors with four other lovers. Welt was not disturbed morally but it was a blow to his pride—God, he was *The Leader*, wasn't he?

He had not always been the Leader. His thoughts drifted back, strangely uncritical, to the days when he had been a young man. Truly young, not the unchanging forty-three of the last two centuries.

In those days he had been loud of voice and dress and bubbling over with ideas. Most of the ideas had been grandiose get-rich-quick schemes and all, without exception, had collapsed, been crushed by the law or failed to come up to expectations. In the end he had been compelled to accept honest employment in a minor clerical capacity. He had, however, a gift of ingratiation and had been rapidly promoted to a position of trust.

Here—and he had a gift for figures—he had cooked the books so successfully and with such ingenuity that two other employees were dismissed for dishonesty before an astute accountant brought the real culprit to book.

Welt was entertained, albeit frugally, at government expense for eighteen months. The judge detested embezzlement but his sentence of two years was reduced for "good behavior."

Welt had then spent years passing from one shady business to another, side street "car sales," pornography, "rigged" gaming dives, clip joints. He had neither the inclination nor the nerve for real crime and he hovered on the fringes of the underworld ready to run at the first hint of danger.

It was on such a run, cautiously changing his mode of transport in case of pursuit, that he had found...

He had in some ways a curiously methodical mind—he always carried a road map. He had dropped off the train at a rural station, jumped a bus, got off again and set off, on foot, for another road along which buses passed frequently.

The route he had chosen was about six miles and wandered, following an ancient bridle path, through wooded and still sparsely populated country.

Halfway along the path he had come upon the mist.

The mist had clung to the top of a low hill, swirled continuously and was a bright and improbable pink.

The mist frightened him but before he could turn and run a voice had said: "Do not be alarmed. I am here to help."

Chapter XIX

WELT, still terrified, thought of superstition, of a dimly remembered religion, of voices from burning bushes and wondered, typical, what sacrifices he might be called upon to make.

"It would not be in your own interest to flee."

The voice was quite passionless and, in truth, entirely neutral but Welt read a threat in the words.

"What do you want?"

"Do not anticipate. It is what *you* want."

"I want!"

"Yes. I have much to give. I am here to give, although, you must bear in

mind, if you demand what is unwise, you must accept the consequence of your choice. Come."

Shakily, still wondering if he had been chosen for some specific and impossible sacrifice, he had walked into the mist and suddenly there had been no mist. There was a sense of light, of space and there was the voice and nothing more.

"What do you want?"

The question caught him off balance and he had mumbled something ridiculous about a wish—he was still being influenced by a mixture of religion and fairy stories.

The voice said: "Insufficient data—specify, please."

It had taken him nearly an hour to discover that the thing wasn't a fairy godmother capable of turning a melon into a golden coach. It wasn't a deity either, nor was it capable of granting idle and wholly impossible wishes, but it was giving something away—it was giving away *technical information*.

Strangely, Welt had never asked himself why. As soon as the implications of the fortune at his fingertips had sunk into his mind, curiosity had been washed away in a flood of greed.

His first thought, therefore, was to keep this fortune to himself and he spent two more hours writing busily in a notebook as the voice instructed him on the erection of a certain quite simple device.

Welt had only a basic knowledge of electronics but apparently the voice was not only prepared to reduce the subject to its simplest terms but to instruct him, within limitations, as well.

Four hours later he was spending the last of his money on some pieces of electronic equipment and, an hour after that, he was back busily following the crude but serviceable sketches in his notebook.

He had enough self-control to work steadily but the frenzy of impatience at the back of his mind made his hands unsteady and sweat crawl down his forehead in steady beads. Someone might come along, someone might decide to take the same path before...

At last the device was finished and, still neurotically anxious, he pressed the switch.

There was no sound but suddenly the swirling pink mist was no longer there. Where it had been was only normal countryside with nothing to suggest that something within it was ready to hand him the world on a platter.

Welt felt a surge of triumph, of self-congratulation, of power. He was smart, real smart; he had always known it but this had been the first chance in his life to *prove* it. His act therefore had been inspired. He had bled the thing of a refractory device which concealed it entirely from others. It was *his*, entirely his because no one else would ever find it.

Wearied to the point of exhaustion, he headed back to the city and, once rested, he began to make plans.

Welt was not without intelligence; he was quick to realize that the bulk of the technical information the voice was prepared to hand him was beyond his comprehension even if reduced to basics. It was necessary, therefore, to find men in particular fields of science capable of interpreting what he was able to bring out.

It was not a difficult task; on the fringes of the underworld there are always contacts and Welt used them. He found a skilled electronics expert no longer employable because of alcoholism. He found a disbarred surgeon, a skilled chemist who took drugs, a well known biologist who had dropped from public life because of a nervous breakdown. The biologist believed he had an incurable carcinoma but was terrified of surgery.

It wasn't much, but it was a start. As has been said, Welt was astute; the first thing he brought out was a counter-alcohol formula which he gave to the chemist who, having "made it up," gave it to the electronics man disguised as whisky.

The electronics man drank it, drank some whisky, vodka, gin, but frighteningly remained cold sober. After four weeks he was almost normal; bitter, but resigned to sobriety.

In due course all were cured of their physical ills, if not their mental ones.

It was then that Welt brought out a device which the electronics man put together and which, when tested, collapsed in smoking ruin as soon as activated.

Welt only laughed. He alone knew that in its brief period of existence the device had implanted subliminal instructions of unswerving loyalty to himself and, incidentally, to each other. The organization was now his.

After that, he concentrated on making money. A variety of illegal devices began to appear on the market for which the underworld was prepared to pay fantastic prices. An ingenious, pocket-size contraption for detecting and inhibiting burglar alarms. A pencil-size torch capable of eating its way silently through the toughest safe or deep into bank vaults.

Welt was not lacking in imagination, but he was frightened. He could have made more money legitimately but legitimate enterprises had a nasty habit of asking questions. Rival concerns might want to know how a group of has-beens could jump so far ahead technically in certain fields of research.

Reporters would get interested; no, it wasn't worth the risk.

It was not long, however, before legitimacy, in the shape of the police, became interested in a series of seemingly impossible crimes, trails from which led back to a certain small manufacturing and garage concern.

Welt was tipped off long before the place was watched day and night, and took counter measures which he discussed with his partners. "What I have in mind is some sort of hypnotic projector which will convince the police they are barking up the wrong tree."

Eventually he arrived with specifications for the device, but before it was complete the electronics man who, before alcohol had pulled him down had been something of a genius, saw other possibilities in the device.

He called in the surgeon and the surgeon found a not too particular neurologist somewhere and they got down to work. Within four days the device had been adapted and tried out on a suspected informer. The informer became an addict—the first dream-machine had been born.

It was the neurologist who saw the possibilities. "Gentlemen, given the

time, with this machine we could conquer the world—assuming, of course, we don't fall victims to it ourselves." He looked at Welt. "Have you any—er—friends who might come up with something?"

"All we need is something to blanket the radiations," said the electronics man quickly.

Welt got it. He also got time in the shape of longevity and the scheme grew beyond his control. The organization which he had founded grew to millions who began to insinuate themselves into the sinews of the race as the addiction to the machine spread.

Welt watched civilization totter on the brink of collapse without conscience. Now, as an Immune, he had prestige, he had respect. He was consulted by ministers, the heads of the armed services and the resulting sense of power was almost overwhelming.

He was, however, still astute. He made a great show of public service, of dedication and lesser members of the organization took their lead from him. People began to say: "Thank God for the Immunes, without them we would have gone under."

The organization made depreciating noises, skillfully advertised their public service and barred the doors of the prison into which they had skillfully herded the unsuspecting race.

"When do we attack?"

Welt realized that someone was shouting at him and dragged his mind back to the present. Attack? Oh, yes. He said, firmly: "My figures assure me that we should be able to launch a full-scale beam assault in exactly nine weeks."

In nine weeks, however, Ontario and her allies were not standing still. Specialists and experts from United London, New York and Chicago poured into the Province eager to avail themselves of Canadian know-how.

The construction of beaming devices was passed on and immediately put to use.

United London promptly beamed Paris which almost immediately blazed into savage insurrection.

Berlin was the next target and here, although the Immunes were prepared for it, they met one of their worst defeats. Here Immune excesses had been worse than other cities and the logical Germans had already decided that the remedy was worse than the disease. Resistance cells had begun nearly thirty years before and there were a limited number of arms caches.

The Immunes, although they had the main streets covered by beaming devices, were not prepared for an armed insurrection and even less for a painfully small but skillfully organized attack. It was true that a large number of weapons were centuries old but they made an unnerving amount of noise and were devastating at short range. Beam operators covering the streets below were picked off by skilled snipers concealed on rooftops or by assault groups who struck from nowhere and were gone.

The allies, however, were beginning to remember tactics. The next city they beamed was a small one—Barcelona in Spain.

Here the Immunes were only half prepared. One section of the city had been cleared as a local fortress to which they could retreat in case of trouble but the defenses were not quite complete.

The Spanish reduced it to ruin in a matter of hours by tacit and ingenious improvisation. They locked the controls of everything which could move, removed the governors and sent them racing into the Immune quarters. Subway trains, flat out, went shrieking into terminals, striking buffers or empty carriages with such force that they virtually exploded like bombs. Before the wreckage could be dealt with another line of hurtling coaches tore into the twisted chaos of the first.

In the streets it was the same: public transport, official ground cars and heavy duty trucks went crashing into buildings or rose in a wreckage of fantastic pile-ups at every intersection.

Power failed, fires broke out and then the entire city went in; men, women and young children armed with any weapon they could find. A few hundred Immunes managed to escape the city, but that was all.

Chapter XX

IN OTHER spheres also, progress was by no means slow. Experts from the liberated cities went into conference with Keisler and other

psychiatrists. Working on known data, they began to form an accurate graph of Immune psychology.

"These people are paranoiacs of the peculiarly unpleasant type. In a normal culture they are the type of people who write poison-pen letters. Maltreat children and animals, make slanderous but untraceable statements. They are the failures, the Uriah Keeps of humanity, schemers, wreckers of marriages and reputations purely from malicious motivation.

"Also they are cowards—note the reluctance to declare themselves openly. Healing balm in one hand and a whip in the other."

"True, and in their peculiar psychology lies the key to our survival. They didn't wipe us out, for the simple reason that had they done so the true reason for their existence would have been gone. There would have been nothing left to exploit, to manipulate, to torture. They are like a man who savagely beats a dog but refrains from killing it so he can beat it again later."

"Chip on the shoulder, persecution mania."

"Precisely. In my considered opinion, however, in a straight fight these creatures would cut and run, betray each other and surrender in droves."

"Unfortunately it will not be a straight fight. We'll have to fight their way—on a subjective battleground of their choosing."

"Perhaps." A German expert leaned forward. "Given time, I, and my American colleague here, may discover the secret of this Immune skull device. The investigation is, alas, hampered by the fact that the device is triggered. That is to say it explodes if removed or is investigated by penetrator devices. We have, therefore, begun a new series of experiments with a view to creating a new beaming device of the same basic design but a different frequency. Should this prove successful, the Immune protection mechanism would be bypassed. Bluntly our Immune friends would find themselves Susceptibles, at least to our beaming devices."

Someone said: "Speaking of beaming, two cities we have beamed fail to respond."

"Noted; we can only assume that these cities are Immune playgrounds containing no Susceptibles whatever."

"Are we any closer to the enigma of the 'Supreme'?"

"No, apparently this is a secret known only to the Immune leader. He, we have learned from continued interrogation, is a man named Welt. The name sounds Dutch in origin but we know he has changed his name at least five times so he might be anything."

In other spheres work was also going ahead; intensive training against subjective assault was increasing hourly. As the liberated cities added their manufacturing resources the supply of cage-like protectors for infants and other vulnerable sections of the population began to rise to reasonable proportions.

Slowly Toronto became an armed camp and within her borders, inspired and ingenious men, no longer held down by regimentation, investigated the dream-machines, began to dream dreams and see visions of the future which had nothing to do with the devices they were investigating.

At the bungalow, although under heavy guard, Gilliad and the girl had been virtually besieged by experts. Now, however, as the weeks passed and the danger of attack drew closer, it was decided to separate them both for strategic and security reasons. If one was killed—they didn't actually put it quite so bluntly, but it was implied.

Gilliad went to the capital; the girl was conveyed to secret recently constructed laboratories in the north and a week later...

Osterly woke and clutched the side of his bed—what the hell! He looked at the window and saw that it was still dark. What the devil had awakened him? He reached for his coat, fumbling for the pipe in the right hand pocket and it was then that the building rocked and shivered as if struck by a gigantic gust of wind.

Outside the window, something shivered, snapped sharply and went crashing into the street.

Farther away a hoarse frightened voice shouted: "Quake! Lie flat! Earthquake!"

Osterly clutched at the bed again as the building swayed and groaned.

It was then that the alarm bell began clanging above his head and sirens began to wail over the city.

Subjective assault! Thank God for Gilliad; he was the only one in the city capable of distinguishing one from the other.

He it was, no doubt, who had seen the danger signal and immediately pressed the alarm bell.

Osterly was surprised to find that his short but intensive training triggered his mind naturally. "*The building was reinforced, and based on special shock-resistant foundations.*"

The swaying lessened and became almost imperceptible; the walls ceased to groan.

He leapt from the bed and began to struggle into his clothes. Keisler came in as he finished. "Ready?"

"Ready." They raced for the stairs but stopped as they reached the door. Directly in front of them, water jetted upwards from a broken main; the entire highway shivered, jerked and huge jagged fissures opened and closed like mouths. Piles of rubble crashed downwards and, as they watched, an entire building staggered and suddenly cascaded in swirling dust completely blocking the street.

"What now?" Osterly shifted his feet uneasily.

Keisler quirked the corner of his mouth. "Somehow my imagination balks at the thought of wings but I've seen pictures of air-taxis and the controls."

Osterly said: "So have I."

They concentrated.

Eighty seconds later they were a hundred feet up and racing towards headquarters.

Below them, buildings collapsed and over to the west a fire flickered dully.

Osterly was compelled to remind himself of facts before the scene

depressed him and undermined his will to fight. *There was no earthquake. There were no fires*, but an enemy was beaming a mental picture so vividly into his stimulated mind that those events appeared real.

Again, there was no air taxi. In truth, they were hurrying to headquarters in a normal way but, employing the mental image of an air taxi, they were successfully overcoming the mental picture which could have destroyed them.

A policeman, incongruously supported above the roofs on limp-looking but effective leathery wings, waved to them as they passed.

Again Osterly was compelled to remind himself that the policeman was not flying. What they had seen was the mental defenses the man was using to protect his mind from beamed assault. While the man believed he was flying above the earthquake, its effects would not hurt him.

"Looks bad over there." Keisler pointed.

Osterly, following the direction he indicated, felt a qualm of fear. Beyond the city, black and menacing in the coming dawn was a range of mountains which had never been there before. Two of the highest peaks billowed black smoke which was sullenly streaked with crimson at the base.

At headquarters, however, his confidence was restored by assured experts addressing the city and the entire province through the emergency speaker system.

"Attention all citizens. Observers report three active volcanoes twenty miles beyond the city limits. Remember, please, that this volcanic activity is not real; it is subjective. Nonetheless, mental defenses must be erected against this form of attack. It is suggested, therefore, that all citizens visualize themselves as wearing heat-resistant suits. Such visualization will protect them against normal fire and possible showers of red-hot cinders. These suits are provided with a face-plate and visor and their own personal air supply, thus sealing the user off from super-heated air or asphyxiating volcanic dust. Attention, please, while I repeat these suggestions—"

Osterly turned away, slightly dazed. These alert, recently trained men

were already way ahead of him.

He crossed to the civil defense casualty section. "How we doing?"

"Not bad, Mr. Osterly; far better than we hoped. So far, we've only forty-two dead and twenty-seven injured."

Osterly held his breath briefly then let it out in a slow sigh. It was good. He was not happy about the death roll but it was far better than he had expected. Pessimistically, even with their defenses, he had anticipated twelve times that number at the very least.

"How are the cages working?"

"No reported casualties there at all. Infants and the aged apparently unaware that anything is going on at all."

A voice shouted at them suddenly from a wall speaker. "Stand by, please, Observer Corps here. Cone number three has just blown its top; white-hot ash already falling in the streets with a few red-hot cinders for luck. Cone two is running lava; looks like the balloon or its equivalent is just going up."

Another voice overrode the first. "Observer Corp Nine. The mother and father of all tidal waves is rolling towards the bay with a godawful hurricane sitting on its back. Estimated height of wave, one thousand three hundred feet. Wind velocity in the immediate vicinity varying from one-twenty to one-fifty."

Osterly, his pipe halfway to his mouth, froze. This was the end; there were limits to what the human mind could conceive. God, earthquake, fire, flood and tempest. The Immunes had not only thrown the book at them but the wrapping and price tag as well.

He became aware of an intense discussion in the corner of the room and then Gilliad stepped forward and raised his hand for silence. "Gentlemen, please—" He waited until the conversation died away. "It has been suggested by Mr. Hartly—one of our experts from New York—that we are thinking on too small a scale and I must say I entirely agree with him. The enemy is beaming a picture of national destruction: the forces of nature let loose in their entirety. To beat this threat we, too, must think big, counter it with forces equally massive. We have unanimously decided,

therefore, on the following measures..."

Over two thousand kilometers away, the Immune beam operators tended their machines and waited. They had technical methods of observing the greater part of Toronto but, being Immunes, no device capable of showing the projected picture. All they could observe was the objective picture which was providing very little comfort.

"Screen six here—two men have just dropped dead on East Suffolk Street."

"Two!" Welt tugged nervously at his beard. "Only two! They should be dropping like flies."

Chapter XXI

REPORTS FROM OTHER screens reported deaths in various parts of the province in twos and threes.

Welt felt sweat on his face. Something was wrong; something was very damn wrong indeed.

He snapped his thin, rather grubby fingers noisily. "There's only one type of creature who can observe the entire picture—get me one."

They got one. They picked up the first Susceptible they saw and dragged him into the building.

"Sit in front of the screen and tell us what you see. Don't leave anything out." Someone ground out a lighted cigar on the back of his hand. "Don't make anything up either."

The man looked at the screen and his mouth fell open. "This is some sort of dream-machine; you're—"

A man hit him on the side of the face and he fell out of the chair and onto the floor.

He was lifted and flung back into the chair.

"Never mind the observations or conclusions. Just say what you see, unless, of course, you would prefer us to burn your fingers off slowly, one

at a time."

The man shivered, and leaned forward, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth. "There's a city, a small city; seems to be falling apart—looks like an earthquake—buildings are falling; there are several fires; the streets are all torn up."

"Go on! Go on!"

"Some distance away are three volcanoes—one is sort of exploding and—"

"Hold it! Mercer, switch in screen ten. What do you see now?"

"I see an ocean—there's a wave—a huge wave and I can hear the wind howling like—"

"Never mind! Okay, Mercer, you can switch back. Now you will look at the picture more closely. Do you see people?"

"Yes, there are people."

"Many?"

"A fair number, not crowds."

"What are they doing?"

"Most of them—" The man hesitated and swallowed uneasily. "Most of them are flying."

"Flying!" They knocked him out of the chair again. "Are you stupid or something?" They lifted him back by his hair and ears. "Listen, sonny; we are not here for amusement. If we wanted a comedian we would have sent for one." Someone hit him in the mouth with the back of his hand. "Stick to facts, eh?"

"It's the *truth*." Suddenly he was shouting. "You asked me what I saw and I told you. They're flying—f-l-y-i-n-g— flying, blast you."

"Why, you insolent—"

"Wait!" A worried looking expert came forward. "The man may be

telling the truth." He waved the others away and said, almost gently, "How are they flying?"

The man looked up at him from one sound eye. "Some seem to have machines or sort of flying rafts. Others—" He hesitated again. "—Have wings like birds.

"I see." The expert placed a lighted cigarette between the Other's swollen lips. "What else do you see?" And, angrily, over his shoulder: "Bring this man a drink and have someone clean up his face. God, you ask for a report and then rough up your contact so much he's damn near useless."

Then, gently: "All right, go on."

"All three volcanoes are throwing fire now; the whole sky is a flickering sort of crimson."

"Go on."

"Something is happening; I don't quite know what it is."

There was a pause as someone arrived with the drink.

The man's hands shook so much that half of it was spilled or trickled down his chin but he swallowed about a quarter. It seemed to give him strength.

"There's something between the city and the volcanoes. I can't make it out. It seems to go right up to the sky and stretches away as far as I can see."

"Can you be a little more explicit, please?"

"It's like a curtain, a curtain of little blue sparks. All the ash, the smoke and white-hot cinders disappear when they touch it and can't get through."

The expert nodded and ran a nervous finger around the inside of his collar; his face was colorless. "Mercer, screen ten again." And to the Susceptible: "What do you see now?"

The wave, like I told you, but it's almost still."

"Still! How?"

The man's battered face puckered in puzzlement. "It looks like a hurricane was pushing it from behind; only there's a bigger wind pushing against it from the front, flattening it, pushing it back and down. Water twisters—or is it water spouts?—are racing about all over the ocean and there's nothing but spray and spume."

"Thank you." The expert took the empty glass from the man's hand and flung it savagely against the wall. "I believe you; thank you for damned all." He looked at the others. "All right, get this creature out of here and dispose of him—permanently. In the interval, for God's sake, pour me a drink, someone."

Before the drink arrived, however, he was confronted by Welt.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" The Leader was twining and intertwining his fingers nervously and the skin over his cheekbones was flushed. "If you have information, I should be the first to receive it. After, *only* after you have given me that information are you permitted to throw glasses at the wall and indulge in tantrums—is that clear?"

The expert, stiffened, paled and said, "Yes, sir."

"Well, what is happening?"

The expert swallowed and almost visibly shrugged. "Very well, sir, if you want it straight you may have it. What the man said is *true*, the opposition were flying—flying above the earthquake.

"But that's absurd."

"Oh, my God—sorry, sir, I'm a bit on edge. I'll explain it. The enemy are using the mental stimulation of our beam to counter it. In short, to throw a mental picture at them we must stimulate their brains first or they will not receive it. Their brains are stimulated, but they are using that same stimulation to will into being counter measures. First they played it simple; they 'imagined' they were flying above it. Now, obviously, they've gone in for mass concentration and built a force-screen."

"But a force-screen on that scale is a scientific impossibility."

The expert's fingers twitched and he drew a deep audible breath. "Sir, we cannot grow a range of mountains. We cannot wave a wand and lift three volcanoes out of a hat. They are not *real* volcanoes; they are *subjective*. They are *illusions* beamed at the recipients' minds by our machines —have you got that? Good. Then follow on; the force-screen is also *subjective*. It is also an *illusion*. It is an illusion sufficiently convincing, however, to counter and overcome our illusion." Suddenly the expert's control seemed to snap and he was shouting. "Shall I draw you a bloody diagram or do I have to spell it out, letter by letter—*they've beaten us!*"

Welt stared at him, too shocked by the news to reprimand the other's insolence. "Beaten us; but we have only just begun." He licked his lips nervously and rubbed his hands together raspily. "We can always change the projection. We can throw a hundred H-bombs at them; blow the entire province off the face of the Earth—"

The expert put his hand over his face and said, "Dear God" in an anguished kind of way, then he seemed to pull himself together. "Mr. Welt, we don't know how to make an H-bomb. All we can do is to project an *illusion* of an H-bomb and *our* illusion of an H-bomb won't penetrate *their* illusion of a force screen. I just can't put it clearer than that even if I resort to baby-talk."

Welt stared at him, the truth slowly penetrating. "What can we do?"

Someone brought the expert his drink and he gulped it down before answering. "Do? You want the truth, Mr. Welt? No matter, I shall have to tell the Directorate anyway. You won't like this, but here it is. One, we shall have to resort to conventional weapons and train an army to use them. Before you start clapping your hands and saying 'Susceptibles,' forget it. All the enemy would have to do is beam them and the whole damn lot would come marching back at us using the weapons we gave them.

"We, therefore, as Homo Superior, will have to create and train that force from our own ranks and slog it out with a numerically superior enemy."

"Is that the only solution?" Welt's voice quavered slightly.

"It is my only solution, sir; any alternative lies with you. If we are going

to win this war, you are the only person capable of providing us with superior weapons and superior strategy."

Mentally, Welt backed uneasily away. Superior weapons, superior strategy—Oh God, not again! He knew exactly what the other meant and he knew that the Directorate would back him to the hilt. He would have to go to the Supreme; no use stalling now; if he didn't, certain pressures would be applied which would make damn sure he did. Welt felt trapped and surrounded. He found an illogical parallel with a certain fictional character called Faust. Faust had sold his soul to the devil and he, Welt, had done almost the same thing. Not that the Supreme had ever demanded a return for information; it was just that every time he went—it was the thing's implied contempt, the inferences of superiority. It made him want to crawl away and hide. Again, for all he knew, it might demand repayment. It might—Welt found himself shaking inwardly; he was terrified. Worse, he had no logical explanation for his terror, but somehow the thing had worn him down, exposed his nerves and made him inexplicably sensitive in its presence. Why? The voice never changed; there had never been a threat even by inference and when all boiled down, its only reprimand, in essence, had been, "Your requests should have been more detailed."

Welt realized suddenly that his real repugnance lay in the act that it made him feel *inferior*. It made him feel puny, ineffective, contemptible. Mentally he went to it hat in hand like a beggar and he had the uncomfortable feeling it knew and despised him for it.

Welt knew that his attitude was illogical but he could do nothing about it. Nothing; the thing affected him that way and lately it had got worse. Not that it would make any difference; the Directorate would still send him, force him to go. It was their necks as well as his now and he was the only answer.

Exactly two hours later he was on his way. No one tried to follow him, however; the robotic guards and weapons with which the site was surrounded soon put an end to that. They had given up that trick a long time ago. The robotic weapons and guards only recognized him and made short work of anyone else. One hundred and eighty-three deaths had completely discouraged the curious, and those using spy devices found the mechanisms exploding in their hands.

Welt strode down the well-worn path, passed through refraction field

and entered the pink mist.

"What do you require?" The passionless voice sounded to Welt both haughty and accusing.

"I—we—" Welt swallowed. "We need a weapon—a weapon against which there is no defense."

There was a moment of silence, then: "Such a weapon can be provided. I propose the mutation of a certain virus common to this world."

"Excellent." Welt began to "wash" his hands, but suddenly stiffened. "There's a serum against it, I trust?"

"You speak in contradictions. If you require a weapon against which there is no defense there can be no protective serum; surely that is obvious."

"But we might get it—the virus, I mean."

"You would undoubtedly. You did not specify survivors."

"It's no good. We need a weapon to ensure victory."

"In the present circumstances there is no such weapon."

Chapter XXII

WELT FELT A COLDNESS creep up his back. "What do you mean—'in present circumstances'?"

"Surely you are familiar with the circumstances you created? You adapted a certain device in order to gain ascendancy over the vast majority of your own people."

"You *know!*" The words felt as if they had been squeezed from Welt's throat.

"It is my business to know."

"But why?" Welt wrung his hands desperately. "Why didn't you *warn us?*"

"My function is to make information available to those who ask. It is not my business, however, to intercede on behalf of warring factions."

"Then you will not give us a weapon?"

"I cannot refuse to give you a weapon but you must specify your requirements."

"God blast you!" Welt's hands were clenched. "Naturally I want a weapon powerful enough to defeat the enemy."

"In that case I propose you revert to the virus."

"Good God-why?"

"Because, apart from an indiscriminate weapon, I cannot, within the data supplied, supply you with a weapon more powerful than the one opposed to you."

"That is insane!" Welt was too frightened to be overawed now.

"On the contrary. Technology cannot provide the intangible. I cannot provide you with revenge, love of freedom, the will to win, ingenuity, self-sacrifice. I can provide you with weapons which will destroy your opponents in thousands but none which will guarantee victory."

"Give me a weapon which will give us an even chance."

"I will give you a weapon which will destroy armies but it will not give you an even chance. At best it will reduce your certainty of defeat by thirty percent."

"Give it to me; just give; we'll decide the percentages." Somehow he was, at the moment anyway, no longer afraid of the voice nor did its pessimistic opinions depress him. With a weapon which would destroy an army he, also, had something intangible—ruthlessness.

When he got back with the information, the technical experts pounced on it. There was much whispered conversation of which he only caught a part but it sounded none too encouraging.

"Need a hell of a lot of shielding, otherwise—"

"Damn complicated—"

Then one of the experts stood upright and said savagely: "This bloody thing is going to take us nine weeks to build

In Toronto the volcanoes had faded, become misty and watery outlines without reality or menace. In the city, the streets were resuming their normal appearance and rubble and bricks were rising mysteriously and resuming their normal places in ruined buildings.

The allied commanders and top scientists were already in intense conference.

"Passive defense is not enough. We must strike before the enemy throws something else at us."

"I entirely agree; we still have the enigma of the Supreme to contend with."

"We must make sure of aims first—where do we strike?"

"Obviously an Immie city, preferably in support of a beamed city, most of which are having a tough time. The Immies are organized now; when the population explodes in their faces they explode back. We can't take the risk of beaming another until we're in a position to support them —any suggestions?"

"Yes." A Spanish colonel stood up. "Madrid is an Immie occupied city. If we cleared that it would support the insurrection in Gibraltar and give us control of the entire peninsula, not to mention most of the Mediterranean." He smiled deprecatingly. "I must also be frank, gentlemen, and avoid deceit. I am having political problems; we are a proud people. The idea of an alien invader occupying our chief city is not something my people can accept placidly. In truth, we have experienced some difficulty restraining our newly-freed citizens from trying to take the city themselves. This sort of attack, as you will appreciate, is doomed from its inception and would perhaps wipe out my people forever."

"I think you have a forceful argument there, Colonel, but we need another primary target."

"Then I suggest Boston." The New York scientist looked grim and

determined. "Not only is it an Immie stronghold but as Dr. Keisler will confirm, we were beamed from there."

"Madrid and Boston as a beginning and as soon as possible. Now as to equipment and weapons."

"We'll shake them." There was a harsh but pleased laugh.

"I think I have something here." A small dark-skinned man stepped forward and looked about him. "I have a device here which I would like to demonstrate—it will not take long." He took something from his pocket. "You would be good enough to volunteer, sir?"

"Why, I—" Osterly was caught off guard.

"Thank you. I think you also, Dr. Keisler, if you have no objection. Just hang the lockets around your necks, gentlemen—thank you."

"What are we supposed to do?" Osterly looked dubiously at the small object now hanging on his chest. It looked like a rather bulky identity disc.

"You do nothing at present, Mr. Osterly. Will one of you gentlemen be good enough to write a short sentence on a piece of paper and hand it to Mr. Keisler without stating its contents?"

A young major obliged and stood back looking puzzled.

"Now, Dr. Keisler, please open the paper and read the contents to yourself. You, Mr. Osterly, will please repeat the words which you should be hearing in your mind."

"Huh!" Osterly blinked at him, then he said: "The rain in Spain falls mainly in the plain," idiotically.

"My God, that's what I wrote," said the major.

Keisler smiled his half-smile. "And I read it to myself."

Osterly fumbled for his pipe. "What are these things? I heard Keisler's voice inside my head."

"They are adaptations of the original dream-machine, sir, but reduced to suitable size by micro-engineering. These machines, however, unlike the

original, specialize insofar as they stimulate only a certain section of the brain. A section which, once stimulated, can attune itself to the brain of another similarly stimulated."

Osterly's mouth fell open and he thought: *This is a joke, surely?*

It isn't, you know. Keisler's voice in his mind was amused. *This is real.*

Osterly thought: *Go to hell,* and removed the locket hastily.

Someone said, "A telepathic device?" in a shocked and slightly dubious voice.

"One could call it that, sir. With constant use and constant practice the need to think actual words would become unnecessary. One could think in pictures, in concepts, and the device will even convey emotions."

The man paused and lit a cigarette. "If, in the course of time, the device should become universally adopted, the race would stand on the brink of a new era. There would be understanding between races and peoples; deceit would become impossible." He paused and smiled deprecatingly. "That is in the future, however; at the moment it might be a wise move to employ the limited number in our possession as communication mediums, say between headquarters and our armed forces."

Five hours later, the conference broke up, the broad outline of the proposed attack already laid. A date was already fixed; it was several weeks before the Immunes would have their super weapon constructed and ready for action.

Gilliad came out of the conference room so lost in thought that he barely noticed those present in the anteroom until a soft voice said, "Hello, Dave."

He stiffened slightly, then forced a smile. "Why, hello, have they brought you back from the laboratory?"

"Today. I've been collaborating on that telepathic device you've just seen demonstrated."

"Very interesting. I'd like to discuss it with you, but later. I have another problem if you can spare the time—is there anywhere we could talk

alone?"

"I'm staying at the Hudson on West Street at the moment. We could talk there but there will be security men guarding the place."

He grinned faintly. "I should be used to that by now—is 'Auntie' one of them?"

She smiled up into his face. "I couldn't say; I keep singling odd ones out and asking but they all deny it."

He laughed. "In his position so would I."

Ten minutes later they were sitting comfortably in chairs drinking coffee.

"Well?" she said.

"Eh? Oh, sorry, yes. When I first arrived in Ontario I was taken or conveyed to Toronto in what Osterly called a 'subjo.' What is a subjo?"

She pouted, prettily. "Oh, Dave, I was afraid you were going to ask me that sooner or later. The true answer is, we don't know. There are only two in existence and both were built by a third degree addict who has since died. We assume that he built them subjectively first and then took the trouble to build them in fact between sessions. Before addiction he was a scientist of some note so we presume he stumbled on a new idea subjectively."

"What else can you tell me?"

"Very little; the vessels have sealed motors contained in a substance we can't cut so no one knows how they operate."

"How are they controlled?"

"One just *thinks* the destination and one arrives; that's all we know. It won't work for an Immune but we must assume in the light of recent knowledge that the shield generated by his skull device in some way inhibits the motor."

He nodded frowning. "I'm the world's worst tech but I suspect that if we could arrive at the vessel's power medium we could conquer the stars."

Somehow I think the inventor stumbled on a hyper-dimensional mechanism but I don't know enough to be sure."

"Does it concern you directly?"

"Directly? Personally? I'm not quite sure but the conception of instantaneous travel fascinates me. Again, for a long time now I have had the curious feeling that we are on the verge of something."

"Aren't we?"

He sighed. "I suppose we are but at the moment we have a war to contend with."

Chapter XXIII

SHE CROSSED the room and sat on the arm of his chair. "You're unusually serious today and you still haven't told me what you think of our telepathic device."

He shook his head. "I've run out of superlatives—seriously, congratulations on a magnificent contribution to the future of humanity."

"Thank you." She produced something from her handbag. "You haven't tried it yourself yet."

He stiffened visibly. "Later, not now."

"But I thought that you and I—" She frowned suddenly. "You don't *want* to?"

"No!"

"But I thought that now we were such close friends—"

He rose quickly but avoided touching her. "What gave you that idea?" He made an angry gesture. "When I want someone prying into my mind I want it on a more secure basis than an amiable comradeship. If you want to know what I feel about you I'll give you the skeleton, but I'll be damned if I'll lay bare my soul for you to dissect at your leisure."

She looked up at him, her face strangely pale. "You hate me—why? What have I done?"

He laughed harshly. "My God! And they talk about a woman's intuition; that's one exploded myth. If you want it straight—you may have your laugh later—I'm in love with you. I've been in love with you since the first moment I saw you." He turned and strode toward the door.

"David, please, don't—"

"Spare me your pity, spare me your—I admit—sincere understanding. *That* I cannot take." The door closed behind him.

In the Immie camp, Welt was having trouble. "But what is the delay, Huber? The components are made and ready for assembly."

Huber, normally ruddy-faced, turned redder. "The components, yes, but these godawful circuits have to be traced and impressed. One error, one tiny deviation and this damn weapon will be more dangerous to us than the enemy." He held up a blueprint. "Take a look at that but make sure you don't get cross-eyed. That's just the firing mechanism; if we were back to the days of wired circuits we'd need a unit as big as a three story building to contain it. Even now, with impressed micro-circuits, it's going to stand as tall as a man."

"But surely—"

Huber turned, his face scarlet. "Mr. Welt, if you think you can find someone to do this job quicker, do it. If not, get off my back."

Welt flushed, his hands clenched and his shoulders rose, heightening the impression of physical deformity. Before he could answer, however, an alarm sounded and red lights began to blink on a bank of instruments. Brown-coated techs pulled switches and a frightened urgent face appeared in a huge wall screen.

"Madrid to H.Q.—emergency!"

Switches clicked as the techs alerted the various defense departments.

"All systems in—report please."

"Take a look," said the frightened face in an unmilitary manner and promptly vanished. In its place appeared a gray expanse of ocean which Welt stared at blankly until he lifted his eyes to the horizon.

On the clearly defined line of the gray sea and pale blue sky was a myriad of black spots.

The scanners arced and panned and the dots were no longer dots. Welt's fingers twitched uncontrollable. Ships! Countless ships! The skin of his face seemed strangely tight over his cheekbones and he was conscious of a cold unpleasant weight in the pit of his stomach. A task force, a seaborne assault; there was no mistake. He remembered one like it way back—the D Day landings! He'd been sixteen then, but could remember the newsreels clearly.

This, of course, was not the same. He forced himself to study the vessels closely; this was a rabble invasion. Four nuclear cruisers probably constructed around '05, six destroyers about the same date, twenty or thirty diesel warships, various and...

To Welt it seemed that his heart stopped beating fractionally. It wasn't the ships; it was what they were towing—line after line of troop carriers.

He stared at them almost with respect for their ingenuity. They were nothing more than huge plastic rafts with a transparent covering. Clearly they could—and had been—mass-produced easily in thousands and, what was worse, they were literally packed to overflowing with troops and equipment. Greater London, Paris and possibly Brussels and Amsterdam must have conscripted their entire manpower to launch an army of this size.

He thought, with a kind of anguished despair, that the entire force, despite its size, was a sitting duck. A single squadron of antique Lancasters or Flying Fortresses could have carved the entire fleet to pieces. Only he didn't have any Lancasters; he didn't have a single military aircraft, fighting sea vessel or even a hero with an ancient muzzle-loader to guard the beaches.

Suddenly the scanners changed direction, swung backwards and downwards and he was looking at the outskirts of the city which he had called The Spanish Bulwark-Barcelona.

As the scanners swung downwards, he saw lithe dark men digging trenches, ancient but serviceable weapons skillfully sighted on rooftops, barricades in the streets, women and young children constructing strong points.

This was the invasion point! The thought struck him with almost numbing force. These people were prepared and ready to hold the city against land attack while their liberators built up a colossal beachhead behind them without interference.

Good God, what had he to use against them? Local beaming devices which wouldn't reach from Madrid and his own high-powered projectors which would have to be swung from Toronto to Spain, realigned, reset and then probably would be inadequate at such range.

Conventional weapons? He scrambled desperately in his mind; there were only a few pieces in museums minus vital equipment. One or two ancient arsenals with equally ancient and probably rusting weapons. A few barracks, with possibly a few more weapons which, even if they could be made ready, few knew how to use.

Welt's troubles had only just begun. Four hours later, a voice which was too numb with shock to be hysterical reported four massive fleets of aircraft crossing the Canadian border.

Less than five minutes later six American cities were beamed and exploded in savage insurrection.

The local Immunes, although prepared for revolt, were soon on the defensive. It was hideously clear that their morale was cracking and they were fighting with one eye on the sky—were these air fleets in support of the insurrections?

In Immie headquarters, morale began to crack; sweating uniformed men barked orders into speakers which were almost immediately countermanded by their superiors.

Aides, generals and commanders began to mill about in obvious confusion until Cole, the Chief of Staff, clubbed an aide with a ceremonial revolver and shouted coarsely but effectively for order.

"Quiet, you bloody vermin!"

Slowly the noise and confusion died and he glowered about him. "If you bastards are going to run around like hysterical schoolgirls we might as well surrender now. We might as well cut our own throats slowly and with jagged knives. It will be far less pleasant than the treatment they'll hand

out if they panic us into immediate defeat without a shot being fired."

They were silent, intent. At that moment they almost loved him, someone to take command, someone to shoulder the responsibility and tell them what to do.

Cole, in truth, had held a peacetime commission and, therefore, was not entirely without experience. His experience, however, did not extend to Chief of Staff, but before the machines he had held the rank of major.

Somehow, almost despite himself, he succeeded in creating order out of chaos and began to issue orders.

It was not until hours later that the futility of his efforts began to dawn on him. He had no arms capable of stopping a mass air attack; all he had was the huge projectors which had to be aligned on a fixed target and were, therefore, useless. He had a vast number of projector-type side arms but these, also, were useless, unless the attackers descended to a hundred feet, which was unlikely.

He sent out several hundred men to scour museums, ancient arsenals, and abandoned barracks for conventional weapons.

While they were gone he studied the air fleets in the viewing screen. Like the seaborne attack, this, too, was makeshift: ancient jet liners towed plastic gravity-rafts in veering and dangerous-looking rows. Air freights and troop carriers, dating back to God knew when, virtually lumbered along in their wake. There were a lot of craft which looked homemade; he personally noted four 1960 bombers—three American and one British—and an archaic thing with propellers which he was unable to identify. In terms of efficiency the entire outfit was a collection of flying bedsteads, an airborne rabble, but in mass—Cole felt sweat stand out on his forehead—in terms of mass it was irresistible.

In the middle of his terror he thought suddenly of Welt—where the hell was Welt? He sent a dozen messengers to find him, commandeered several urgently needed systems to call him—the result was negative; Welt was nowhere to be found.

Cole stood still in the center of the command room and tried to stop his body shaking. Welt had run out! Welt, who might have contacted the Supreme and come back with serviceable if limited arms.

The Leader had gone! He had run out and left his Chief of Staff to carry the bag. Self-pity struck at Cole, almost calming him. So that was loyalty; that was the reward of two centuries' devoted service. Oh, God, it wasn't fair; what had he *done* to deserve *this*?

Men began to come in with reports which depressed him even further. The search for conventional weapons had yielded an abundance of white elephants. Twenty-six ground-to-air missiles, all without fuel, eighteen without warheads and five without motors; seven hundred side arms without ammunition; a 1955 Bofors gun with fourteen rounds of ammunition but no breechblock.

Cole was about to put his head in his hands when a frightened voice shouted: "They're nearly here!"

It was then he became aware of a distant menacing drone and by the time he turned to the screen it was almost too late.

The gravity rafts had slipped their towlines and were already floating down to Earth on the outskirts of the city.

The ancient bombers had found reserves of speed and were now circling menacingly overhead—this, undoubtedly, was the end.

Cole took out the ceremonial revolver, looked at it and put it back in its holster. There was nothing in it anyway. A knife? He shuddered. Maybe there was some quick poison which didn't hurt. One which just put one gently and sweetly to sleep. Inwardly Cole knew he lacked the courage for anything even as merciful and peaceful as that. Taking one's life required a certain amount of guts and Cole hadn't any.

Chapter XXIV

WITH A NUMB kind of despair he began to watch the screen again. Troops, equipment, weapons and even armored vehicles were spilling from the recently landed vessels. There were even considerable amounts of armored vehicles; most of the armor was plastic but, since he had nothing to bring against it, it might just have well have been supasteel. It was tough enough to stop the projectiles of any of the ancient weapons he might have serviced to make a last stand. Last stand! The city was surrounded by at least four divisions of grimly revengeful desperadoes who would, no doubt, take the slightest show of resistance as an excuse for a

massacre.

From the distant troops there was a sudden gush of flame and something black, but trailing fire, rushed abruptly skywards.

Cole whimpered, "Rockets!" aloud, and flung himself desperately flat.

Around him there was immediate panic; men dived for cover or ran from room to room in a kind of blind frenzy. He had a brief glimpse of an aide and a colonel fighting like animals to reach the cover of a frail table upon which coffee was usually served. In the fight a leg broke and the table collapsed on both of them. The colonel put his head under the small, flower-decorated cloth which had covered it and lay there shuddering.

Cole had the grace to feel both sick and numbly embarrassed.

Suddenly the floor jerked under his body; there was a crashing explosion and one of the windows fell in. Heavy objects struck at the sides of the building and a vase of flowers on a window shelf suddenly flew to fragments.

The explosion was followed by an unreal and heavy silence and then from a distance, but with disturbing clarity, a voice began booming, "Attention! That was a warning! It is the only warning! This is the Commander of the Allied Liberation Forces speaking. The city is completely surrounded and your situation is completely hopeless. We have enough fire-power to bring the entire city down on your heads and we intend to do so unless you surrender.

"Here are the terms.

"One: You will hang a white cloth from every available window in the city as a token of complete surrender.

"Two: The entire populace capable of doing so will appear on the streets in an orderly manner with their hands clasped on the tops of their heads.

"Three: All arms, including projectors, are to be dumped at intersections.

"Four: Our troops are to be given free access to all streets, all buildings and all institutions without let or hindrance.

"Five: No reprisals, personal or considered, shall be taken by me or the troops under my command against any civilian or any member of your armed forces unless the terms of surrender be abused.

"Six: Individual acts of resistance will not be used as an excuse for mass executions.

"Seven: Individual acts of resistance shall be judged by a military tribunal.

"Eight: The city, upon surrendering, shall be placed under martial law for an indefinite period.

"You have thirty minutes in which to come to a decision. The appearance of the white tokens on your buildings will be taken as a sign of acceptance. No alternative surrender terms can, or will be, considered."

There was silence.

The colonel took his head out from under the tablecloth and said in a cracked voice: "We've got to do as they say; we've no choice."

Cole shrugged resignedly; if there had been a choice he wasn't going to get it; the people had taken it out of his hands. Already, from every visible window, white was fluttering: dresses, shirts, and even bedsheets.

Cole sank into a chair and stared miserably into the screen. The colonel went out on the terrace, clasped his hands on the top of his head and stood there waiting. He was soon joined by others, but Cole, wallowing in a mixture of self-pity and frustrated fury, stayed where he was. Let them come and bloody well shoot him; let them do what they damn well pleased; to hell with them. The master race, God! The victors must regard them as a race of old women.

Despairingly he watched the victorious troops march in— troops! A damn rabble; most of them in civilian clothes and bearing a variety of antique weapons. He watched them take up positions at intersections, make crude emplacements, mount guard at various points. He watched the makeshift armored vehicles trundle noisily and unsteadily into the main thoroughfares and then, suddenly, he was aware of a movement behind him.

He rose and turned.

There were three men, one in uniform and two in civilian clothes. Two other civilians stood slightly behind them.

The uniformed man said, "Are you in command?"

"I was." Cole's shoulders slumped.

"Where is Welt?"

"I don't know—he ran out."

"You concede defeat?"

"I had nothing with which to fight—yes, I concede defeat. I was outnumbered and out-gunned."

One of the civilians lit a squat blackened pipe. "For a man who has lived over two centuries, you're not very bright, are you?"

Cole flushed angrily. "I don't understand you."

"You don't?" The civilian removed a small instrument from his pocket and flicked a switch. "Take a look through the window."

Cole looked and felt a cold feeling rise inside him. Dutiful and obviously terrified people lined the streets, hands clasped on the tops of their heads. White still fluttered from every window and there were piles of surrendered arms at every street corner but no troops—no *troops at all!*

No bombers circled above them; there were no armored vehicles; no signs of airborne landings.

The pipe-smoking civilian ejected a brief jet of blue vapor from the corner of his mouth. "Did you think we were too stupid to take a page out of your book?"

The switch clicked and the rabble troops and armor appeared again.

"You can't do that!" Cole felt as if he were choking. "I'm an *Immune*."

"Immune to your machines, yes. As it happens, however, a German and

an American scientist cooked up another one on an entirely different frequency and you're not immune to that." He smiled around the stem of the pipe. "Don't get ideas, brother; we can still switch the tape to meet a possible insurrection. The troops are not real, but you will find it impossible to convince your mind of the fact and, when they shoot, their illusory bullets will kill you just the same." Cole lowered himself shakily into the nearest chair. He knew enough about the machines to know it was true.

The civilian smiled again. "If you're interested, we have recaptured the city of Boston with five men: two American beam operators, an American commander, Mr. Gilliad and myself."

Cole said, "Oh God!" in an anguished voice, but the civilian seemed determined to give him no peace. "We took Madrid with three: a Spanish colonel and two beam operators. Possibly you are in no mood to appreciate the work that was put into those tapes but I am going to tell you just the same. Consider the intense research that was undertaken to give you a mental picture of an '06 bomber or a diesel warship—we had neither, by the way. Then there was the meticulous attention to detail, of vast but makeshift sea and air fleets which, if you have stopped to think, you must have known we could not possibly have massed in so short a time. In short, my friend, we conquered you with an exquisite bluff. Our armies were rabble enough, our fleets makeshift enough to stop you from thinking, and you believed we might *just* have done it in the short time; but you didn't stop to reason about it, did you?"

He removed the pipe from his mouth and thrust it into his pocket. "I haven't introduced myself, have I?" He walked forward and stood looking down at the now shivering Cole. "My name is Osterly; I represent the Ontario Intelligence Service." He smiled and put the pipe back in his mouth. "I shall be wanting the answers to a lot of questions."

Cole said, "Go to hell!" in a squeaky kind of voice.

"Ah, now, I rather thought you'd say something like that at first, but I should think about it if I were you. You see, I'm rather good at this and I've brought along quite a lot of equipment to help me. Also my friends here insisted on bringing some personal tapes just for you. They say the coward dies many deaths; offhand I can arrange about twenty-five for you, all of them unpleasant."

He crossed the room, poured a generous glass of whisky from the staff decanter and returned with it

"You drink that, old chap; you drink it up and you *think*. I don't *want* to be unpleasant; I should much prefer an amiable cooperation. Think, what have you to lose? Do you think anyone will *care* that you played a tight-lipped hero? After all, this is defeat; no one will come to cheer, and an unhonored martyr is something of a clown, don't you think?"

He refilled the glass. "This could mean a lot to you, Cole; the word 'cooperation' at a war crime trial could spell the difference between execution and a few years' confinement."

Cole blanched; he looked up, licking his lips. "What do you want to know?" His voice was a whisper.

"Now we're being sensible." Osterly drew up a chair and took out a pocket recorder. "No funny business now; we take some nasty reprisals for false information—what do you know about the Supreme?"

"Nothing—I swear it. Only Welt knows; no one else. He goes, gets information and comes back."

"Where does he go?"

"I don't know; no one does. A lot of people have tried to follow him but they never came back."

"Where is he now?"

"God knows; the swine ran out on us."

"Have you any idea of the general direction?"

"Oh, yes, I can tell you that." He rose tiredly, removed a note pad from a desk and began to execute a shaky sketch. "You follow this road here for about a hundred and fifty kilometers. It's overgrown, but still visible. Just here is a small hill and beyond it a clump of trees. After that, we don't know. Someone sent a low flying aircraft after him once, but it blew up before it had gone thirty kilos. High flying aircraft can see nothing, even with instruments "

Osterly removed the pipe from his mouth and looked at Gilliad. "Shall we go? I'll have a specialist meet us en route."

Chapter XXV

THE SPECIALIST was a thin, studious-looking man with the—perhaps—significant name of Grimm. He appeared to have brought enough pocket instruments to start a store of his own.

Once at the group of trees indicated on the map, he took them out of his pockets in turn and studied them, frowning.

"Know what you're looking for?" Osterly sounded dubious.

"No, but I shall know it when I see it." He smiled faintly. "That's not quite so stupid as it sounds. I was an electronics specialist in New York; principally engaged on robotics, but that's a damn big field. You can't run anything without a detectable leak, particularly a refraction field."

"Refraction field?"

"It bends light. Whatever he has out there, he has to hide; there's very little natural cover."

"You mean he's made it invisible?"

"One could put it that way, yes." He took out another instrument, frowned at it and put it back in his pocket. "Negative; try another." There was a brief pause, then he said, "Hello!" in a pleased voice. He laid the instrument carefully on the ground and produced another. "Ah, here we are—one refraction field."

"Where?"

"Thirty to forty kilos. If we aim for that tree on the horizon there, we should be heading in the right direction."

They climbed into the decrepit turbo-jeep which, although expertly reserviced and fitted with new plastic tires, was over a century old. It moaned, grunted and made almost human protesting noises when they took it over rough ground.

Grimm said, "I'd like you to stop every two kilometers for me to take readings."

"Is that necessary?"

"Matter of opinion; a lot of people, you tell me, followed this Welt character but forgot to come back. I'm not overanxious on joining them. There are two things we have to consider; either this Supreme oddity gets rough if you get too close, or our friend Welt has surrounded the place with traps. Personally, I hope for the latter conclusion—traps are detectable."

Osterly laid his hand briefly on the other's shoulder. "You're in charge from now on." He was beginning to like this thin acidulous man. He was apparently quite calm and possessed a quick if sardonic sense of humor.

They stopped after two kilometers and Grimm checked again. "Things are getting a little complicated; inside the refraction field is another power source. God knows what it is but it carried enough potential to fry the crust off the entire planet—I'm not sure I care for it." He studied another instrument. "Let's be careful from here on and stop every kilo. I'm picking up some nasty reactions here and there."

They moved on but the journeys became shorter and the stops more frequent. Finally Grimm took out a large but grubby notebook and began to sketch.

When he had finished, he scowled and said, "This, I don't care for particularly." He held out the sketch for them to study. "The circle in the center is presumably what we're looking for. It's hidden by the refraction field so we can go on guessing. As you see, beyond this is a wide area of flat land; the little dots I've marked represent about one fifth of the telltales I've picked up."

"Telltales?"

"My instruments register—presumably they're electronic weapons."

"How does Welt get there?"

"If they are electronic weapons they are 'keyed' to him. In short they recognize him when he approaches and hold their fire."

Gilliad, peering over Osterly's shoulder, said, "What's the shading on this sketch?"

Grimm hunched his shoulders. "Mine fields," he said, unhappily.

"No hope of getting through them?"

"Only if you can afford to wait a couple of years. Unless I'm very much mistaken those fields are 'patterned' and triggered. That is to say, you can't pick a path through them. Lift six and the two nearest your path blow as you lift the seventh. To clear that field you'd not only have to hit all the mines but lift them in precise order. It would be rather like 'feeling' for the combination of a safe—with the added hazard that bang goes your head if you fail to get the right numbers first time."

"Welt must have got in somewhere," said Gilliad.

"True; but he's been smart enough not to leave a well-worn path."

"We could search."

"With pleasure, but under my supervision; our nearest mine field is only about a hundred paces away."

They turned at right angles and began to crawl slowly along. Once they passed a perforated heap of wreckage which might once have been a ground car. Later, what was clearly an aircraft; the tail had been blown off and the body was covered in moss but the shape was unmistakable. It had buried its nose in the soil and looked like a broken dart.

They did not stop; they were looking for something else.

It was Grimm who said, "Stop!" He pointed. "Notice the grass there—some people can be just a little too smart."

"Don't follow you."

"Grass is just a little greener; why should an area of grass about six feet wide and a winding five hundred paces be different?"

"Following an underground stream, perhaps."

"Maybe, maybe not. It could be that when that area gets a little used

something comes out from somewhere. Something that irrigates and replants it with fresh seed—one of those small robotic gardeners they used to use in public parks."

"You think that?"

"Don't pin me down, Mr. Osterly; I'm just saying that it could be." He took out one of his instruments. "There's a bunch of telltales at the far end, concentrated on each side; yes, it certainly could be."

"Where do we go from here?"

"Not up there, certainly. Do no one any good drifting back as ash."

Gilliad cut the motor. "What do we do? Just sit here?"

"Until we can think of something; yes."

Gilliad scowled at him. Somehow, lately, all the zest seemed to have gone out of life. Things which once had had both purpose and meaning had become futile and empty. God, they could sit here forever; bring out an arsenal of equipment and still sit here. At least, if someone did something it would give a lead which might help others. Suppose someone wriggled up that path on his belly ready for those automatic weapons. With his own hair-trigger reflexes he might just be able to roll out of the way in time and, perhaps, knock one of those weapons out.

Deep down Gilliad knew the chances of survival were a thousand to one against it, but a sullen resentment inside him overrode natural caution. His period of real usefulness was over and, in any case, there was another—his mind stubbornly refused to acknowledge the identity of "the other."

In any case, what did it matter, apart from the explanations, the temporary anguish of the witnesses, who the hell would care?

I care, said a voice inside his mind. *I care because I love you, too. In any case what are you trying to prove?*

He stiffened. What the hell! Then he thought: A *telepathic device—where is the damn thing?*

Please, don't look for it, Dave, please. You spoke about baring your soul—look into mine, please.

Almost angrily he allowed his mind to adjust but found himself swept away into a kind of gentle ecstasy. She loved *him* like *that!* His mind seemed to soar upwards beyond his control and then suddenly he was contrite.

My darling, I didn't know.

Neither did I until you walked out on me. There was gentleness, warmth and somehow contriteness conveyed. Then: you're having trouble ?

Enough.

May I help?

Can you?

I hope so; we've been discussing it here and Keisler came up with a new angle. This Supreme whatever-it-is doesn't seem to have done much to help Welt in this crisis—we think it might be neutral.

So?

Keisler suggests you go over Welt's head and try and contact directly. That is to say try and call it from there with an amplifier if you have one.

Gilliad nodded unconsciously and turned to Grimm. "Have you an amplifier?"

"What kind of amplifier? What have you in mind?"

Gilliad outlined what he had heard and Grimm nodded quickly. "I haven't one with me but I think I've enough odds and ends to build you one. Have to be a special or the refraction field will foul it—give me fifteen minutes."

As he worked Gilliad looked thoughtfully at Osterly. "I thought you were damned insistent about having me wear my thicker jacket. You knew, I suppose, that it had been bugged with a telepathic device.

Osterly grinned with friendly insolence. "I'm a natural born Cupid," he said.

Gilliad tried to scowl and failed. "All right, you win and thanks." Mentally, he said, *Not now, darling; you're getting me hot around the collar.*

Don't you like it?

"You know I do but I'm too far away to do anything about it.

Show you how I really feel, then I leave you in peace—for a while.

After a second Gilliad turned red but looked delighted.

"Finished." Grimm held something. "Press the stud and speak."

Gilliad took the pencil-like mike and put it close to his mouth. He had no idea what he was going to say; he had rehearsed nothing, but it seemed logical to speak normally.

"This is David Gilliad addressing the being or group of beings known to me as the Supreme—do you read me?"

"I read you." The voice, neutral and cultured, seemed to answer quietly from the air at his side and Gilliad jumped.

"You know me?"

"I know you. You are David Gilliad, a Susceptible/resistant and, as such, largely responsible for the recent uprising."

"Where do you fit in?"

"I do not 'fit in,' as you phrase it; I am neutral."

"You are sheltering Welt."

"Correction. Welt has taken refuge in this vicinity. I am not actively concealing him."

Chapter XXVI

IN THE BRIGHT light where he had been resting, Welt sprang to his feet.

"You betrayed me."

"I did not contract to conceal you. You asked to stay here and I permitted you to do so."

Welt swore but there was sweat on his face.

Far away, Gilliad said, "You supplied the dream-machines."

"Not precisely; they were adapted from information I supplied for a less comprehensive purpose."

"But you knew it *could* be adapted?"

"Technical information is neutral. It creates or destroys not of itself but according to the requirements of those who possess it."

Gilliad scowled at the mike in his hand, becoming slowly aware that he was dealing with an intelligence far greater than his own. "Am I to understand you dispense technical information irrespective of who asks for it?"

"Correct."

"But, good God, you could have provided the Immunes with a weapon which could have destroyed humanity."

"That offer was made but rejected since they, themselves, would have perished with it."

Gilliad swore under his breath. "What exactly is your purpose—what do you *do*?"

"I do nothing. My purpose is to dispense technical information irrespective of who asks it and, again, irrespective of the ends to which that information is put."

Gilliad resisted an inclination to scratch his head; he was out of his depth and knew it. Finally he said almost to himself, "There must be a reason."

"Of course there is a reason."

"Then I would like to know it."

"Very well, but please give your imagination rein. I represent Intelligences so highly evolved that to attempt to explain it is impossible. Their life span is by your standards infinite; to them a million years tick past like seconds; they observe the birth and death of suns and passing of galaxies as you note the changing of seasons. Above all else, however, their compassion for all living intelligences is absolute."

The voice paused, then went on: "The universe is, again by your standards, infinite. Let me assure you that from this planet, even with instruments, you observe a fraction so small as to be almost nonexistent when set against the true immensity of things as they are.

"Bear this in mind when I tell you that uncountable intelligences come into being every second and, every second, intelligences such as yours reach the most critical period in their development.

"This critical period may be likened to the transition from pupa to butterfly but is many, many times more dangerous. When a culture reaches this stage it is poised between maturity and eternity. When I tell you that out of every twenty million cultures to reach this stage only *two* achieve maturity you will perceive some of the true hazards.

"You, yourselves, were tottering on the brink of chaos, threatened with war, devastating weapons and undoubted financial collapse. So many like you have perished from the universe forever in this critical stage of transition.

"Something had to be done, therefore, without actively interfering with the free growth of the culture involved and, after many experiments, this one was found to be the most successful. Since its inception the appalling figure of two in twenty million has risen to a ninety percent survival figure." The voice stopped.

Gilliad swallowed and looked helplessly at his two companions. Then he said, "But how?" numbly.

"The introduction of advanced technologies provide a guide line for the ascending culture. It is irrelevant how those technologies are used; the

culture is, at this stage, psychotically introvert and its attention must be diverted from itself."

"But, good God, we were enslaved for nearly three centuries; millions perished."

"True, but it might have been the entire race of man.

Absolute compassion must, to succeed, resort to absolute ruthlessness or at least manifest itself as apparent ruthlessness. It cannot afford to concern itself with individual tragedies or intransient persecutions when the survival of an entire culture is at stake."

Osterly craned forward to the mike. "Apart from that we don't seem to benefit very much, do we?"

"You are speaking from your emotions and not your intelligence. Already you have opened up entirely new fields in psychiatry and stepped into an entirely new conception of the human mind. You have, without my help, devised a telepathic device which will wipe away forever all misunderstandings between races and individuals. Again, you have a mechanism you call the 'subjo,' the workings of which I am fully prepared to explain. This mechanism, when exploited, will not only provide nearly costless transport, it will give you the stars."

"We also have over a million Immunes," said Gilliad angrily. "A million enemies of the people."

"Correction. You have one million, two hundred and eighty thousand, six hundred and five."

"What difference does it make? They are enemies."

"Again, correction. You have one million, two hundred and eighty thousand, six hundred and five *mentally sick patients* for whom you are responsible."

Gilliad was shaken. It was an entirely fresh view of an immediate problem and he was sensitive enough, despite his anger, to see its truth. Somehow the implied rebuke heightened the obvious truth of the statement.

"Can they be cured?"

"Yes, they can be cured but, in view of your state of development, it is, perhaps, fortunate to add that the cure is not pleasant. Treatment, therefore, can be reconciled both with justice and with punishment. Your patients, in order to effect a lasting cure, will have to be beamed into the belief *that they are Susceptibles. They will have to be convinced that they are addicts and that all these centuries of power have been subjective.* Only then will they respond to the treatments already in your possession and emerge as sane and responsible people."

Gilliad stared unseeingly across the apparently empty landscape, awed and not a little shocked. "Are *you* one of these demigods?"

"No, I am an instrument—one of many, many more. We follow a routine practice which scarcely varies no matter what the form has reached its critical stage of development. We land unobserved and unnoticed—naturally we have advanced techniques for circumventing detection instruments. Having landed, we link with the culture's communication systems, break down and learn all the languages. We familiarize ourselves with politics, history, local and general; customs, traditions, mores and, of course, draw up a comprehensive psychological graph in respect of the entire culture.

"We are then ready for the first contact and we adapt our outward appearances to the psychological development of the particular native as he or she approaches."

"It sounds very pretty." Grimm's voice was harsh. "But as I see it, in view of the fact that you hand out any information gratis, you could be providing the instruments of a planet's destruction. You could be landing an atom bomb to an imbecile."

"Let me assure you that our percentages are precise beyond reasonable doubt. If a culture *does* destroy itself with the information we provide them, I assure you it would have destroyed itself in any case and without our intervention."

"How do we get at you?" Osterly was biting the stem of his unlit pipe.

"The simplest and quickest solution would be to blow the mine fields surrounding me. The resulting explosion will not only destroy the

automatic weapons but remove the refraction screen. I can provide a simple device which will activate all the detonators simultaneously and can be put together on the spot."

"You'll be in the middle of it," said Grimm.

"I am strong enough to contemplate nuclear attack with equanimity. It is unlikely, therefore, that I should become perturbed over a few chemical explosives."

"Since you have awakened us to our responsibilities," said Gilliad harshly, "what about Welt? We can't blow him to pieces with a clear conscience, much as we feel inclined to."

"I will protect your patient—he is sleeping at the moment."

"Let's get on with blowing these damn mine fields," said

Grimm savagely. "I am more than a little anxious to get a clear look at you. Information, please."

"Very well; first you will require the Lohm tube in your right hand pocket—"

While Grimm assembled his equipment and took notes, Gilliad called the base. "Did you get all that, darling?"

"All of it—naturally it's been passed on. Keisler is on his way."

"Keisler?"

"Keisler and a beam-operator. Welt is going to be our first patient." Then, mentally, soft arms went around Gilliad's neck. *Come back to me soon, darling*. Gilliad went red again.

"Finished," said Grimm with satisfaction. "Now, let's pull out to a nice safe distance. Our friend may refer disparagingly to 'chemical explosives' but several thousand tons of *phosodioline* is going to make considerably more noise than a handful of popcorn."

Before they reached a safe distance, however, a sleek silvery vessel which had obviously belonged to an Immune came to rest beside them.

Keisler stepped out, followed by a technician loaded with equipment. Both of them climbed into the jeep and the air vessel floated upwards and away.

Osterly said, "Good morning, Doctor," without particular humor.

Keisler scowled morosely in front of him. "All right, all right, so we have a social conscience now. You know it, I know it, everyone knows it; responsibility has been thrust upon us and somehow, God knows when, we have become mature enough to shoulder it."

Osterly began to fill his pipe slowly. "Nearly a million and a quarter sick lice and we have to nurse them back to sanity. The only coercion is conscience and I, like you, find I can't escape it."

"At least we're following medical and psychiatric procedure," said Keisler harshly. He tapped some of the equipment beside him. "I suppose I should be sorry that this is going to give them hell, a taste of their medicine, but I'm not. In point of fact, I'm going to be horribly smug about it and tell myself it's for their own good. As it stands now I couldn't permit pogroms or executions but, to be frank, I shall enjoy this—*they deserve it.*"

Chapter XVII

THEY FOUND A hollow behind a low ridge of earth and stopped.

"This should be safe—we fervently hope." Grimm lay down. "Everyone ready?"

The others, already prone beside him, nodded without speaking.

"Right; keep your heads down." He pressed a switch.

Almost immediately there was a livid scarlet flash; the earth punched upwards at their bodies, then seemed to drop away and punch up again, leaving them breathless. Before they could regain it, wind, black acrid smoke and hail of fragments howled above them.

"Keep still!" Grimm's shout was hoarse and only just audible.

The advice was emphasized less than a second later. The stripped trunk

of a huge tree crashed down a short distance away; it was followed by rocks, branches, huge lumps of earth and a veritable rain of soil fragments.

A minute later Grimm climbed cautiously to his feet. "Okay."

They shook soil from their clothing and stood upright but none of them looked at the devastation. None of them looked at the valley which had never been there before, a blackened valley filled with churned and still smoking soil. They looked at the thing in the middle of it and felt a terrified, almost superstitious, awe.

"My God!" said the beam operator in a whisper. "What the hell is it?"

No one answered him and Gilliad had the curious feeling that his eyes were fixed and immovable in his head. Mentally he echoed the beam operator's words and, if he had any doubts, they, were dispelled now.

Desperately he sought in his mind for points of reference and wondered briefly why, because there was nothing unusual in shape and color.

It was a dull and rather depressing shade of green, dark green but flecked with a curious and unnatural iridescence. It was shaped rather like a coffin but upended so the widest part was at the top. The "coffin," however, stood about fifteen hundred feet in height and dominated the entire landscape.

There were no protuberances, no antenna and there was a curious absence of sharp angles—it was a spaceship, surely?

He was still fumbling in his mind trying to find a reason for his fear and then, suddenly, he knew. It was not its height; there were buildings half as high again in innumerable cities. It was not even the color—somehow the thing radiated a massive and awful sense of power. He could well understand the need for it to conceal itself behind an innocuous and innocent facade for the first life form which came along. One glimpse of it as it really was and the entire armed might of the world would have been flung around it in a desperate circle of steel and men.

Gilliad felt not only overawed, he felt choked and psychologically stifled. The sense of tremendous power made him want to crawl into a hole in the earth and stay there. No wonder, in all innocence, Welt had called it the

Supreme.

Shakily he brought the microphone to his lips. "How long do you propose to stay?" Somehow he didn't want to live in the same world as this thing.

"My work is almost complete—a week at most."

"Here." Grimm wrenched the mike from Gilliad's hand and almost snarled into it. "What the hell *are* you?"

"I told you, an instrument."

"Can't you be a bit more blasted specific?"

"Well—" Somehow the cultured neutral voice conveyed all the inferences of deprecation. "Well, I suppose without stretching the imagination too much, you could call me a robot—"

Welt woke from an exhausted sleep quite unaware that the situation had radically changed.

He stretched, rubbed his eyes and wondered vaguely how he came to be sitting in a chair. The light, too, did not seem as bright.

Welt rubbed his eyes again in bleary disbelief. The cell-like room with its unpainted gray walls, the plastic chair and table. He had seen cells like this before—in the sub-tunnels of the great cities. This was a living cubicle; this— He froze. In the center of the plastic table and directly in front of him was a *dream-machine*.

The prism tube, although not shimmering, was still ruddy from recent use.

Welt was aware of tensing muscles, of emptiness, of a churning kind of panic. Where was the light, the Supreme? How had he got here? Where was—?

It was then that the door crashed in and two men entered. The men wore familiar scarlet uniforms and their faces were not pleasant.

One of them picked up the machine and the other gripped his shoulder. "Come along."

Welt stared up at him stupidly. "Eh?"

"Don't play it stupid, brother; you know the penalties for using a machine. You've seen M-Police before; you're under arrest." They almost dragged him from the room and pushed him into a waiting vehicle. It jerked forward almost at once and he nearly fell. He regained his balance and turned on them swearing. "Are you mad? I am an Immune. I am the greatest Immune; I am *Eugene Welt*."

They looked at him blankly and with faint distaste. "Dry up!"

Welt felt veins throb in his temples and he shook his fist in their faces. "I'll see you fry for this, fry slowly, you blasted *imbeciles*."

One of them cuffed him none too gently on the side of the head. "Watch it, you, or well work you over here and now."

Welt staggered but continued to shout. "But you don't understand. I am an Immune; I am Welt, the *Leader*."

They looked at him and shrugged. "Who the hell is Welt?"

"That's a new one on me, too—makes a change from God, doesn't it?"

Welt choked and clenched his fists impotently. "God, you'll pay for this."

"Save it for the tribunal, friend."

A few moments later the vehicle stopped and he was hustled into an imposing looking building. Inside he was shown into a long brightly lighted room where three white-coated men sat behind a polished table.

One of the policemen handed something to one of the white-coated men. "His papers, Dr. Stead."

The man called Stead studied them briefly and laid them down. "Bring him a chair." He waited until it arrived, then: "Sit down, you."

Welt flushed. "Now listen; you'd better—"

"The Doctor said 'sit.' " Rough hands emphasized the order and Welt sat heavily and painfully.

"I think before we begin we must arrive at an understanding." Dr. Stead smiled thinly and unpleasantly. "We may, at a later stage in these proceedings, consider any story you may care to tell or any claims you may see fit to make. At this stage, however, you will answer questions in a manner respectful to this tribunal. I will not mince words; if you do not do so, you will be beaten heavily about the head and body. Do I make myself plain?"

"I—" Welt stopped suddenly, becoming aware that one of the scarlet clad policemen was standing beside him. The man held a rubbery sort of truncheon with which he was tapping the palm of his hand meaningly.

He said, "Yes, sir," meekly.

"Good—your name?"

"Welt-Eugene Welt."

The doctor held up the papers. "This your writing?"

"Yes, sir."

"Kindly read the signature."

Welt opened his mouth and nearly choked—how had they found *that*?

"Well?"

"Geor—George Merris—sir."

"Do you deny that that is your real name?"

"N—no, sir."

"You changed it?"

"Yes, sir."

"George Merris, you were caught in the act of using the forbidden dream-machine. Have you anything to say?"

"I can't use a machine, sir; I am an Immune."

The doctor sighed, wearily. "Merris, it is fortunate for you that the death penalty has only recently been rescinded, but even now you are due for a course of long and painful treatment. Tell me, what is the date?"

"The date?" Welt delved desperately into his mind and told him.

"There is a calendar behind you; look at it and explain to me the discrepancy of one year; two months and three days. Do you still deny using a machine?"

"I—I—" Welt choked on his answer. Where the hell had over a whole year gone?

Far away Osterly was smoking his pipe and Gilliad was holding Vanessa in his arms, but Welt did not know about this—already he was wondering if they had ever existed.