

Test to Destruction

The late October wind drove icy rain against Mallory's face above his turned-up collar where he stood concealed in the shadows at the mouth of the narrow alley.

"It's ironic, Johnny," the small, grim-faced man beside him muttered. "You-the man who should have been World Premier tonight-skulking in the back streets while Koslo and his bully boys drink champagne in the Executive Palace."

"That's all right, Paul," Mallory said. "Maybe he'll be too busy with his victory celebration to concern himself with me."

"And maybe he won't," the small man said. "He won't rest easy as long as he knows you're alive to oppose him."

"It will only be a few more hours, Paul. By breakfast time, Koslo will know his rigged election didn't take."

"But if he takes you first, that's the end, Johnny. Without you the coup will collapse like a soap bubble."

"I'm not leaving the city," Mallory said flatly. "Yes, there's a certain risk involved; but you don't bring down a dictator without taking a few chances."

"You didn't have to take this one, meeting Crandall yourself."

"It will help if he sees me, knows I'm in this all the way."

In silence, the two men waited the arrival of their fellow conspirator.

* * *

Aboard the interstellar dreadnought cruising half a parsec from Earth, the compound Ree mind surveyed the distant solar system.

Radiation on many wavelengths from the third body, the Perceptor cells directed the impulse to the sixty-nine hundred and thirty-four units comprising the segmented brain which guided the ship. Modulations over the forty-ninth through the ninety-first spectra of mentation.

A portion of the pattern is characteristic of exocosmic manipulatory intelligence, the Analyzers extrapolated from the data. Other indications range in complexity from levels one through twenty-six.

This is an anomalous situation, the Recollectors mused. It is the essential nature of a Prime Intelligence to destroy all lesser competing mind-forms, just as I/we have systematically annihilated those I/we have encountered on my/our exploration of the Galactic Arm.

Before action is taken, clarification of the phenomenon is essential, the Interpretors pointed out. Closure to a range not exceeding one radiation/second will be required for extraction and analysis of a representative mind-unit.

In this event, the risk level rises to Category Ultimate, the Analyzers announced dispassionately.

RISK LEVELS NO LONGER APPLY, the powerful thought-impulse of the Egon put an end to the discussion. NOW OUR SHIPS RANGE INTO NEW SPACE, SEEKING EXPANSION ROOM FOR THE GREAT RACE. THE UNALTERABLE COMMAND OF THAT WHICH IS GREAT REQUIRES THAT MY/OUR PROBE BE PROSECUTED TO THE LIMIT OF REE CAPABILITY, TESTING MY/OUR ABILITY FOR SURVIVAL AND DOMINANCE. THERE CAN BE NO TIMIDITY, NO EXCUSE FOR FAILURE. LET ME/US NOW ASSUME A CLOSE SURVEILLANCE ORBIT!

In utter silence, and at a velocity a fraction of a kilometer/sec below that of light, the Ree dreadnought flashed toward Earth.

* * *

Mallory tensed as a dark figure appeared a block away under the harsh radiance of a polyarc.

"There's Crandall now," the small man hissed. "I'm glad-" He broke off as the roar of a powerful turbine engine sounded suddenly along the empty avenue. A police car exploded from a side street, rounded the corner amid a shriek of overstressed gyros. The man under the light turned to run-and the vivid blue glare of a SURF-gun winked and stuttered from the car. The burst of slugs caught the runner, slammed him against the brick wall, kicked him from his feet, rolled him, before the crash of the guns reached Mallory's ears.

"My God! They've killed Tony!" the small man blurted. "We've got to get out!"

Mallory took half a dozen steps back into the alley, froze as lights sprang up at the far end. He heard booted feet hit pavement, a hoarse voice that barked a command.

"We're cut off," he snapped. There was a rough wooden door six feet away. He jumped to it, threw his weight against it. It held. He stepped back, kicked it in, shoved his companion ahead of him into a dark room smelling of moldy burlap and rat droppings. Stumbling, groping in the dark, Mallory led the way across a stretch of littered floor, felt along the wall, found a door that hung by one hinge. He pushed past it, was in a passage floored with curled linoleum, visible in the feeble gleam filtered through a fanlight above a massive, barred door. He turned the other way, ran for the smaller door at the far end of the passage. He was ten feet from it when the center panel burst inward in a hail of wood splinters that grazed him, ripped at his coat like raking talons. Behind him, the small man made a choking noise; Mallory whirled in time to see him fall back against the wall and go down, his chest and stomach torn away by the full impact of a thousand rounds from the police SURF-gun.

An arm came through the broached door, groping for the latch. Mallory took a step, seized the wrist, wrenched backward with all his weight, felt the elbow joint shatter. The scream of the injured policeman was drowned in a second burst from the rapid-fire weapon-but Mallory had already leaped, caught the railing of the stair, pulled himself up and over. He took the

steps five at a time, passed a landing littered with broken glass and empty bottles, kept going, emerged in a corridor of sagging doors and cobwebs. Feet crashed below, furious voices yelled. Mallory stepped inside the nearest door, stood with his back to the wall beside it. Heavy feet banged on the stairs, paused, came his way . . .

Mallory tensed and as the policeman passed the door, he stepped out, brought his hand over and down in a side-handed blow to the base of the neck that had every ounce of power in his shoulders behind it. The man seemed to dive forward, and Mallory caught the gun before it struck the floor. He took three steps, poured a full magazine into the stairwell. As he turned to sprint for the far end of the passage, return fire boomed from below.

A club, swung by a giant, struck him in the side, knocked the breath from his lungs, sent him spinning against the wall. He recovered, ran on; his hand, exploring, found a deep gouge that bled freely. The bullet had barely grazed him.

He reached the door to the service stair, recoiled violently as a dirty-gray shape sprang at him with a yowl from the darkness-in the instant before a gun flashed and racketed in the narrow space, scattering plaster dust from the wall above his head. A thick-set man in the dark uniform of the Security Police, advancing up the stair at a run, checked momentarily as he saw the gun in Mallory's hands-and before he recovered himself, Mallory had swung the empty weapon, knocked him spinning back down onto the landing. The cat that had saved his life-an immense, battle-scarred Tom-lay on the floor, half its head blown away by the blast it had intercepted. Its lone yellow eye was fixed on him; its claws raked the floor, as, even in death, it advanced to the attack. Mallory jumped over the stricken beast, went up the stairs.

Three flights higher, the stair ended in a loft stacked with bundled newspapers and rotting cartons from which mice scuttled as he approached. There was a single window, opaque with grime. Mallory tossed aside the useless gun, scanned the ceiling for evidence of an escape hatch, saw nothing. His side ached abominably.

Relentless feet sounded beyond the door. Mallory backed to a corner of the room-and again, the deafening shriek of the SURF-gun sounded, and the flimsy door bucked, disintegrated. For a moment, there was total silence. Then:

"Walk out with your hands up, Mallory!" a brassy voice snarled. In the gloom, pale flames were licking over the bundled papers, set afire by the torrent of steel-jacketed slugs. Smoke rose, thickened.

"Come out before you fry," the voice called.

"Let's get out of here," another man bawled. "This dump will go like tinder!"

"Last chance, Mallory!" the first man shouted, and now the flames, feeding on the dry paper, were reaching for the ceiling, roaring as they grew. Mallory went along the wall to the window, ripped aside the torn roller shade, tugged at the sash. It didn't move. He kicked out the glass, threw a

leg over the sill, and stepped out onto a rusted fire escape. Five stories down, light puddled on grimy concrete, the white dots of upturned faces-and half a dozen police cars blocking the rain-wet street. He put his back to the railing, looked up. The fire escape extended three, perhaps four stories higher. He threw his arm across his face to shield it from the billowing flames, forced his legs to carry him up the iron treads three at a time.

The topmost landing was six feet below an overhanging cornice. Mallory stepped up on the rail, caught the edge of the carved stone trim with both hands, swung himself out. For a moment he dangled, ninety feet above the street; then he pulled himself up, got a knee over the coping, and rolled onto the roof.

Lying flat, he scanned the darkness around him. The level was broken only by a ventilator stack and a shack housing a stair or elevator head.

He reconnoitered, found that the hotel occupied a corner, with a parking lot behind it. On the alley side, the adjoining roof was at a level ten feet lower, separated by a sixteen-foot gap. As Mallory stared across at it, a heavy rumbling shook the deck under his feet: one of the floors of the ancient building, collapsing as the fire ate through its supports.

Smoke was rising all around him now. On the parking lot side, dusky flames soared thirty feet above him, trailing an inverted cascade of sparks into the wet night sky. He went to the stairhead, found the metal door locked. A rusty ladder was clamped to the side of the structure. He wrenched it free, carried it to the alley side. It took all his strength to force the corroded catches free, pull the ladder out to its full extension. Twenty feet, he estimated. Enough-maybe.

He shoved the end of the ladder out, wrestled it across to rest on the roof below. The flimsy bridge sagged under his weight as he crawled up on it. He moved carefully out, ignoring the swaying of the fragile support. He was six feet from the far roof when he felt the rotten metal crumble under him; with a frantic lunge, he threw himself forward. Only the fact that the roof was at a lower level saved him. He clawed his way over the sheet-metal gutter, hearing shouts ring out below as the ladder crashed to the bricks of the alley.

A bad break, he thought. Now they know where I am . . .

There was a heavy trap-door set in the roof. He lifted it, descended an iron ladder into darkness, found his way to a corridor, along it to a stair. Faint sounds rose from below. He went down.

At the fourth floor, lights showed below, voices sounded, the clump of feet. He left the stair at the third floor, prowled along a hall, entered an abandoned office. Searchlights in the street below threw oblique shadows across the discolored walls.

He went on, turned a corner, went into a room on the alley side. A cold draft, reeking of smoke, blew in through a glassless window. Below, the narrow way appeared to be deserted. Paul's body was gone. The broken ladder lay where it had fallen. It was, he estimated, a twenty-foot drop to

the bricks; even if he let himself down to arm's length and dropped, a leg-breaker . . .

Something moved below him. A uniformed policeman was standing at a spot directly beneath the window, his back against the wall. A wolf smile drew Mallory's face tight. In a single motion, he slid his body out over the sill, chest down, held on for an instant, seeing the startled face below turn upward, the mouth open for a yell-

He dropped; his feet struck the man's back, breaking his fall. He rolled clear, sat up, half-dazed. The policeman sprawled on his face, his spine twisted at an awkward angle.

Mallory got to his feet-and almost fell at the stab of pain from his right ankle. Sprained, or broken. His teeth set against the pain, he moved along the wall. Icy rainwater, sluicing from the downspout ahead, swirled about his ankles. He slipped, almost went down on the slimy bricks. The lesser darkness of the parking lot behind the building showed ahead. If he could reach it, cross it-then he might still have a chance. He had to succeed-for Monica, for the child, for the future of a world.

Another step, and another. It was as though there were a vast ache that caught at him with every breath. His blood-soaked shirt and pants leg hung against him, icy cold. Ten feet more, and he could make his run for it-

Two men in the black uniform of the State Security Police stepped out into his path, stood with blast-guns leveled at his chest. Mallory pushed away from the wall, braced himself for the burst of slugs that would end his life. Instead, a beam of light speared out through the misty rain, dazzling his eyes.

"You'll come with us, Mr. Mallory."

* * *

Still no contact, the Perceptors reported.

The prime-level minds below lack cohesion; they flicker and dart away even as I/we touch them.

The Initiators made a proposal: By the use of appropriate harmonics a resonance field can be set up which will reinforce any native mind functioning in an analogous rhythm.

I/we find that a pattern of the following character will be most suitable . . .
A complex symbolism was displayed.

PERSEVERE IN THE FASHION DESCRIBED, the Egon commanded. ALL
EXTRANEIOUS FUNCTIONS WILL BE DISCONTINUED UNTIL SUCCESS IS
ACHIEVED.

With total singleness of purpose, the Ree sensors probed across space from the dark and silent ship, searching for a receptive human mind.

* * *

The Interrogation Room was a totally bare cube of white enamel. At its geometric center, under a blinding white glare panel, sat a massive chair constructed of polished steel, casting an ink-black shadow.

A silent minute ticked past; then heels clicked in the corridor. A tall man in a plain, dark military tunic came through the open door, halted, studying his prisoner. His wide, sagging face was as gray and bleak as a tombstone.

"I warned you, Mallory," he said in a deep growling tone.

"You're making a mistake, Koslo," Mallory said.

"Openly arresting the people's hero, eh?" Koslo curved his wide, gray lips in a death's head smile. "Don't delude yourself. The malcontents will do nothing without their leader."

"Are you sure you're ready to put your regime to the test so soon?"

"It's that or wait, while your party gains strength. I chose the quicker course. I was never as good at waiting as you, Mallory."

"Well-you'll know by morning."

"That close, eh?" Koslo's heavy-lidded eyes pinched down on glints of light. He grunted. "I'll know many things by morning. You realize that your personal position is hopeless?" His eyes went to the chair.

"In other words, I should sell out to you now in return for-what? Another of your promises?"

"The alternative is the chair," Koslo said flatly.

"You have great confidence in machinery, Koslo-more than in men. That's your great weakness."

Koslo's hand went out, caressing the rectilinear metal of the chair. "This is a scientific apparatus designed to accomplish a specific task with the least possible difficulty to me. It creates conditions within the subject's neural system conducive to total recall, and at the same time amplifies the subvocalizations that accompany all highly cerebral activity. The subject is also rendered amenable to verbal cueing." He paused. "If you resist, it will destroy your mind-but not before you've told me everything: names, locations, dates, organization, operational plans-everything. It will be simpler for us both if you acknowledge the inevitable and tell me freely what I require to know."

"And after you've got the information?"

"You know my regime can't tolerate opposition. The more complete my information, the less bloodshed will be necessary."

Mallory shook his head. "No," he said bluntly.

"Don't be a fool, Mallory! This isn't a test of your manhood!"

"Perhaps it is, Koslo: man against machine."

Koslo's eyes probed at him. He made a quick gesture with one hand.

"Strap him in."

Seated in the chair, Mallory felt the cold metal suck the heat from his body. Bands restrained his arms, legs, torso. A wide ring of woven wire and plastic clamped his skull firmly to the formed headrest. Across the room, Fey Koslo watched.

"Ready, Excellency," a technician said.

"Proceed."

Mallory tensed. An unwholesome excitement churned his stomach. He'd heard of the chair, of its power to scour a man's mind clean and leave him a gibbering hulk.

Only a free society, he thought, can produce the technology that makes tyranny possible . . .

He watched as a white-smocked technician approached, reached for the control panel. There was only one hope left: if he could fight the power of the machine, drag out the interrogation, delay Koslo until dawn . . .

A needle-studded vise clamped down against Mallory's temples. Instantly his mind was filled with whirling fever images. He felt his throat tighten in an aborted scream. Fingers of pure force struck into his brain, dislodging old memories, ripping open the healed wounds of time. From somewhere, he was aware of a voice, questioning. Words trembled in his throat, yearning to be shouted aloud.

I've got to resist! The thought flashed through his mind and was gone, borne away on a tide of probing impulses that swept through his brain like a millrace. I've got to hold out . . . long enough . . . to give the others a chance . . .

* * *

Aboard the Ree ship, dim lights glowed and winked on the panel that encircled the control center.

I/we sense a new mind—a transmitter of great power, the Perceptors announced suddenly. But the images are confused. I/we sense struggle, resistance . . .

IMPOSE CLOSE CONTROL, the Egon ordered. NARROW FOCUS AND EXTRACT A REPRESENTATIVE PERSONALITY FRACTION!

It is difficult; I/we sense powerful neural currents, at odds with the basic brain rhythms.

COMBAT THEM!

Again the Ree mind reached out, insinuated itself into the complex field-matrix that was Mallory's mind, and began, painstakingly, to trace out and reinforce its native symmetries, permitting the natural egomosaic to

emerge, free from distracting counter-impulses.

* * *

The technician's face went chalk-white as Mallory's body went rigid against the restraining bands.

"You fool!" Koslo's voice cut at him like a whipping rod. "If he dies before he talks-"

"He . . . he fights strongly, Excellency." The man's eyes scanned instrument faces. "Alpha through delta rhythms normal, though exaggerated," he muttered. "Metabolic index .99 . . ."

Mallory's body jerked. His eyes opened, shut. His mouth worked.

"Why doesn't he speak?" Koslo barked.

"It may require a few moments, Excellency, to adjust the power flows to ten-point resonance-"

"Then get on with it, man! I risked too much in arresting this man to lose him now!"

White-hot fingers of pure force lanced from the chair along the neural pathways within Mallory's brain-and met the adamantine resistance of the Ree probe. In the resultant confrontation, Mallory's battered self-awareness was tossed like a leaf in a gale.

Fight! The remaining wisp of his conscious intellect gathered itself-

-and was grasped, encapsulated, swept up and away. He was aware of spinning through a whirling fog of white light shot through with flashes and streamers of red, blue, violet. There was a sensation of great forces that pressed at him, flung him to and fro, drew his mind out like a ductile wire until it spanned the Galaxy. The filament grew broad, expanded into a diaphragm that bisected the universe. The plane assumed thickness, swelled out to encompass all space-time. Faint and far away, he sensed the tumultuous coursing of the energies that ravened just beyond the impenetrable membrane of force-

The imprisoning sphere shrank, pressed in, forcing his awareness into needle-sharp focus. He knew, without knowing how he knew, that he was locked in a sealed and airless chamber, constricting, claustrophobic, all sound and sensation cut off. He drew breath to scream-

No breath came. Only a weak pulse of terror, quickly fading, as if damped by an inhibiting hand. Alone in the dark, Mallory waited, every sense tuned, monitoring the surrounding blankness . . .

I/we have him! The Perceptors pulsed, and fell away. At the center of the chamber, the mind trap pulsed with the flowing energies that confined and controlled the captive brain pattern.

TESTING WILL COMMENCE AT ONCE. The Egon brushed aside the interrogatory impulses from the mind-segments concerned with speculation.

INITIAL STIMULI WILL BE APPLIED AND RESULTS NOTED. NOW!

. . . and was aware of a faint glimmer of light across the room: the outline of a window. He blinked, raised himself on one elbow. Bedsprings creaked under him. He sniffed. An acid odor of smoke hung in the stifling air. He seemed to be in a cheap hotel room. He had no memory of how he came to be there. He threw back the coarse blanket and felt warped floor boards under his bare feet-

The boards were hot.

He jumped up, went to the door, grasped the knob-and jerked his hand back. The metal had blistered his palm.

He ran to the window, ripped aside the dirt-stiff gauze curtains, snapped open the latch, tugged at the sash. It didn't budge. He stepped back, kicked out the glass. Instantly a coil of smoke whipped in through the broken pane. Using the curtain to protect his hand, he knocked out the shards, swung a leg over the sill, stumbled onto the fire escape. The rusted metal cut at his bare feet. Groping, he made his way down half a dozen steps-and fell back as a sheet of red flame billowed from below.

Over the rail he saw the street, lights puddled on grimy concrete ten stories down, white faces, like pale dots, upturned. A hundred feet away, an extension ladder swayed, approaching another wing of the flaming building, not concerned with him. He was lost, abandoned. Nothing could save him. For forty feet below, the iron ladder was an inferno.

It would be easier, quicker, to go over the rail, escape the pain, die cleanly, the thought came into his mind with dreadful clarity.

There was a tinkling crash and a window above blew out. Scalding embers rained down on his back. The iron was hot underfoot. He drew a breath, shielded his face with one arm, and plunged downward through the whipping flames . . .

He was crawling, falling down the cruel metal treads and risers. The pain across his face, his back, his shoulder, his arm, was like a red-hot iron, applied and forgotten. He caught a glimpse of his arm, flayed, oozing, black-edged . . .

His hands and feet were no longer his own. He used his knees and elbows, tumbled himself over yet another edge, sliding down to the next landing. The faces were closer now; hands were reaching up. He groped, got to his feet, felt the last section swing down as his weight went on it. His vision was a blur of red. He sensed the blistered skin sloughing from his thighs. A woman screamed.

" . . . my God, burned alive and still walking!" a thin voice cawed.

" . . . his hands . . . no fingers . . ."

Something rose, smashed at him, a ghostly blow as blackness closed in . . .

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* * *

The response of the entity was anomalous, the Analyzers reported. Its life tenacity is enormous! Confronted with apparent imminent physical destruction, it chose agony and mutilation merely to extend survival for a brief period.

The possibility exists that such a response represents a mere instinctive mechanism of unusual form, the Analyzers pointed out.

If so, it might prove dangerous. More data on the point is required.

I/WE WILL RESTIMULATE THE SUBJECT, the Egon ordered. THE PARAMETERS OF THE SURVIVAL DRIVE MUST BE ESTABLISHED WITH PRECISION, RESUME TESTING!

* * *

In the chair, Mallory writhed, went limp.

"Is he . . . ?"

"He's alive, Excellency. But something's wrong! I can't get through to a vocalization level. He's fighting me with some sort of fantasy-complex of his own!"

"Bring him out of it!"

"Excellency, I tried. I can't reach him. It's as though he'd tapped the chair's energy sources, and were using them to reinforce his own defense mechanism!"

"Override him!"

"I'll try-but his power is fantastic."

"Then we'll use more power!"

"It's . . . dangerous, Excellency."

"Not more dangerous than failure!"

Grim-faced, the technician reset the panel to step up the energy flow through Mallory's brain.

* * *

The subject stirs! The Perceptors burst out. Massive new energies flow in the mind-field! My/our grip loosens . . .

HOLD THE SUBJECT! RESTIMULATE AT ONCE, WITH MAXIMUM EMERGENCY FORCE!

While the captive surged and fought against the restraint, the segmented mind of the alien concentrated its forces, hurled a new stimulus into the rolling captive mind-field.

* * *

. . . Hot sun beat down on his back. A light wind ruffled the tall grass growing up the slope where the wounded lion had taken cover. Telltale drops of dark purple blood clinging to the tall stems marked the big cat's route. It would be up there, flattened to the earth under the clump of thorn trees, its yellow eyes narrowed against the agony of the .375 bullet in his chest, waiting, hoping for its tormentor to come to it . . .

His heart was thudding under the damp khaki shirt. The heavy rifle felt like a toy in his hands-a useless plaything against the primitive fury of the beast. He took a step; his mouth twisted in an ironic grimace. What was he proving? There was no one here to know if he chose to walk back and sit under a tree and take a leisurely swig from his flask, let an hour or two crawl by-while the cat bled to death-and then go in to find the body. He took another step. And now he was walking steadily forward. The breeze was cool on his forehead. His legs felt light, strong. He drew a deep breath, smelled the sweetness of the spring air. Life had never seemed more precious-

There was a deep, asthmatic cough, and the great beast broke from the shadows, yellow fangs bared, muscles pumping under the dun hide, dark blood shining black along the flank-

He planted his feet, brought the gun up, socketed it against his shoulder as the lion charged down the slope. By the book, he thought sardonically. Take him just above the sternum, hold on him until you're sure . . . At a hundred feet he fired-just as the animal veered left. The bullet smacked home far back along the ribs. The cat broke stride, recovered. The gun bucked and roared again, and the snarling face exploded in a mask of red- And still the dying carnivore came on. He blinked sweat from his eyes, centered the sights on the point of the shoulder-

The trigger jammed hard. A glance showed him the spent cartridge lodged in the action. He raked at it vainly, standing his ground. At the last instant, he stepped aside, and the hurtling monster skidded past him, dead in the dust. And the thought that struck him then was that if Monica had been watching from the car at the foot of the hill she would not have laughed at him this time . . .

* * *

Again the reaction syndrome is inharmonious with any concept of rationality in my/our experience, the Recollector cells expressed the paradox with which the captive mind had presented the Ree intelligence. Here is an entity which clings to personality survival with a ferocity unparalleled-yet faces Category Ultimate risks needlessly, in response to an abstract code of behavioral symmetry.

I/we postulate that the personality segment selected does not represent the true Egon-analogue of the subject, the Speculators offered. It is obviously incomplete, nonviable.

Let me/us attempt a selective withdrawal of control over peripheral regions of the mind-field, the Perceptors proposed. Thus permitting greater concentration of stimulus to the central matrix.

By matching energies with the captive mind, it will be possible to monitor its rhythms and deduce the key to its total control, the Calculators determined quickly.

This course offers the risk of rupturing the matrix and the destruction of the specimen.

THE RISK MUST BE TAKEN.

With infinite precision, the Ree mind narrowed the scope of its probe, fitting its shape to the contours of Mallory's embattled brain, matching itself in a one-to-one correspondence to the massive energy flows from the Interrogation chair.

Equilibrium, the Perceptors reported at last. However, the balance is precarious.

The next test must be designed to expose new aspects of the subject's survival syndrome, the Analyzers pointed out. A stimulus pattern was proposed and accepted. Aboard the ship in its sub-lunar orbit, the Ree mindbeam again lanced out to touch Mallory's receptive brain . . .

* * *

Blackness gave way to misty light. A deep rumbling shook the rocks under his feet. Through the whirling spray, he saw the raft, the small figure that clung to it: a child, a little girl perhaps nine years old, crouched on hands and knees, looking toward him.

"Daddy!" A high, thin cry of pure terror. The raft bucked and tossed in the wild current. He took a step, slipped, almost went down on the slimy rocks. The icy water swirled about his knees. A hundred feet downstream, the river curved in a gray-metal sheen, over and down, veiled by the mists of its own thunderous descent. He turned, scrambled back up, ran along the bank. There, ahead, a point of rock jutted. Perhaps . . .

The raft bobbed, whirled, fifty feet away. Too far. He saw the pale, small face, the pleading eyes. Fear welled in him, greasy and sickening.

Visions of death rose up, of his broken body bobbing below the falls, lying wax-white on a slab, sleeping, powdered and false in a satin-lined box, corrupting in the close darkness under the indifferent sod . . .

He took a trembling step back.

For an instant, a curious sensation of unreality swept over him. He remembered darkness, a sense of utter claustrophobia-and a white room, a face that leaned close . . .

He blinked-and through the spray of the rapids, his eyes met those of the doomed child. Compassion struck him like a club. He grunted, felt the clean white flame of anger at himself, of disgust at his fear. He closed his eyes and leaped far out, struck the water and went under, came up gasping. His strokes took him toward the raft. He felt a heavy blow as the current tossed him against a rock, choked as chopping spray whipped in his face. The thought came that broken ribs didn't matter now, nor air for breathing.

Only to reach the raft before it reached the edge, that the small, frightened soul might not go down alone-into the great darkness . . .

His hands clawed the rough wood. He pulled himself up, caught the small body to him as the world dropped away and the thunder rose deafeningly to meet him . . .

* * *

"Excellency! I need help!" The technician appealed to the grim-faced dictator. "I'm pouring enough power through his brain to kill two ordinary men-and he still fights back! For a second there, a moment ago, I'd swear he opened his eyes and looked right through me! I can't take the responsibility-"

"Then cut the power, you blundering idiot!"

"I don't dare, the backlash will kill him!"

"He . . . must . . . talk!" Koslo grated. "Hold him! Break him! Or I promise you a slow and terrible death!"

Trembling, the technician adjusted his controls. In the chair, Mallory sat tense, no longer fighting the straps. He looked like a man lost in thought. Perspiration broke from his hairline, trickled down his face.

Again new currents stir in the captive, the Perceptors announced in alarm. The resources of this mind are staggering!

MATCH IT! The Egon directed.

My/our power resources are already overextended! The Calculators interjected.

WITHDRAW ENERGIES FROM ALL PERIPHERAL FUNCTIONS! LOWER SHIELDING! THE MOMENT OF THE ULTIMATE TEST IS UPON ME/US!

Swiftly the Ree mind complied.

The captive is held, the Calculator announced. But I/we must point out that this linkage now presents a channel of vulnerability to assault.

THE RISK MUST BE TAKEN.

Even now the mind stirs against my/our control.

HOLD IT FAST!

Grimly, the Ree mind fought to retain its control of Mallory's brain.

In one instant, he was not. Then, abruptly, he existed. Mallory, he thought. That symbol represents I/we . . .

The alien thought faded. He caught at it, held the symbol. Mallory. He remembered the shape of his body, the feel of his skull enclosing his brain, the sensations of light, sound, heat-but here there was no sound, no light. Only the enclosing blackness, impenetrable, eternal, changeless . . .

But where was here?

He remembered the white room, the harsh voice of Koslo, the steel chair-

And the mighty roar of the waters rushing up at him-

And the reaching talons of a giant cat-

And the searing agony of flames that licked around his body . . .

But there was no pain, now, no discomfort-no sensation of any kind. Was this death, then? At once, he rejected the idea as nonsense.

Cogito ergo sum. I am a prisoner-where?

His senses stirred, questing against emptiness, sensationlessness. He strained outward-and heard sound; voices, pleading, demanding. They grew louder, echoing in the vastness:

" . . . talk, damn you! Who are your chief accomplices? What support do you expect from the Armed Forces? Which of the generals are with you? Armaments . . . ? Organization . . . ? Initial attack points . . . ?"

Blinding static sleeted across the words, filled the universe, grew dim. For an instant, Mallory was aware of straps cutting into the tensed muscles of his forearms, the pain of the band clamped around his head, the ache of cramping muscles . . .

. . . was aware of floating, gravityless, in a sea of winking, flashing energies. Vertigo rose up; frantically he fought for stability in a world of chaos. Through spinning darkness he reached, found a matrix of pure direction, intangible, but, against the background of shifting energy flows, providing an orienting grid. He seized on it, held . . .

* * *

Full emergency discharge! The Receptors blasted the command through all the sixty-nine hundred and thirty-four units of the Ree mind-and recoiled in shock. The captive mind clings to the contact! We cannot break free!

Pulsating with the enormous shock of the prisoner's sudden outlashing, the alien rested for the fractional nanosecond required to reestablish intersegmental balance.

The power of the enemy, though unprecedentedly great, is not sufficient to broach the integrity of my/our entity-field, the Analyzers stated, tensely. But I/we must retreat at once!

NO! I/WE LACK SUFFICIENT DATA TO JUSTIFY WITHDRAWAL OF PHASE ONE, the Egon countermanded. HERE IS A MIND RULED BY CONFLICTING DRIVES OF GREAT POWER. WHICH IS PARAMOUNT? THEREIN LIES THE KEY TO ITS DEFEAT.

I/WE MUST DEVISE A STIMULATION COMPLEX WHICH WILL EVOKE BOTH DRIVES IN LETHAL OPPOSITION.

Precious microseconds passed while the compound mind hastily scanned Mallory's mind for symbols from which to assemble the necessary gestalt-form.

Ready, the Perceptors announced. But it must be pointed out that no mind can long survive intact the direct confrontation of these antagonistic imperatives. Is the stimulus to be carried to the point of nonretrieval?

AFFIRMATIVE. The Egon's tone was one of utter finality. TEST TO DESTRUCTION.

* * *

Illusion, Mallory told himself. I'm being bombarded by illusions . . . He sensed the approach of a massive new wave front, descending on him like a breaking Pacific comber. Grimly, he clung to his tenuous orientation-but the smashing impact whirled him into darkness. Far away, a masked inquisitor faced him.

"Pain has availed nothing against you," the muffled voice said. "The threat of death does not move you. And yet there is a way . . ." A curtain fell aside, and Monica stood there, tall, slim, vibrantly alive, as beautiful as a roe-deer. And beside her, the child.

He said "No!" and started forward, but the chains held him. He watched, helpless, while brutal hands seized the woman, moved casually, intimately, over her body. Other hands gripped the child. He saw the terror on the small face, the fear in her eyes-

Fear that he had seen before . . .

But of course he had seen her before. The child was his daughter, the precious offspring of himself and the slender female-

Monica, he corrected himself

-had seen those eyes, through swirling mist, poised above a cataract-

No. That was a dream. A dream in which he had died, violently. And there had been another dream of facing a wounded lion as it charged down on him-

"You will not be harmed," the Inquisitor's voice seemed to come from a remote distance. "But you will carry with you forever the memory of their living dismemberment . . ."

With a jerk, his attention returned to the woman and the child. He saw them strip Monica's slender, tawny body. Naked, she stood before them, refusing to cower. But of what use was courage now? The manacles at her wrists were linked to a hook set in the damp stone wall. The glowing iron moved closer to her white flesh. He saw the skin darken and blister. The iron plunged home. She stiffened, screamed . . .

A woman screamed.

"My God, burned alive," a thin voice cawed. "And still walking!"

He looked down. There was no wound, no scar. The skin was unbroken. But a fleeting almost-recollection came of crackling flames that seared with a white agony as he drew them into his lungs . . .

"A dream," he said aloud. "I'm dreaming. I have to wake up!" He closed his eyes and shook his head . . .

* * *

"He shook his head!" the technician choked. "Excellency, it's impossible-but I swear the man is throwing off the machine's control!"

Koslo brushed the other roughly aside. He seized the control lever, pushed it forward. Mallory stiffened. His breathing became hoarse, ragged.

"Excellency, the man will die . . . !"

"Let him die! No one defies me with impunity!"

Narrow focus! The Perceptors flashed the command to the sixty-nine hundred and thirty-four energy-producing segments of the Ree mind. The contest cannot continue long! Almost we lost the captive then . . . !

The probe beam narrowed, knifing into the living heart of Mallory's brain, imposing its chosen patterns . . .

* * *

. . . the child whimpered as the foot-long blade approached her fragile breast. The gnarled fist holding the knife stroked it almost lovingly across the blue-veined skin. Crimson blood washed down from the shallow wound.

"If you reveal the secrets of the Brotherhood to me, truly your comrades in arms will die," the Inquisitor's faceless voice droned. "But if you stubbornly refuse, your woman and your infant will suffer all that my ingenuity can devise."

He strained against his chains. "I can't tell you," he croaked. "Don't you understand, nothing is worth this horror! Nothing . . ."

Nothing he could have done would have saved her. She crouched on the raft, doomed. But he could join her-

But not this time. This time chains of steel kept him from her. He hurled himself against them, and tears blinded his eyes . . .

Smoke blinded his eyes. He looked down, saw the faces upturned below. Surely, easy death was preferable to living immolation. But he covered his face with his arms and started down . . .

Never betray your trust! The woman's voice rang clear as a trumpet across the narrow dungeon.

Daddy! the child screamed.

We can die only once! the woman called.

The raft plunged downward into boiling chaos . . .

"Speak, damn you!" The Inquisitor's voice had taken on a new note. "I want the names, the places! Who are your accomplices? What are your plans? When will the rising begin? What signal are they waiting for? Where . . . ? When . . . ?"

Mallory opened his eyes. Blinding white light, a twisted face that loomed before him, goggling.

"Excellency! He's awake! He's broken through . . ."

"Pour full power into him! Force, man! Force him to speak!"

"I-I'm afraid, Excellency! We're tampering with the mightiest instrument in the universe: a human brain! Who knows what we may be creating-"

Koslo struck the man aside, threw the control lever full against the stop.

* * *

. . . The darkness burst into a coruscating brilliance that became the outlines of a room. A transparent man whom he recognized as Koslo stood before him. He watched as the dictator turned to him, his face contorted.

"Now talk, damn you!"

His voice had a curious, ghostly quality, as though it represented only one level of reality.

"Yes," Mallory said distinctly. "I'll talk."

"And if you lie-" Koslo jerked an ugly automatic pistol from the pocket of his plain tunic. "I'll put a bullet in your brain myself!"

"My chief associates in the plot," Mallory began, "are . . ." As he spoke, he gently disengaged himself-that was the word that came to his mind-from the scene around him. He was aware at one level of his voice speaking on, reeling off the facts for which the other man hungered so nakedly. And he reached out, channeling the power pouring into him from the chair . . . spanning across vast distances compressed now to a dimensionless plane. Delicately, he quested farther, entered a curious, flickering net of living energies. He pressed, found points of weakness, poured in more power-

A circular room leaped into eerie visibility. Ranged around it were lights that winked and glowed. From ranked thousands of cells, white wormforms poked blunt, eyeless heads . . .

HE IS HERE! The Egon shrieked the warning, and hurled a bolt of pure mind-force along the channel of contact and met a counter-bolt of energy that seared through him, blackened and charred the intricate organic circuitry of his cerebrum, left a smoking pocket in the rank of cells. For a moment, Mallory rested, sensing the shock and bewilderment sweeping through the leaderless Ree mind-segments. He felt the automatic death-urge that gripped them as the realization reached them that the guiding over-power of the Egon was gone. As he watched, a unit crumpled

inward and expired. And another-

"Stop!" Mallory commanded. "I assume control of the mind-complex! Let the segments link in with me!"

Obediently, the will-less fragments of the Ree mind obeyed.

"Change course," Mallory ordered. He gave the necessary instructions, then withdrew along the channel of contact.

* * *

"So . . . the great Mallory broke." Koslo rocked on his heels before the captive body of his enemy. He laughed. "You were slow to start, but once begun you sang like a turtledove. I'll give you my orders now, and by dawn your futile revolt will be a heap of charred corpses stacked in the plaza as an example to others!" He raised the gun.

"I'm not through yet," Mallory said. "The plot runs deeper than you think, Koslo."

The dictator ran a hand over his gray face. His eyes showed the terrible strain of the last hours.

"Talk, then," he growled. "Talk fast!"

As he spoke on, Mallory again shifted his primary awareness, settled into resonance with the subjugated Ree intelligence. Through the ship's sensors, he saw the white planet swelling ahead. He slowed the vessel, brought it in on a long parabolic course which skimmed the stratosphere. Seventy miles above the Atlantic, he entered a high haze layer, slowed again as he sensed the heating of the hull.

Below the clouds, he sent the ship hurtling across the coast. He dropped to treetop level, scanned the scene through sensitive hull-plates-

For a long moment he studied the landscape below. Then suddenly he understood . . .

* * *

"Why do you smile, Mallory?" Koslo's voice was harsh; the gun pointed at the other's head. "Tell me the joke that makes a man laugh in the condemned seat reserved for traitors."

"You'll know in just a moment . . ." He broke off as a crashing sound came from beyond the room. The floor shook and trembled, rocking Koslo on his feet. A dull boom echoed. The door burst wide.

"Excellency! The capital is under attack!" The man fell forward, exposing a great wound on his back. Koslo whirled on Mallory-

With a thunderous crash, one side of the room bulged and fell inward. Through the breached wall, a glittering torpedo-shape appeared, a polished intricacy of burnished metal floating lightly on pencils of blue-white light. The gun in the hand of the dictator came up, crashed deafeningly in the

enclosed space. From the prow of the invader, pink light winked. Koslo spun, fell heavily on his face.

The twenty-eight-inch Ree dreadnought came to rest before Mallory. A beam speared out, burned through the chair control panel. The shackles fell away.

I/we await your/our next command. The Ree mind spoke soundlessly in the awesome silence.

* * *

Three months had passed since the referendum which had swept John Mallory into office as Premier of the First Planetary Republic. He stood in a room of his spacious apartment in the Executive Palace, frowning at the slender black-haired woman as she spoke earnestly to him.

"John-I'm afraid of that-that infernal machine, eternally hovering, waiting for your orders."

"But why, Monica? That infernal machine, as you call it, was the thing that made a free election possible-and even now it's all that holds Koslo's old organization in check."

"John-" Her hand gripped his arm. "With that-thing-always at your beck and call, you can control anyone, anything on Earth! No opposition can stand before you!"

She looked directly at him. "It isn't right for anyone to have such power, John. Not even you. No human being should be put to such a test!"

His face tightened. "Have I misused it?"

"Not yet. That's why . . ."

"You imply that I will?"

"You're a man, with the failings of a man."

"I propose only what's good for the people of Earth," he said sharply. "Would you have me voluntarily throw away the one weapon that can protect our hard-won freedom?"

"But, John-who are you to be the sole arbiter of what's good for the people of Earth?"

"I'm Chairman of the Republic-"

"You're still human. Stop-while you're still human!"

He studied her face. "You resent my success, don't you? What would you have me do? Resign?"

"I want you to send the machine away-back to wherever it came from."

He laughed shortly. "Are you out of your mind? I haven't begun to extract the technological secrets the Ree ship represents."

"We're not ready for those secrets, John. The race isn't ready. It's already changed you. In the end it can only destroy you as a man."

"Nonsense. I control it utterly. It's like an extension of my own mind-"

"John-please. If not for my sake or your own, for Dian's."

"What's the child got to do with this?"

"She's your daughter. She hardly sees you once a week."

"That's the price she pays for being the heir to the greatest man-I mean-damn it, Monica, my responsibilities don't permit me to indulge in all the suburban customs."

"John-" Her voice was a whisper, painful in its intensity. "Send it away."

"No. I won't send it away."

Her face was pale. "Very well, John. As you wish."

"Yes. As I wish."

After she left the room, Mallory stood for a long time staring out through the high window at the tiny craft, hovering in the blue air fifty feet away, silent, ready.

Then: Ree mind, he sent out the call. Probe the apartments of the woman, Monica. I have reason to suspect she plots treason against the state . . .