

A SCOURGE OF SCREAMERS  
BY DANIEL F. GALOUYE

THE SCREAMIE PACKAGE

A SEARING BLAST OF PAIN AND FEAR WHICH DRIVES ITS VICTIMS INTO WRITHING PAROXYSMS OF ANGUISH... A RAGING PLAGUE FOR WHICH THE ONLY CURE IS

THEY TRIED EVERYTHING: ISOLATION INSTITUTES; SCREAMER PICKUP SQUADS STALKING THE STREETS; EMERGENCY SEDATION KITS WHOSE PLUNGING HYPODERMIC NEEDLES SET OFF PITIFULLY WAILING SIRENS THAT COULD BE HEARD FOR BLOCKS. BUT THE EPIDEMIC CONTINUED TO GROW

EXPLOSION IN THE AFTERNOON

She was motionless beneath him now and frivolity had fled her expression. Still pinning her wrists, he kissed her.

The sun itself, blazing in all its vehemence, exploded in his skull. It was an awful, wrenching agony that seared every neuron, fused every synapse, ruptured each cell wall.

He was aware somehow of his own coarse shouts of terror and anguish, while he sensed in all his desperation that this was not just another sporadic seizure—that the Screemies in their entirety, in their final and permanent fury, had descended upon him.

The prick of the hypodermic needle and the stridency of its siren went unnoticed among the merciless excruciations . . .

A Scourge of Screammers  
Daniel F. Galouye

A SCOURGE OF SCREAMERS

*A Bantam Book published January 1968*

*All rights reserved.*

*Copyright © 1968 by Bantam Books, Inc.*

*This book may not be reproduced in whole or in part,*

*by mimeograph or any other means, without permission in writing.*

*Published simultaneously in the United States and Canada*

*Bantam Books are published by Bantam Books, Inc., a subsidiary of Grosset & Dunlap, Inc. Its trade-mark, consisting of the words "Bantam Books" and the portrayal of a bantam, is registered in the United States Patent Office and in other countries. Marca Registrada. Bantam Books, Inc., 271 Madison Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10016.*

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*Foreword*

*Six billion years old, 18,000 parsecs in length, the great lens scintillates in cosmic grandeur as it wheels through the ebon reaches of infinity.*

*Generically, for those life forms on the semantic level, it is a "Galaxy." One species, inclined to quaint, romantic expression, designates it the "Milky Way." To another, it is "One of the Billion Eyes of God."*

*Such purely subjective interpretations of the galactic concept are understandable. For*

*the so-called "Milky Way" can never be fully grasped by any evolved intellect.*

*Ten billion suns of infinite variety and endless groupings. Shimmering clusters displaying their dazzling celestial luminosities like myriads of jewels in magnificent crowns. Nebulae by the thousands. Great clouds of opaque material and nonluminous bodies that emit at frequencies undetectable by organs of "sight" sensitive in the 3,800-8,000 angstrom range. Billions upon countless billions of planets and satellites, comets, meteors and interstellar fragments.*

*All caught up in an awe-inspiring swirl of frozen motion. Trailing tenuous arms that wrap about themselves in a gauze-like array of spiraling grace. Coruscating with the flaring radiance of exploding suns-much like the sporadic brilliance of atomic disintegration in a microgram of radium.*

*Once around its axis every 200,000,000 years, as measured by the standard time unit designated by the species which so blithely regards the majestic system as its "Milky Way." That such a superstellar conglomerate should be regarded as incomprehensible is commensurate with the nature of creatures "Whose spans of existence are roughly equivalent to the half-life of samarium 151.*

*Spinning. Changing form imperceptibly. Aglow with the soft, yet fierce light of stellar combustion. Ever evolving as it condenses droplets of fledgling suns out of inchoate hydrogen. Spawning fiery young stars that hurtle proudly through their life cycles then, in cataclysmic fury, collapse upon themselves and hurl forth the flotsam from which their second-generation descendants will be born.*

*Then there's the shimmering, inaccessible nucleus of the system. Ever forbidden, by virtue of its crushing density, to the questing species whose curiosity compels them to sail the unfathomable depths of space in frail contrivances. Here is found the swarming congestion of RR Lyrae stars-as they are so designated by the This-Is-Our-Milky-Way beings.*

*And finally there's-Chandeen, as it's known by one sapient species.*

*Perhaps Chandeen is the aggregate radiation of the variable RR Lyrae stars. Or the over-all pattern of their oscillations. Or, again, it may be merely a precipitation of metaphysical force at the very center of the Galaxy, where all physical forces come to focus.*

*How to describe this hypermaterial concept to the Our-Milky-Way beings?*

*You would have to tell them that Chandeen is like a sun. That its metaphysical emission (referred to as "rault" by one "rault-sensitive" culture) is like light. But there the analogies would have to cease. For, just as you can never explain the Our-Milky-Way species' "seeing" to a creature that is not "light-sensitive," so could you never describe "zylphing" to one that is not "rault-sensitive."*

*Suffice it to say that rault emitted by Chandeen pervades all physical objects, just as it bathes, at the same time, the mind of the rault-sensitive perceiver. And it unites beholder and everything beheld in an all-encompassing oneness.*

*Zylphing, to any species which zylphs, is indeed a form of perception undreamed of by the Our-Milky-Wayites. For the latter creatures-whose contact with environment includes only tactile perception, epithelial excitation, olfactory response, reception of molecular vibrations in a gaseous medium, and sensitivity to various ranges of the electromagnetic spectrum-for these creatures, zylphing would represent the function of a sixth sense.*

## Chapter I

Darting out of the littoral cumulus buildup, the Security Bureau craft checked its position

over a gutted and charred Nice, then climbed southeastward over the Mediterranean.

At the controls, Arthur Gregson engaged the autopilot, then eased back against cushioned upholstery. But only momentarily. For soon the horizontal servo unit went yaw-crazy and the ship began responding more like a beagle sniffing out a hare's trail.

Annoyed, he resumed manual control and thought he heard a chuckle from the seat beside him. But, to all appearances, the lanky Englishman was still dozing, as he had been since their departure from London.

But for his bleached complexion, Gregson could well have been mistaken for an American plankton farmer. There was a seafaring suggestion to the tousled indifference of thick, dark hair; to a pair of rugged hands that might have developed their strength by hauling on the winch lines of steel nets asag with the weight of micromarine accumulations. Even his eyes, brown and intense, seemed to be defying the lash of wind-driven spray.

His toneless complexion was, of course, the result of thirty orbital months as project engineer in charge of systems aboard Vega Jumpoff Station. Since VJO's decommissioning, there had been little opportunity for soaking up a tan.

He tensed abruptly and peered into the morning sunlight. 3

*Them* ft was again-a faint silvery mote riding high above the wispy cirrus doud layer and lurking in the solar glare.

The steady throb of combustion faltered in one of the powerplants, bringing Kenneth Wellford fullj'awake. He Sared at the starboard engine and muttered, "Damn fuel! I shouldn't be surprised to learn they're distilling it in gin vats."

"We may have more than inferior fuel to worry about."

"There's *always* more to concern ourselves with," the Englishman observed phlegmatically. "The fuel situation, I should hope, will straighten itself out, though, when SecBu gets more of your country's processing plants back in production."

Oregon stared at him. Wellford, who had served as a shuttle craft pilot aboard Vega Jumpoff until the Mna had blasted away on its interstellar expedition, had a simple, pleasant face. Blue eyes that seemed to analyze, rather than merely regard, yet eyes that always cast about for the humor in any situation.

"We've got company out there," Gregson disclosed finally.

Frowning, Wellford searched the sky. "Where?" Then he smiled. "Quite sure you aren't panic buttoning? You're somewhat inclined to do that, you know."

"Two Security Bureau hoppers were lost just last week over the U.S.," Gregson reminded.

"Oh, come now. You can't be suggesting an organized attack against the bureau."

"And another was *fired on* over the Alps. There must be more we haven't heard about."

Wellford shook his head dubiously. "I admit there may be some intense nationalist groups that resent SecBu's provisional authority during a world crisis. But to try to generalize from a few isolated instances. . ."

"There!" Gregson pointed.

"Apologies. There *is* an angel at eleven o'clock," the Englishman confirmed. "But I shouldn't be too concerned. After all, it isn't sneaking up behind us."

"But it's on our identical course."

"I shouldn't think we're the only craft in the sky."

"And why wouldn't we be? Except for bureau traffic, aviation's been practically dead since that Screamer pulled the nuclear plug in '95."

"But there must be plenty of *us* out this morning, what with Radcliff summoning all special agents to Rome for individual briefings."

The other's reassurances, however, failed to blunt Greg-son's concern.

"We might give him a buzz and see how the Screamie situation is in his neck of the woods," Wellford proposed.

"I don't suppose that's necessary."

"Or we could ask SecBu, Corsica, for an armed escort"

"No. Forget it"

\* \* \*

Gregson's hands relaxed on the controls and his palms suddenly cooled as circulating air began evaporating their films of moisture. Wellford, of course, was right. *Who would*, in this hectic day of post-Nuclear Exchange recovery, want to challenge the Security Bureau's choiceless burden of governmental function on the international level?

The job of rebuilding, of shoveling away the atomic debris, decontaminating and patching up decimated populations, was requiring the full energy of all governments involved in '95's thermonuclear abortion. And whatever national resources remained had to be marshaled against the devastating Screemie epidemic.

In Gregson's mind there was no doubt that, without the Security Bureau, civilization would have long since plunged into savagery.

As it was, the bureau's International Guard was bolstering internal security in most nations. It was supervising re-establishment of supply sources. Its fiat money had replaced currencies almost universally. Its blue-uniformed Screamer Pickup Squads patrolled the streets of all cities, gathering victims of the plague and trundling them off to Security Bureau isolation institutes.

"There's our angel again," Wellford announced. "At three o'clock."

The unidentified plane, Gregson saw, had reduced speed and dropped more nearly to their own altitude. But it was still just a glinting mote in the azure sky.

"Let's buzz him on bureau frequency," he proposed.

Wellford spoke briskly into his microphone.- "Security Bureau Flight LR303. Forty-two fifty north. Nine thirty-six east. Calling craft at forty thousand feet in this vicinity. Come in and identify yourself."

But there was no answer.

Again, Gregson's hands tightened on the wheel. "Let's don't take chances, Ken. Switch over to emergency frequency and ask Corsica for an armed escort"

"Very well."

But after the Englishman had transmitted the request he restored his self-assurance with a facetious observation: "I still think you have a propensity for using Pandora's box as a grab bag. If you aren't wringing your hands over an organized conspiracy against the bureau, you're all tears-in-your-beer about the Screemie epidemic."

"A lot of people have been wringing their hands over the plague-for fourteen years now."

"I suppose they have been at that. It's certainly in vogue. Seems almost everybody's taking the Screemie route."

Gregson stared down at the seascape, letting the sparkling reflection of sunlight burn into his eyes as though it might wash his thoughts free of the plague. But it was a subject that could never be buried deep beneath the surface of anyone's mind. Particularly not his. Particularly not-now.

Two Screamers in 1983. A handful in '84. A few hundred the next year-obscure in the world's teeming population. A few thousand in '86. By '90, several hundred thousand. Then the numbing impact of medical statistics acknowledging science's inability to diagnose cause. Eventually, the reluctant admission that only one out of a thousand ever fully recovered.

Two million in '93. Then the social reaction syndrome: isolation institutes; Screamer Pickup Squads stalking the streets; emergency sedation kits whose plunging hypodermic syringes set off pitifully wailing sirens that could be heard for blocks.

It was the year the United Nations decided, nevertheless, to rush preparations for the first interstellar expedition-in order to divert attention from the plague. It was also an occasion for pride. For humanity, with its feet in the muck of the Screamies, still seemed to have its head in the stars.

\* \* \*

Sputtering powerplants snatched Gregson from his thoughts and he busied himself with

engine control adjustments. "Ken, who'd want to attack the bureau?"

"Who, indeed!" Wellford agreed. "And that's precisely my point. SecBu is all that's left of the United Nations. It's the only factor holding civilization together."

"You know, there *could* be a force out to destroy the bureau-to end all hopes for unity and order, for permanent world government."

The Englishman raised an eyebrow, then laughed. "There you go again-off on your there-are-aliens-among-us tangent Now, really..."

"There *were* those reports from my brother aboard the *Nina*-one month out of the system."

"But don't you understand? Those messages have to be taken with a grain of salt! Somehow, the Screemie bug got aboard with the crew. And no Screamer is mentally competent."

"I heard the tapes on those reports. Manuel was sane."

"Very well," the Englishman conceded grudgingly. "Let's say he hadn't gone Screemie yet with the rest of the crew. Don't you suppose he must have been quite overwrought? His impressions couldn't have been accurate."

"*'There's something out there!'* he said," Gregson recalled pensively. "*'A ship perhaps, I sense it! A great, glowing sphere-thousands of miles away-filled with horrible presences-waiting . . . coming!'*"

Wellford nodded. "I remember it quite clearly. As a matter of fact, it was the *Nina's* reports that touched off the aliens-among-us mania. But, when you have a thing like the Screemies on your hand, I suppose it's only human nature to leap at the explanation that something-out-there brought the plague here to destroy us."

"Then you don't believe there's anything out there?"

"Of course there is. There's bound to be. Ten billion stars. A hundred billion planets. We'd be stupid to think we're the only ones. But we'd be just as foolish to imagine that, in all these billions of years, they found us at the precise moment we acquired the capacity to find them."

"It may be that we can hide in our system as long as we want, but the minute we go interstellar we attract whatever's out there."

Wellford studied Gregson's drawn features. "You aren't really proposing that the *Nina's* voyage, the plague and the aliens-among-us obsession are all parts of the same manifestation? Don't forget-we've had the Screemies for fourteen years now. The *Nina* was lost only two years ago."

Always, the subject returned to the Screemies. Two months earlier, that inevitable course of all conversations would not have troubled Gregson. But now . . .

He turned so that the other wouldn't notice his apprehension-wouldn't guess that beside him was an incipient case of the Screemies.

Some went Screemie outright and with irrevocable finality

an abrupt explosion of body and mind into a paroxysm of thrashing limbs while their terrified shrieks raised hackles of fear among those about them. Others backed in, fighting desperately, managing somehow to resist a first, second and perhaps even sixth or seventh seizure before plunging over the precipice.

For as long as the choice was his, Gregson had decided after his first encounter with the "roaring lights," he too would fight it every step along the way. There would be no isolation institute for him-not if he could help it.

Perspiration had filmed his face and his hands were trembling on the wheel. It was going to happen-*now!*

Vaguely, he was aware of Wellford's anxious voice on his right: "Our angel appears to be closing the gap. Perhaps I'd better check and see whether that armed escort is on the way."

Gregson struggled up out of the seat. "Take over, Ken," he managed through an already dry throat. "I'm going to see if the storage compartment's secure."

"Now?" the other demanded incredulously as he stared at the steadily approaching plane.

Gregson somehow made it safely into the after compartment, then leaned back against the hatch, hands drawn into fists. As a final preparation for the inevitable, he unsnapped the hypodermic syringe kit from his belt and hurled it away. Security Bureau regulations could require that he wear the siren-equipped injector. But they couldn't *make* him use it on himself.

\* \* \*

Then the seizure was upon him with a fury. His brain exploded in the agonizing blast of a great, roaring nuclear furnace. And the fires of hell's most profound depths ravaged his faculties, until he was able to hang on to sanity only by swimming on the fringe of consciousness.

There were times during the interminable attack when he *was* unconscious. For briefly, while the onslaught was in one of its less severe phases, he was aware of the metal floor's corrugated hardness pressing against his writhing back.

The nuclear tempest raged throughout his body, radiating fierce light that wasn't luminous at all, but rather shouted at him with all the savagery and perversity of a world gone mad with furious hatred.

As suddenly as it had begun, however, it ended. It was as though he had finally drawn a curtain over all the excruciating effects and unmitigated anguish of the attack.

He rose, still shuddering, and dabbed with a handkerchief at the trickle of blood from the corner of his mouth. Already his tongue was swelling where he had caught it in the viselike grip of his teeth in order to suppress his shouts.

Such was the character of a Screamer attack. Such was the seizure that had felled millions throughout the world, together with a score aboard the starship *Nina*. That almost all of those millions had died, killed themselves or been slain by frightened pre-Screamers, was more in the nature of benevolent resolution than compounded tragedy.

Against instances of Screamer euthanasia, the Security Bureau and the national governments cooperating with it were almost powerless. But perhaps this inability to discourage mercy killings was an expedient solution, for the bureau's isolation institutes couldn't begin to care for all who went down the Screamer road.

Gregson was suddenly aware of the craft's erratic motion as he lurched against the bulkhead. He wrested the hatch open and stumbled back into the cockpit. There he was confronted with the vertiginous sight of the Mediterranean's haze-shrouded horizon slashing vertically across the nose of their craft.

Wellford had the ship in a fully-banked, diving turn that was generating sufficient G's to thrust Gregson forcefully against the cushion as he returned to his seat.

The Englishman grinned. "Where were you? You've been missing out on some jolly good fun."

He leveled off, brought the plane's nose up and veered sharply to starboard-just in time to maneuver out of the way of a slicing laser beam that clipped half a foot off their port wingtip.

Then Gregson caught sight of the attacking craft. It was an aeronautical caricature. The wing configuration was that of a Russian transport, the *Vorashov II*, while the jet engines were apparently British. Its fuselage was decidedly of modified French design-of an early, pre-Nuclear Exchange era. Beneath the pilot's window was emblazoned a crude sunburst, reminiscent of the Imperial Japanese insignia of the early '40s.

It pulled back into attack position and triggered another laser blast. But the beam's intensity was obviously weak. 9

Even though it raked the Security Bureau ship across the midsection, only negligible damage was inflicted.

"They've discharged their laser potential!" Wellford chuckled. "We're home free if they

don't have anything else up their sleeve. Wonder what's detaining our escort."

"I'll give Corsica another buzz."

"Don't bother. This situation should resolve itself within the next few minutes. But I do wish we had some armament. It would be a more even match. Remind me to take it up with Radcliff when we get to Rome."

The angel did, indeed, have more up its sleeve. On the next pass-one which Wellford had been unable to elude-it cut loose with an ancient .50-caliber machine gun. Slugs lore through the bureau plane's starboard powerplant, which promptly cut out with a groaning *clunk*.

Wellford thrust the control column forward and they dived toward the glittering water.

"Care to take over and share in the fun?"

"You're doing all right. I'll try to raise our escort"

But as Gregson reached for the mike, the cabin speaker rambled: "SecBu Flight LR303, we have you and your angel in sight. This is your escort. Make for minimum altitude-and stay out of our way."

Shortly thereafter Gregson watched the attacking craft plunge aflame into the sea.

10

*chapter it*

Gregson guided their crippled plane to an emergency landing at New Aprilia Jetdrome south of Rome. Nearby, the original airport had been swallowed by a gaping crater where, even after two years, decontamination crews were still scouring the inner slope.

Antimissile defenses had, of course, prevented '95's Nuclear Exchange from gutting most of the world's population centers. And use of "clean" devices had kept the requirements of land reclamation within tolerable limits. But the scars of that wanton havoc were now geographical constants.

As Gregson taxied to the parking apron, the cabin speaker rasped out the Security Bureau Control Tower's disclosure that they would have to use surface transportation into Rome, since hopper flights were now prohibited over the city.

"Must be that crash into *Via del Corso* last week," Well-ford guessed. "Killed fifty persons. I should imagine they've concluded the pilot went Screemie."

Minutes later then- Italian driver, with arm-waving abandon, was threading the traffic lanes on the elevated highway. Below, on either side, the ancient sepulchral monuments that lined the Appian Way sped by in a blur of indistinct form. And Gregson could only speculate that by the time it would have taken a Roman Centurion to cover a couple of hundred *cubits* along *Via Appia*, Antonio would have them in the heart of the city. 11

On the edge of his seat and swaying with the swerving car, he protested, "We're not hi *this much* of a hurry."

"*Perbacco, signore!* But Antonio is!" The driver bared a full-toothed grin. "Not good to be on highway with Scream-ies. Yesterday-three." He held up one hand to indicate the number and used the other to simulate the erratic course of a runaway vehicle. But he managed to retrieve the wheel before they veered into the rail.

"We get off quick, no?" he chortled.

"Yes," Wellford agreed uncertainly. "One way or another. It would appear Rome absorbed a rather good pasting in '95."

Gregson stared at the sprawling city as the car swept around a curve. The metropolis, renowned as a site rich in ancient ruins, had evidently acquired quite a few modern ones.

"Ah yes, *signore*." The driver nodded morosely. "We get three-boom, boom, boom! But we have some time for evacuation. Now all we worry about is work and where find food and clothes."

"It'll all straighten out," Gregson assured. "The Security Bureau's gettings things back on an even keel."

"Security Bureau-ha!" Antonio snorted. But before he could pursue his impulsive thought, he hunched forward and pointed. "There! See? I tell you, do I not?"

Even before they reached the broken rail, Gregson heard the ululations of the Italian-style hypodermic siren rising from below. Apparently the new Screamer had injected himself before losing control. Fortunately, a Pickup Squad car was already on its way.

\* \* \*

The Central Isolation Institute in the heart of Rome was a ponderous, glass-surfaced edifice of post-'95 vintage that reared up on naked, columnar stilts for some thirty feet before it became a complete building, then climbed on to soaring heights. Like a proud mother hen, it squatted protectively over the ruins of the Trajan Forum, untouched for centuries, and received into its lower levels the majestic prnate pillar commemorating the Dacian War.

Mouthing a string of fearful Italian expletives, Antonio braked to a stop a block away from the building, scattering a queue of persons in front of a food distribution point.

"Here . . ." he shouted. "You get out here-no? Up ahead -Screamer. I no go there."

12

Agitation swept the street like a wave almost in front of the institute. Magnetically, an angry, gesticulating mob was still attracting scores of scampering, shouting Romans, many in tattered clothes.

Wellford objected to the balking driver, but Antonio insisted, "No! I stop *here!*" Then he hurled the door open and waved his passengers out.

Curious, Gregson pushed into the horde. Above the indignant voices he could hear the agonized shrieks of a male Screamer.

"Why doesn't someone call the Pickup Squad?" Wellford demanded. "The institute's only just across the street!"

Breaking through, they found the Screamer trussed, face to the sky, in an open cart. With each shriek and convulsion of his body, the throng roared its protest to the threat of contamination. Only a woman, wielding a knife, and an elderly man with a pitchfork held the mob at bay.

Wellford advanced on the cart, withdrawing the hypodermic syringe from his belt case. The woman, seeing the glinting needle, eagerly pulled him toward the Screamer.

It was, ironically, the sudden eruption of the sedative injector's siren that ignited panic. And Gregson was swept aside by the surging throng.

Helpless, he watched the pitchfork rise and plunge again and again. The hypodermic siren's screeching wail broke off abruptly and the crowd began dispersing while the lone woman wept over the body of her slain Screamer husband.

Such was Rome in late October, 1997-fourteen years after the first human had gone Screamie in the Swahili tribal territory of Zanzibar; two years after the same fate had befallen a Russian whose only duty was to keep his hand poised, figuratively, over a nuclear switch in his submarine beneath Arctic waters.

\* \* \*

On their way up in one of the Central Isolation Institute's plexiglas elevators, Gregson traced the ascending spirals of the Trajan needle's helical band and stared at the noble bronze features of the ancient emperor atop the column.

In the administration office on the fortieth floor, they were told by a dark-haired receptionist that they could wait by the observation window while she located the Security Bureau director.

Below, the broad swath of *Via del Fori Imperiali* lay in the shadow of many skyscrapers. On the right, most of the build-13

ings were stilted, rising above the Roman Forum ruins beneath them. At the end of the street, though, the Colosseum loomed in all its aged splendor, defying any suggestion that it be overbuilt, as had the city's other vestiges of antiquity.

While waiting for word from Radcliff, Gregson reminded himself that hidden under the superficial crush of modern Roman architecture were evidences of a tyranny that had once plagued the civilized world. And he was confident that the terror of the Screamie scourge,



too, would bow before man's ingenuity. Then he frowned as his analogy also suggested that the Fall of the Roman Empire had been followed by the crushing millennium of the Dark Ages.

The receptionist snatched him back to 1997. "Mr. Radcliff will meet you in Laboratory 271-B."

On the threshold of the laboratory, the stifling acidity of formaldehyde vapors engulfed them. It was a large room, dominated by chemical equipment and tenanted by technicians at stainless steel workbenches. Before the nearest such table, a short man with little hair and a well-smudged frock hunched over a human brain.

"If you're Gregson and Wellford," he said without looking up, "Radcliff'll be along in a minute. I'm McClellan-Research."

He inserted his scalpel into an incision in the brain and pried it open. "We deal in cerebrums," he said, smiling abstractedly, ". . . that organ which Screammers complain is 'on fire.' But I see no evidence of nuclear holocaust here."

He turned toward Wellford. "Seriously, though, don't you suppose that 'searing pain' might be mainly psychic?"

"Oh?" the Englishman said, amused.

"But, then, isn't all pain psychic in a sense? Your hand can't *feel* pain. Only the brain does. But the brain doesn't experience the agony of a smashed thumb. It simply records it"

Gregson faced the window and let his gaze settle on the hulking Colosseum, fearful that involvement in a discussion of the Screemies would have the same consequences it had had hi the plane.

McClellan yawned. "Enough abstract speculation. I don't think we shall ever find out what causes the Screemies. What brings our Security Bureau agents trickling into Rome?"

"Weldon Radcliff," Gregson replied curtly. "And I've a hunch you already know why."

"Unfortunately, I do. It's something in the nature of not being able to bring the hill to Mahomet The hill, for lack of

14

a better designation, is under here." He touched a jar whose contents were concealed by a plastic cover. "Part of it, at least How's the Screemie situation Stateside?"

"Rough," Gregson said, turning quickly back to the window.

"Research making any progress?" Wellford asked.

"Not one single, rotten, goddamned bit! We still lose nine hundred and ninety-nine out of a thousand. If they don't kick off from fright or pain, they break through sedation and kill themselves."

"Why don't you try some of the suspended animation techniques?"

"You don't get the point. The object isn't simply to keep them unconscious for two years. You have to hold them on the fringe. Let them come around occasionally and wrestle with the effects, build up immunity hi small doses."

\* \* \*

Weldon Radcliff charged into the laboratory, tossed a perfunctory "Be with you in a minute" to Gregson, then continued toward McClellan.

But he paused and returned to the two special agents. He' was a huge man, exceptionally broad from the waist up and obviously compounded of great energy and drive. Although his eyes were alert, the lines drawn across his stout face were etched more deeply than would be expected for a person in his early fifties.

"Hear you had a rough time over the Med."

"Something old, something new," Wellford offered casually. "Laser beams spiced with .50-caliber slugs. Lost a wingtip and an engine. I should think you'd be more interested in equipping our craft with a few stingers of their own."

"We intend to. Modifications get under way tomorrow."

Gregson frowned. 'Then there *is* a pattern of calculated attack against our planes?"

"I'm afraid so." Radcliff looked down at his hands. "Against our planes, personnel in

some cases, and even our facilities. We had a nuclear generating station knocked out by mortar fire just yesterday-in Teheran."

"But, who? Why. . .?"

"We know some of the details," the director said grimly. "And that's why you've been summoned here. Something's developed that gives new dimensions to the Security Bureau's mission."

15

He turned toward McClellan. "You're not still pursuing that glial cell angle?"

Bent over a microscope now, the technician nodded without looking up. "On the flimsiest of hunches." He straightened. "And I'm about to decide there *is* slight distention."

"And what does that mean?"

"You see, glial cells-the neuroglia-are in strategic anatomical position to be a contributive factor in Screemie attacks. In the glial processes you have sustentacular tissue, probably of epiblastic origin, that. . ."

"Stow the shop talk."

"All right. The glial cells cover all the neurons in the brain. They are present in every area. And if there is distention of those cells, then constriction of the neurons could be responsible for *any* type of hallucination. You name it"

"What does it all add up to?"

"The possibility that glial distention causes the Screemies."

Radcliff appeared skeptical. "Mightn't such distention be a *result* of the disease instead?"

"That's what Dr. Elkhart suspects. He's afraid I'm wasting my time with this line of investigation. Says the distention isn't pronounced enough. What do you think?"

"I've only the greatest confidence in Elkhart. And I'd advise that you adopt whatever he suggests."

The Security Bureau director beckoned Gregson and Well-ford over to the other end of the workbench. Then he withdrew the plastic cover from the jar which, according to McClellan, contained part of the reason for summoning special agents to Rome.

It was a moment before Gregson recognized the objects immersed in formaldehyde. "Two hearts."

"I would suggest you take another look," Radcliff proposed.

Wellford drew erect, then bent more attentively toward the jar. "They're joined together! See? The aorta forks here, with one section going to each left ventricle. *All* of the veins and arteries are branched in a dual network!"

"I don't understand," Gregson said. "Is it simply a malformation, or the result of surgery?"

Radcliff led them toward die door. "I just wanted you to see that before we go on to the morgue. Hold it in mind as part of an over-all picture. I'm about to fill hi the rest of the details-as many as are available, at least."

While they waited for an elevator, the director ran a neatly

16

folded handkerchief over his suddenly drawn face. "We've spent a lot of time reviewing tapes on the *Nina's* messages, Greg; I understand you had access to them because your brother was a crew member."

"Manuel sent the last two messages," Gregson reminded.

The elevator arrived. They stepped in and Radcliff pressed the "down" button. "He said something about a ship-a 'great, glowing sphere'-and 'presences'-a tenth of a light year out of the system."

Wellford's eyes darted from Gregson to the director. Then he laughed. "In case you haven't heard, Greg is inclined toward the aliens-among-us belief. You're encouraging his persuasions."

But Radcliff's expression remained humorless. "Manuel may not have been as distressed as we imagined."

Wellford suddenly didn't appear quite so jaunty.

The elevator stopped and they exited on a floor restless with unnerving sounds that wrested Gregson's thoughts from his brother, the *Nina* and the twin hearts in McClellan's laboratory jar. From the corridor on his left came an almost unbroken succession of screams from many throats, muffled by the intervention of closed doors. Down another corridor passed a funereal procession of nurses trundling sheeted bodies through double portals.

Radcliff led them on in silence. In the next corridor they encountered a gaunt woman in robe and slippers who was mumbling to herself in Italian that Gregson could understand. "I know what the Screemies are! I *know* what they are!" she was saying.

Nodding in her direction, the director observed, "Not a few 'know what the Screemies are' after they're released from sedation: mankind's evil catching up with him; the Second Coming; bugs imported from Lunar or Mars Base before we recalled those establishments; monstrous shadows out of space eating into our brain."

Still muttering, the woman drew up numbly before a window at the end of the hall.

\* \* \*

At the entrance to the morgue, Radcliff paused. "What you're about to see is the body of a would-be assassin. Two days ago he made an attempt on the life of the provisional President of Italy, who is also a member of the Security Bureau's Advisory Council. Our assassin was shot down trying to escape. Skin along with him was a Sicilian." 17

They went inside and drew up at the nearest tagged drawer in one of many tiers that reared to the ceiling.

"The assassin was killed outright," Radcliff resumed. "But we were able to question the Sicilian a bit before he died. Most of what he said, however, seemed almost incoherent-until we examined the assassin's body." He pulled open the drawer.

Reluctantly, Gregson looked down at the pale, rigid features of a middle-aged man whose head was almost bald. The nose was thin and long. The lips, small and compressed, seemed to soften the sharpness of a tapering chin. His complexion was olive, grayed somewhat by the pallor of death.

"Here's another exhibit." Radcliff reached into the drawer and displayed four false fingernails.

Then he brought the agents around to the side of the drawer and pointed to the man's hand. There were no nails-only a crescent-shaped incision on the upper surface of each finger. And it was apparent that the artificial nails could be inserted into the surgical slots.

"Good Lord!" Wellford exclaimed.

"This," Radcliff went on, "calls itself a 'Valerian'-according to the Sicilian who was with him. But the Sicilian died before we could get very much more than that out of him.

"On the basis of experiences, however, we may reasonably entertain a number of conclusions. The first is that there must be quite a few Valerians among us. Another was killed yesterday in the attack on our generating station at Teheran. One was shot down two weeks ago trying to intercept a supply craft."

"Sounds like a rather broad base of action," Wellford observed.

The director agreed. "And it appears humans are involved in all instances."

"You mean there are people who would conspire with- these?" Gregson said, pointing at the body.

"You have just led us to another conclusion. The Valerians must be quite persuasive. We don't know how, but they evidently have means, forcible or otherwise, of insuring our cooperation. The Sicilian, for instance, believed he was helping the Valerians 'save humanity.'"

"From what?"

Radcliff shrugged. "Variously from 'itself,' from 'the Screemies'-even, at one point, from 'the Security Bureau.'"

Wellford turned finally from the corpse to stare at the director. "But what *are* the Valorians trying to accomplish here?"

"Learning the answer to that question is going to be the primary mission of all special SecBu agents."

"Seems to me," the Englishman suggested, "that our immediate necessity is a Valorian we can question."

The director's eyebrows arched alertly. "Yes. But that is where we face our severest limitations. We know that the Valorians are overwhelmingly persuasive. So, above all else, we'll have to be on guard against being deluded-as so many other people in Valorian-human cells have apparently been."

Gregson looked up. "This all undercover?"

"Naturally. We don't want to say anything publicly until we are in position to say something reassuring. I'll want you two to work together out of New York for the present. If this whole thing is a challenge against world authority, it'll eventually take some form of action against Security Bureau Headquarters there."

From the corridor came the sound of breaking glass and a frantic scream that fell off in the distance. Gregson reached the hallway first. Before the shattered window he found an orderly staring blankly toward the ground below.

"She kept saying she knew what the Screemies were," he murmured disconsolately. "Then I saw she was going to take the suicide route. But I couldn't stop her."

19

### *chapter Hi*

From his office in the old United Nations Secretariat Building, Gregson stared out into the clear autumn morning. Under its perpetual mantle of flitting hoppers, Manhattan had always impressed him as a vast field of erect corpses with carrion flies buzzing about their heads. But now there were no hoppers, just as there was little traffic in the post-Nuclear Exchange streets.

Somewhere below another spent hypodermic's siren sent its frantic wail out in search of the nearest Screamer Pickup Squad.

Wellford strode loose-jointedly into the office and leaned back against the desk. "So we sit on our hands in our plush quarters and wait-but for what?"

Security Bureau Headquarters were, Gregson conceded, indeed plush. Guttled by the swiping force of the blast that had demolished Yonkers and created a new Hudson River bay, the top several floors of the Secretariat Building had had to be condemned. But the rest of the structure, having responded to reconditioning, now served admirably as administrative center for the coordinated world-wide reconstruction effort and the struggle against the Screemie plague.

"I said," Wellford repeated, "what are we waiting for?"

"If Radcliff's hunch is right, you'll get action sooner or later."

"I should prefer it sooner-less anxiety that way."

20

"At least the bureau isn't drawing a complete blank."

"That affair in the Pyrenees last week? It was next to nothing. Not very much satisfaction in smashing an *evacuated* base, then letting the plane that led you there get away."

Gregson bent forward for a better view of First Avenue below. His attention was somehow drawn to an ancient car passing slowly in front of the Secretariat Building. It pulled almost to a stop, then moved off, turning left on Forty-Fourth.

Wellford went over to the window. "The entire matter strikes me as being somewhat ridiculous-an aggressive culture that's conquered interstellar space and has designs on Earth, yet chooses to sneak in through the back door and do nothing more than snip at our heels,"

"Maybe you can't apply human logic to Valerian strategy." Gregson stared more intently into the street

"Seems to me all logical systems must be equivalent I say -what has got your attention down there?"

"That car. What do you notice about it?"

"Seems to be chugging along on nothing but guts and low-grade petrol. And it appears rather interested in the Secretariat Building."

"'Rather' is right. That's its third or fourth time around. There it goes-back out Forty-Fourth."

"Well, then," the Englishman said. "Supposing we have a closer look when it completes the fifth lap."

\* \* \*

Outside, Gregson and Wellford pushed past the cordon of blue-uniformed International Guardsmen. They crossed the lawn, skirting the access driveway-at the same moment that the Security Bureau director's limousine pulled in from the street.

Wellford stared at the car while it braked to a stop. "That chap with the director-he looks familiar."

"Ought to. He's Frederick Armister, Governor of New York."

"Oh, but of course. Remarkable character, I understand. An ex-Screamer, isn't he?"

Gregson nodded, remembering last year's campaign. Ar-mister's pitch had been a memorable one: "You can't afford *not* to have an ex-Screamer as your governor. My candidacy is the only one that guarantees administrative continuity, unbroken by consignment of the chief executive to an isolation institute."

21

But, then, that same argument had won political office for many another candidate who had successfully surmounted the Screamer barrier. In the same manner, corporations seeking to stabilize their top managerial echelons had long since begun elevating ex-Screamers to executive positions.

Alighting from the limousine, the director held the door open for Armister-a somewhat nondescript little man with a sallowish complexion and pinched cheeks.

In the next instant, though, Radcliff blanched and shoved the governor back into the car, diving in after him.

Simultaneously, the inquisitive automobile heaved back into sight. It leaped the sidewalk and veered across the lawn, an obsolete automatic rifle thrust through its right window.

Gregson brought Wellford down out of the line of fire with a crushing body block.

The rifle discharged an entire clip. But Radcliff had managed to close the limousine's door and the slugs only ricocheted off armor-plated panels.

The attacking car completed its sweeping turn and headed back into the street-just as a half dozen laser weapons sliced the air in its wake.

One of the Guardsmen succeeded in beaming the left rear tire and the vehicle caromed into a truck at the next intersection. Its two occupants scurried away under the van, escaping out Forty-Third.

With the Englishman only a step behind, Gregson lunged off in pursuit, spurred by realization that the driver of the car bore features almost identical to those of the Valorian corpse in Rome-olive complexion, a thin face with compressed lips and tapering chin, and only a fringe of hair.

\* \* \*

Charging into Forty-Third, he immediately spotted the pair. Halfway down the block, they were sprinting along a sidewalk just beginning to fill with the tide of noonday office workers.

Apparently incapable of maintaining the pace set by his obviously human accomplice, the Valorian faltered in stride. At the corner of Second Avenue, he broke off impulsively to the right, leaving the other to continue his flight along Forty-Third.

Reaching the intersection first, Gregson saw that the alien had not quite succeeded in losing himself in the crowd on Second Avenue.

He lunged off in pursuit of the Valorian, indicating that Wellford should continue on after the other fugitive.

A moment later the alien floundered into a shopper, bounced off and collided with another before falling against a building. But he saw his pursuer closing hi on him and stumbled off again. At the intersection of Second and Forty-Fourth, however, he missed the curb and dropped to a knee.

Recovering his footing, he glanced frantically over his shoulder, then pushed on across the street, turning right on Forty-Fourth and heading toward the river.

Finding even the thinning sidewalk crowd too much to buck, he plunged back into the street, staggering across the traffic lanes. He barely missed being struck by one car, came up sharply against the fender of another that had screeched to a stop, then made his way clumsily to the opposite sidewalk.

Scarcely a hundred feet behind the Valorian now, Gregson put on a burst of speed and wedged through several pedestrians to close *in* on his quarry.

The slight man clung desperately to a wall, his chest heaving, eyes casting frantically about for an avenue of escape. Then he deliberately jammed his hand into a coat pocket and at once seemed to generate a second wind.

A moment later he was racing ahead, no longer appearing either injured or exhausted. He deftly avoided oncoming pedestrians, took to the roadway, nimbly side-stepped cars, and continued his flight down the other sidewalk.

Now it was Gregson who found himself becoming winded and lagging in pursuit

Up ahead, an automobile careened across the traffic lanes and smashed into another and its driver hung out the window and began shouting his lungs out. Even as Gregson raced by, somebody was administering a hypodermic to the new Screamer.

Then Gregson caught sight of the fugitive once again-just as the Valorian plunged into an alley. But pursuit was further complicated by two persons who had gone Screamie within moments of each other and had fallen writhing to the sidewalk.

He leaped over the second and, charging into the alley, saw that the Valorian had come to bay against an insurmountable mound of still uncleared rubble.

More deliberately now, Gregson started forward, caution slowing his pace almost to a stalk. Behind him, a trio of hy-23

podermic sirens was filling the canyon of Forty-Fourth Street with shrill, baleful cries.

The Valerian, fright heightening the severity of his features, sidled off into a recess between two buildings on bis right

Then Gregson fell abruptly to bis knees and clutched his face.

*Oh, Cod! he thought Not now! Not a Screamie seizure- now!*

\* \* \*

But all the malevolent, roaring light ever spawned in a hateful universe, over billions of years of existence, was searing his brain. Only, it wasn't radiance at all, but something uncanny, terrifying, agonizing. It was as though a flimsy barrier had been viciously torn aside to expose him to the brutal onslaught.

Sagging to his knees, fighting desperately to ward off the attack, he realized at last that he was shrieking out his anguish. And he was remotely aware of his own hands fumbling at the flap of his self-injection kit. Somehow he managed to withdraw the bulky hypodermic syringe.

But he almost dropped the instrument as a new wave of fire washed over bis senses, almost obscuring his consciousness, sending great rivers of lava coursing in angry, gushing torrents through his brain.

But he *couldn't* go Screamie! He *had* to hang on. For if he surrendered to the attack, he felt certain, it would be bis very last act of volition.

Slowly, the fires abated. Then, as though he had somehow found means of restoring the barrier between himself and torturous insanity, the seizure was over and he sat hi the dirt of

the alley, uncontrollably sobbing off the final effects of the attack.

Briefly, he hid his despair behind the glowing hope that perhaps the Screemies *could* be rejected, could be resisted by the sheer strength of indomitable will power. Could he continue to hold out-indefinitely?

Then, remembering the Valorian, he rose and started forward on legs almost incapable of bearing his weight

To the right of the mound of debris, off in the darkened, narrow recess between the two buildings, he found the cringing Valorian. But he drew up warily.

What tactics would he encounter? What racially-evolved

24

faculties of attack and defense? How could there be any way of anticipating the alien's assault potential, his limitations? How did you go about challenging someone whose strength, prowess and reflexes you couldn't begin to evaluate?

Momentarily, they stared uncertainly at each other while Gregson berated himself for having been caught unarmed in such a predicament. Then he remembered the hypodermic syringe that was still in his hand. But would the injection be effective on a Valorian?

Impulsively, he charged, wielding the needle like a rapier.

But the Valorian stepped nimbly aside and the hypodermic slipped harmlessly past his shoulder.

Gregson recovered his balance, drew back again and drove the needle forward once more. But, again, the alien was entirely prepared for the thrust and readily eluded it.

Annoyance finally overcoming caution, Gregson hurled himself upon the alien and caught his head in the grip of an arm.

As though having foreseen the move, however, the latter fled out of what would have been a viselike headlock. At the same time his hand came up to seize Gregson's other arm and impel it on in the swinging arc it had already begun.

That motion was originally to have jabbed the needle into the Valorian's neck. The man's head being no longer in his grip, however, Gregson winced as the syringe pierced his own left biceps instead.

The siren went off instantly and the alien stepped back to let Gregson sag forward into unconsciousness.

\* \* \*

*As though from the infinite reaches of space came Manuel's resonant but soundless voice. Trembling in their incoherence, the words strove to convey strange, compelling concepts. But they were concepts that could not be put into words. Thus, the flow was not one of unspoken language at all, but rather of inchoate ideas, terrifying in the very emptiness of their meaning.*

*It was not the first time Arthur Gregson had experienced an ephemeral flash of empathy -with his twin. There had been the Nina's trial run to Pluto before her cosmic transmitter was installed. The ionic accelerators had slipped out of phase. In that moment of impending disaster, he had somehow known of Manuel's peril.*

*This time, Gregson sensed, it was a different kind of emotion Manuel was undergoing-something so utterly alien that* 25

*it could not be categorized in the framework of human experience. Indescribable reflections of the other's sensations came as though from a Screamer's agonized mind.*

*Yet, Manuel seemed to be telling him not to be afraid, for the shadow of isolated ignorance was crumbling before the searing light of truth and soon all the strangenesses would be familiar. And again and again, as though with shouted impact, came the word symbols *zylph* and *rault*. But they were concepts utterly without meaning, provocative, shards of semantic nothingness.*

\* \* \*

An almost unfamiliar calm settled over Gregson's threshing thoughts and he convinced

himself that the parapsychological contact with Manuel had all been a fantasy.

Or had it? The bridge of empathy that he had occasionally experienced-could it span billions of miles? Or was it possible that his brother was somewhere on Earth, perhaps the captive of a creature such as the one he had just confronted in the deserted alleyway?

Recollection of the victorious Valerian brought his head abruptly off the pillow and he stared up into Wellford's face just as the latter's concerned expression was being supplanted by a grin.

"Welcome back to the ranks of the pre-Screamers," the Englishman greeted. "Although we had a deuce of a time convincing the Pickup Squad that you were the victim of some sort of skulduggery. You came fairly close to winding up in an isolation institute, you know."

Gregson saw that he was in the Secretariat Building's infirmary. "What happened?"

"I rather hoped you'd be able to tell us that."

"I ... I had him. But somehow he made me inject myself."

"We surmised as much. Crafty affair, this human-Valerian thing."

Wellford herded a shock of blond hair back into place along his precise part, then called attention to the livid puffiness beneath his left eye.

"Crafty and capable," he added pointedly. "The one you selected for me to chase didn't quite go along with the Marquis of Queensberry rules."

"So we both came back empty-handed?"

"Indeed not. I had mine quite full-until the Guardsmen relieved me of my burden."

26

Gregson bounded from the cot. "You mean we have him -here?"

Wellford nodded. "Radcliff and his special interrogators have been giving him a good going over for a couple of hours now. As a matter of fact, I just got buzzed by the director. He wants to see us in his office as soon as you've restored starch to your legs."

Long after Gregson and Wellford had drawn up before his desk and recounted their experiences of the chase, Security Bureau Director Radcliff continued to pace before his window overlooking the East River. His face was creased with concern.

Finally he said, "You're to be commended for a good job."

"But-" Gregson began apologetically.

"I know. The Valorian escaped. But don't feel badly about that. I'm sure your report will fill in broad gaps in our data on the aliens. Only this morning an almost identical incident was reported in Bavaria. But the agent in that case somehow turned a laser pistol on himself instead. So, you see, you were lucky."

"What have we learned from our prisoner?"

"Not very much thus far, I'm afraid. He went incoherent during questioning. It's almost as though he had been conditioned to react irrationally under such circumstances."

"May we have a shot at him?" Wellford inquired.

Radcliff shook his head. "He's no longer here. I thought it wise to set up undisclosed detention facilities for whatever prisoners we happen to take."

"But," the Englishman protested, "we're quite curious. And we think we're entitled to whatever information is acquired, inasmuch as it will doubtless help us along . . ."

"True. And as soon as we can squeeze some rational pattern or even some useful information out of our collective effort, we'll pass it promptly along. Meanwhile, perhaps you'd care to hear some of what your captive had to say."

He crossed over to a recorder on his desk. "I'll spot-play portions of the stuff and remind you that all of it is as irrational as what you'll hear."

The recording blared into the room, hurling out vehement invective.

"That's our bounder," Wellford observed, amused. "It's practically all he had to say to me too."

Radcliff skipped along the tape and settled next on:

*"They're good, I tell you! The Valerians are good! You \*7*

*know they are! They're here to save us! You've got to stop persecuting them! You've*



got-"

Then more curses and vilification, all shouted out in a desperate, ranting voice.

Radcliff cut off the recorder. "See what we're up against? The man actually believes his Valerians are benevolent."

"He's absolutely demented," Wellford declared.

"Did he say anything else about the plague?" Gregson asked.

"Only that the Valerians, if given the chance, will lift the epidemic. But consider this, Greg: In the wake of the Valo-rian whom you chased this morning, *three persons went Screemie.*"

After a moment Radcliff added, "I think it's obvious that there is a definite connection between the Valerians and the plague-despite the fact that the epidemic broke out fourteen years before we became aware of the aliens' presence."

28

#### *chapter iv*

A week later, as November winds strengthened fall's desolate grip on Manhattan and laced the East River with scudding whitecaps, Gregson settled down under a siege of frustrated inactivity, made even more tedious by Wellford's sudden transfer to the Security Bureau's London office.

It was a period during which the Valerians seemed to have withdrawn to the unfathomable depths of space from which they had come, relinquishing Earth to its alternate agony of the Screemie epidemic.

Prompt reaction by the Secretariat Building's defenses to the assassination attempt had, of course, vividly demonstrated that Security Bureau Headquarters would not be caught unaware. And, in the interest of underscoring that point, the International Guard detail had been tripled while considerable heavy armament had been installed in the abandoned upper levels.

That bureau headquarters had been fortified inconspicuously, Gregson supposed, was a matter of political prudence. For Congress was even now considering special legislation that would double United States appropriations to the international agency. And it just wouldn't be wise to present American taxpayers with the image of a Security Bureau growing in resources and heavily braced against no apparent physical threat-an armed enclave.

Gregson's secretary appeared in the doorway. "There's an urgent call on the comviewer-from Pennsylvania." 2»

' H\* flicked the switch and the frightened, tear-streaked face of a young, blond woman sprang onto the screen.

"Helen! What is it?"

"Oh Greg! It's Uncle Bill! He's just gone Screemie! I can't teach him! And we can't get the Pickup Squad out here!"

"Hasnt he injected himself?"

"No. He doesn't have his hypo. And I can't get one to him!"

She turned to race from the room as her hand came up to snap off the comviewer switch. Just before the screen went dead, Gregson could hear Forsythe screaming in the background.

Twice he tried to call back. But there was no answer. Then he dialed the Monroe County Isolation Institute several times before getting a response. He reported the seizure.

By then his secretary was back in the doorway. "I've had Air Transport roll out a hopper. But Operations says regardless of the emergency, you'll have to skirt the metropolitan area."

Once airborne, however, he sent the craft winging recklessly over Manhattan, above the bombed-out industrial section of New Jersey and on towards Pennsylvania.

Bill Forsythe-a Screemie-unable to get help. And Greg-son could only wonder to what extent he, himself, might be responsible. Even before the accident aboard Vega Jumpoff,

Gregson had indulged the old man's desire to remain on as a satellite engineer long after his reflexes had dulled.

And, after the accident, he had insisted that they invest together in the East Pennsylvania farm. It had seemed like a good idea at the time.

But now Forsythe was a Screamer. And, in the seclusion of the farm, his niece was somehow powerless to administer the injection that might save his life.

Within another ten minutes, Gregson crossed the state line and abruptly altered his course for the Monroe Isolation Institute outside Stroudsburg.

At the reception desk, however, there was no record of admission on a William Forsythe. Yes, another attendant assured him, the institute had responded to his call and had dispatched a Pickup Squad car. As a matter of fact, it should be at the farm by now. No, there was no comviewer available for him to use.

Verticaling back into the sharp, bright Pennsylvania morn-

30

ing, he thought of Helen for the first time and, didn't quite see how she would manage-with this latest blow compounding all the other tragedies that had befallen her.

It wasn't enough that her fiance had been felled by the plague three years earlier and had taken the suicide route. Less than a year later, her immediate family had been caught in the nuclear blast which had buried Cleveland under an arm of Lake Erie. With her uncle now gone Screemie, what would she do?

Two months ago Gregson would have readily produced the solution to her dilemma. But not now-not after he had already taken his first, irrevocable steps along the Screemie road.

Above the farm, he verticaled precipitately down to the bull's-eye and cut his jets. Leaping out, he inhaled, but without the usual sense of appreciation, air spiced with the musk of livestock and the vigorous fragrances of harvest.

He sprinted to the house and paused in the kitchen doorway, ready to shout out for Helen.

But Bill was there-seated next to the table, his right foot immersed in a pan of steaming water.

"Greg?" the old man said, casting about for further sound.

"You're *all right!*"

"You wouldn't say that if you were in my place."

Forsythe shifted his foot painfully. He was a smallish man with a salubrious complexion that set off his thick crop of white hair. In his rotundity, there was the persuasive suggestion of jollity. But, with his face set in a grimace, he didn't seem to be very jovially disposed at the moment.

"What happened?" Gregson demanded.

Helen drew up in the hallway and glanced down at the floor. She had repaired the damage to her face and, despite puffed eyes, was as subtly attractive as Gregson had last remembered her.

"You see, it was like this . . ." she began.

Forsythe snorted and, with pretended severity, said, "You're entitled to the first ten swats, Greg. Then you can hold her for me."

She came into the room, carrying herself with a grace and poise that seemed anomalous to the farmhouse setting.

"But, BUI. . ." she protested.

Her uncle relented with an exaggerated gesture of concession. "On second thought, I don't suppose I can shift the blame. After all, I guess I *was* bellowing like a wounded ele-31 pliant-and with the shower going full blast so I couldn't hear how Helen was reacting."

Finally Gregson felt his tension subsiding. "What *did* happen?"

"Slipped in the shower stall. Sheared off an ingrown toe-nail."

"I tried to call you back as soon as he quieted down," Helen explained, smoothing out her skirt over well-proportioned thighs.

"Believe me," Forsythe added facetiously, "I was ready to run her down and administer those ten swats without assistance, *if* only I had my eyesight."

Bill, of course, would never recover his vision. That had been the verdict after months of surgery to relieve his concussions.

\* \* \*

Gregson called headquarters and reported he wouldn't be back for the rest of the day, but that they could expect him Saturday morning. Then Helen prepared a lunch of ham steaks and French fries, desultorily chatting with him all the while. It was apparent she was talking around his protracted absence from the farm. And he welcomed her indirection, for he didn't care to be pressed into an explanation.

Later, she put on a heavy-knit sweater that seemed to accentuate the trimness of her hips while its turned-up collar imparted an almost adolescent youthfulness to her rather attractive face. If Gregson hadn't known better, he might have suspected that her subsequent suggestion of a stroll in the pasture was part of a calculated design.

He agreed to the walk. But he firmly set himself against any sentimental involvement. And if he should seem cool as a result of his resolve, he'd simply have to hope she wouldn't be hurt.

They stayed close to the fence, talking about insignificant things while she stooped occasionally to draw a bull-grass stalk out of its sheath and twist it absently in her fingers.

She came to her point abruptly. "Bill and I were hoping you'd decide to come out to the farm permanently."

"Someday, perhaps I will," he said noncommittally. Until two months ago he would have sprung upon her suggestion. But not now.

"Things are going to be different," she went on. "Reconstruction's pretty much in hand all over. Market lines are being restored. And the demand for food is becoming or-

32

derly. Profitable too. Why, we haven't had a single crop raid this fall."

They paused beneath a tree and she leaned back, resting her head against its bole while the wind drifted strands of her blond hair against dark bark.

"Yes," he agreed. "It'll pay off-if Bill can hire some help."

She reached out and touched his arm importunately. "Why don't you quit the Security Bureau? You don't really belong there. And it's dangerous work."

He stared into her face. How would she know?

"The bureau discharges the most important function in the world today," he said stiffly, covering over the real reason why he wouldn't allow their conversation to become more intimate.

"Some say it's assuming too many functions-that it has a high potential for tyranny, controlling almost everything as it does."

"They don't know what they're talking about. We've got a world-wide plague on our hands, so we use world-wide authority to fight it. Assumption of that responsibility naturally calls into play other forms of necessary control."

She sighed, then smiled. "Oh, let's forget about the bureau. I was only trying to lead up to-well, an answer to your question."

Unprepared for this thrust, he tried not to meet her anxious eyes,

"Arthur Gregson!" she exclaimed with feigned exasperation. "A year ago you asked me to marry you. I said you were just sorry for me. Six months ago, you asked again. I thanked you for .being generous and sweet. In August you asked once more. I said, 'Perhaps-someday-when I'm ready.' Well . . ." she spread her arms, ". . . I'm ready."

All along he had feared something like this-ever since his first Screemie seizure. He could only lower his head.

Her smile drained off and she glanced away. "Seems it's my turn to be rejected."

He had hurt her, he saw. And, of incidental importance, he was feeling the pain almost as much as she. He seized her impulsively and kissed her, but regretted at once that she

would misinterpret the gesture.

Which she promptly did when she drew back and sprightly asked, "Then you *will* leave the bureau?"

After a moment he shook his head resolutely. 33

Her eyebrows drew together. "But I don't understand."

And he would never explain--not about the Screamies. "There's too much important bureau business to take care of."

"And when it's over?"

There was no point in dragging it out. If he broke off completely, she might perhaps not even hear about his being committed to an isolation institute when it happened.

"It won't be over--not for a long while."

"Greg, is there somebody else?"

Leaving it at that, he simply turned and headed back for the house.

\* \* \*

Judging from her reticence at supper, he concluded that he had succeeded in discouraging her. It was an achievement which filled him with despair, though, and he was still glumly silent as he sat with Bill in the living room later that evening.

"Things in New York?" Forsythe said in his casual manner of leaving the front end of sentences open.

"Pure hell. Scarcities, shortages, long lines. Screamers dropping all over. Pickup Squad cars everywhere. You don't know how lucky you have it here."

"Done a lot of thinking about the Screamies lately, Greg. Maybe it isn't a disease after all."

"What else *could* it be?"

"Don't know. Used to think they were awful--the Screamies. People shouting themselves to death with 'lights' in their head." He let out a frustrated breath. "Damn! I'd give my right arm to see a light--any kind of light!"

Gregson thought of his own seizures, of the mercy killings, the pitchfork murder on *Via del Fori Imperiali*. And he wanted to shout Forsythe down on the utter stupidity of his selfish statement

But his resentment and pity he buried in a three-week-old edition of the *Monroe County Clarion*. And a four-column italicized headline at the top of page two caught his attention:

'aliens-among-us' fad back again- 'little green men' up to old tricks

It was of course, tongue in cheek--a carbon copy of many similar stories that had given vent to editorial humor over the past two years, when any occasion was seized upon to lighten

34

grim reports on '95's Nuclear Exchange, the Screamies and reconstruction.

The writer had stepped off from, a recent local resurrection of rumors stemming from the *Nina's* reports. He had polled opinion and written whimsically on backwoods superstitions.

Gregson was about to cast the article aside when he encountered an observation solicited from an Enos Cromley, farmer who, coincidentally, lived not too far from Forsythe's place.

Cromley claimed to "have it from the horse's mouth." The aliens were most positively among us. He had spoken with them. They wanted to save humanity from a fate worse than the Screamies and Nuclear Exchange. And they had asked the farmer to find others who would help them.

Gregson came rigidly erect in the chair. One--there were, of course, aliens-among-us. Two--they had somehow drawn a number of helpless humans into conspiracy with them. Consequently, there must be some system whereby humans were approached by aliens.

Again, one--alien-human cells would not necessarily be located in the cities or close to points they intended to attack. Too risky. Chances for detection too favorable. Two--rural

regions *near* those targets would present optimum opportunity for recruitment and preparation.

"Bill, Doc Holt edits the *Clarion*, doesn't he?"

"Used to. All by himself. Practically a one-man operation."

"Used to?"

Forsythe nodded "Up until a couple of weeks ago. Sold out to Secondary Publications. Got a good price, I understand. Packed up his wife and belongings and took off."

Secondary Publications-a public service instrument of the Security Bureau's Communications Division, Gregson recalled. Another instance of the bureau's tireless effort to hold civilization together. Many news media were folding up, depriving local communities of their right to be informed. So the bureau was stepping in to hold the pieces together until private journalistic enterprise could resume its obligations.

Forsythe withdrew from his sightless isolation long enough to remind, "Next week's Thanksgiving. You promised you'd spend it with us."

"I'll be here," Gregson confirmed. "Enos Cromley-he's the farmer who lives a couple of miles down this road, isn't he?"

"Right If you'd call him a farmer. Has the most run-down 35 place in the area. Figures, though. Jumped on the agricultural bandwagon just after NE. Used to be caretaker at the Wilson Hunting Lodge."

\* \* \*

The grass was still dew-spangled the next morning when Gregson verticaled toward the almost obliterated bull's-eye in front of Enos Cromley's farmhouse. Even before he touched down, however, he sensed that the place was deserted. Nevertheless, after hallooming several times he entered cautiously.

The rooms were sparsely furnished, with a considerable film of dust over everything. But the hallway and kitchen lights were burning, suggesting that an unpaid electricity bill had not yet resulted in meter cut-off.

In the kitchen he found abundant evidence of a struggle- overturned furniture and charred streaks left by laser beams on the walls and ceiling. By the table there was a crumpled newspaper that might have been cast aside in anger. When he straightened it out, he saw that it was open on the page with the "aliens-among-us" story.

And glinting in the early sunlight that was spilling in through the open back door was a single, long, false fingernail-conclusive justification for his hunch to come to Cromley's place.

Back at the hopper, he contacted Special Agents Operations and recounted what had happened. He reported his intentions of pushing on to Wilson Hunting Lodge on foot and described its nearby location. Then he requested a detail of International Guardsmen to meet him there as soon as possible.

After acknowledging his instructions, the operations officer added, "Whatever you've got on the fire will have to be wrapped up as soon as possible. You just received special orders from Radcliff in England. He's set up a special agents briefing in London Monday morning."

"There's been a break on this thing?"

"I wouldn't know. Radcliff can be secretive as hell.\*\*"

At the hunting lodge a half hour later, Gregson advanced carefully through the underbrush on the caretaker's shack, from whose chimney was curling a shaft of smoke.

He heard the twig snap behind him. But, before he could draw his laser pistol, something with the punch of a horse's hoof exploded against his temple and he fell into a pit of blackness.

3tt

Regaining consciousness, he sagged forward. But a stout hand landed on his chest and shoved him erect in the chair.

He opened his eyes and stared into the tube of his own laser pistol, wielded by a stocky man of about forty-five with black hair graying at the temples. Beside him was a much

smaller and considerably older person who was going through Gregson's wallet

"Nothing in here except a New York hopper license," the latter said. "Name's Gregson-Arthur. He's thirty-one."

"We'll find out whatever we need to know," the other vowed, seizing Gregson's lapel. "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

Gregson shook his head to clear it. "I saw the story in the *Clarion*. I believed what was in it and-

*Whapt* He caught the stout man's knuckles across his cheek.

"Won't do. All the way from New York you see the story and hightail it out here."

"I was passing through Stroudsburg."

"Why did you leave your hopper over at the farm and walk here, through the woods rather than by the road?"

"No place to vertical down."

*Whap!* More knuckles snapped his head sideways.

"There's a whole field outside."

"I didn't know that."

"Then how'd you know enough about this place to look for Cromley here?"

"You Cromley?"

*Whap!* The knuckles were formed into a fist this time. And Gregson licked blood from his lips.

"He's Cromley." The interrogator flicked the pistol in the older man's direction.

Gregson addressed the latter directly. "You said in print what I suspected all along. You claimed you needed help. I wanted to help-up until now, anyway."

"That was a mistake," Cromley said. "They told me I shouldn't have done it-speak with Doc Holt, I mean. I brought us too far out into the open. I..."

"Shut up!" the stout man ordered. Then, to Gregson, "Once more-who are you? Who sent you here? What do you want?"

"I want to help." And, inspirationally, Gregson added, "I want to do anything I can to get the Security Bureau off our backs before it's too late." 37

Cromley and the other man exchanged uncertain stares.

But, just then, from elsewhere in the shack anxious footsteps bore down on the room where the interrogation was in progress. And a voice pitched high with alarm shouted out:

"He's from the Security Bureau! He's a special agent!"

The interrogator turned vehemently on Gregson as the man appeared in the doorway. Wearing a robe and slippers, he was, unmistakably a Valorian, even to the detail of fingertips that were bluntly rounded in the absence of their false nails.

The man with the laser pistol raised it in Gregson's face.

But the Valorian shouted, "No-wait! He's the one the Forsythe girl said was . . ."

Then his slight, severe features tensed with fear as he exclaimed, "Oh, God! I've been zylphing in the wrong direction! They're coming! They're here!"

Instantly melting the window pane before it, a heavy laser beam sliced into the room, fatally piercing the chest of the man who was threatening Gregson.

Two other beams, focused at stun intensity, splashed full upon Cromley and the Valorian and they collapsed.

Moments later several International Guardsmen were spilling into the shack, led by the supervisor of Special Agents Operations.

"Sort of a melodramatic rescue, wouldn't you say?" the latter observed, staring at the unconscious Valorian.

But Gregson was numbly silent. Why had *Helen's* name been mentioned by the alien? And how did the Valorian know who he was? Or that the Guardsmen were just outside the shack?

"I *thought* this situation might call for the stealthy approach technique," the supervisor quipped. "You all right?"

Gregson rubbed his bruised cheek. "I'd like to be in on the questioning of these two."  
"Sorry. Orders are to take all prisoners straight to quarantine."

38

*chapter v*

Jangling on its night table, the comviewer brought Gregson upright in bed. But it was a moment before he recognized his Mount Royal Hotel room in London and remembered the special agents briefing scheduled for Monday morning.

He flicked the switch and Wellford's face materialized on the screen. "Sorry to barge in like this, but I should think you would be up and around by now, even though it is Sunday."

"What time is it?"

"Fair on to noon. And I'm sitting anxiously on your note inviting me to Simpson's for Yorkshire pudding. Shall we get cracking?"

"Be right down."

Wellford drew back skeptically. "I suppose that translates into about half an hour's worth of objective time. Incidentally, I've only just read the fact sheet on your exploits yesterday. I knew one of us was about due to take a Valerian in tow."

After the Englishman had switched off, Gregson's thoughts stalled on the incidents at the hunting lodge and he couldn't suppress the echo of the alien's blurting out, "He's the one the *Forsythe girl* said was . . ."

Helen a cell member? Persuaded to work with the Valo-rians, as Cromley had been-the man with Cromley-the would-be assassin Wellford had captured in Manhattan? Or 39 had he only imagined hearing her name mentioned in the shack?

He could only hope Cromley and the alien wouldn't implicate her under interrogation. If he, himself, got back to Pennsylvania soon enough, he might find some way of questioning her without triggering the vicious conditioned-response mechanism.

\* \* \*

The cab bore Gregson and Wellford swiftly along Oxford Street, its progress abetted by the dearth of vehicles that had become England's lot with the devastation of its industrial potential in '95.

Of all the Western population centers, Gregson mused, London had taken the brunt of the Soviet missile counterattack. Three hydrogen devices had unleashed their fury in the greater metropolitan area. Ground-level detonation of the warheads, however, had mainly spared the central city from irreparable damage.

True to the British sense of tradition, that section was restored before reconstruction spread into the environs. But the Thames River had been stripped of its riparian integrity, such that in many spots the watercourse sent coves and bays ranging far beyond its old banks and feeding many potholes where the bodies of persons recently gone Screemie were occasionally washed ashore.

"I said," Wellford began again, realizing he hadn't yet caught Gregson's attention, "you've arrived in time to help me celebrate. Yesterday I was supposed to buy the Screemie package. Either I didn't, or I'm the most unperturbed Screemie you've ever encountered."

Gregson grimaced. "Going Screemie is nothing to joke about."

"I should hope not. But then, Lady Sheffington *is*."

"Who's Lady Sheffington?"

"In due time you'll find out. Meanwhile, I was fairly fascinated by this morning's fact sheet on your experiences. But I'm afraid you may not have been the first to bag a live Valo-rian."

"What are you talking about?"

"Tomorrow's briefing. From the grapevine I've managed to gather the impression that Radcliff has already successfully interrogated a Valorian and is ready to disseminate results and conclusions."

At Trafalgar Square, even the sparse traffic in Pall Mall

40

East had slowed to a halt. Gregson rolled up the cab window, trying to shut out the

piercing shrieks of a hypodermic siren coming from the base of Nelson's Column.

The Screamer alarm had frightened the pigeons into wheeling flight that took them well out over Cockspur Street. Just when it appeared the birds would settle, the sharp, clanging bell of the Security Bureau Pickup Squad car, bearing along Whitehall, set them off again.

"Let's walk," Wellford proposed. "Simpson's is close by. Anyway, I have a score to settle with Lady Sheffington in the Strand."

Afoot, Gregson hugged the parapet overlooking the Square, ignoring the silent, apprehensive crowd that had gathered there. But when the squad car screeched to a halt in Cockspur across the square he couldn't avoid staring towards the nearest recumbent bronze lion.

Someone had placed the Screamer, as though in sacrifice to an idol, alongside the forepaws of the massive animal. It was a child-six at the most. His pale, bare calves trembled in unconscious reflex as terror bored in beneath the too-shallow pall of sedative. But at least he wasn't screaming.

Emergency pickup personnel charged onto the scene, placed the boy on a litter and bore him swiftly back to the squad car. The vehicle raced away, surrendering Trafalgar Square to somber silence, and the crowd drifted dispiritedly off.

As Gregson headed into the Strand, he looked back. The Square was deserted, its stillness disturbed only by the pigeons that strutted in the shadow of a Lord Nelson who brooded over the horror that had gripped the heart of London on a quiet Sunday afternoon.

Lady Sheffington, Wellford explained as they neared the building with gaudy lettering splashed across its facade, was indeed not a member of the peerage. If the "Lady" hadn't been capriciously bestowed at christening, then it had been surreptitiously assumed, he ventured.

Gregson read some of the gold-leaf streamers: "Fortunes Told," "Know Thy Destiny and Be Prepared," "Is There a Screamer Package in Your Future?"

"It was Lady Sheffington who predicted you'd go Screamer?" he asked.

Wellford nodded. "Now she must refund my money." Then he anticipated the next question. "No. I don't normally waste my time on soothsayers. I was just curious over the 41

fact that three of them whom I know of happen to be ex-Screamers. Moreover, they're all credited with amazingly accurate predictions, as is this one."

Lady Sheffington was stumpy and coarse-faced, with a commensurate voice. Even in her thick-carpeted office she was reluctant to part with a brace of slender furs, wrapped several times around her neck and ludicrously accenting her stoutness. Her breath was acrid with stale gin whose stimulating effects had established her rigid grin as a permanent fixture.

"Back for your money, eh?" she chuckled, glancing at Wellford.

"I don't appear to be screaming, do I?"

"You will be when you read your receipt, dearie. Says 'on the predicted date, give or take three days.' " She laughed raucously.

Wellford was amused. "You don't often miscalculate, do you?"

"Oh, I've been known to miss before, I 'ave."

"You weren't perhaps a Screamer yourself at one time?"

"Me-a Screamer?" She snickered. "H'aint never screamed in my life, ducky. 'Less you'd count that night in Chelsea with that nice, dear boy with the wavy 'air. Only, 'e wasn't no gentleman."

Then her face relaxed from its almost changeless grin. "All right, bunny. I was a Screamer. But I don't talk about it. Seer

She loosed a halting, snorting laugh, then stared soberly at Gregson. "Want a reading, pet? 'Ave one on the 'ouse: Let's say if I was you I wouldn't go counting on no turkey dinner. And on a farm with a blind bloke h'ain't no place to be when the Screamer package is finally delivered."

Gregson started. Then he glanced suspiciously at Wellford. The gag, though evidently



painstakingly prepared, had been a crude one. But he laughed it off. They'd pulled even cruder ones on each other before.

\* \* \*

Monday morning's Security Bureau briefing was apparently destined to get off to a late start. Gregson and Wellford found seats in the third row and watched scores of special agents from most of the world's civilized nations file into the auditorium.

A few minutes later Radcliff strode onstage, supervised a pair of attendants as they positioned the recording cameras,

4\*

then glanced at his watch. Staring at the audience, his eyes fell on Gregson. He waved, then returned to the wings.

"Quite an imposing figure, that Radcliff," Wellford offered.

"Has a pair of shoulders like a stripling," Gregson agreed.

"If I should ever go Screemie, as Lady Sheffington predicts, I could only hope that I come out of it half as well as our director."

"Radcliff-an ex-Screamer?" Gregson said dubiously.

"Of, but of course. Didn't you know? One of the earlier barrier hurdlers. Class of '86, as I understand it."

"I didn't know that." But at least it did explain why Radcliff had been a dedicated, compelling force in the movement that had enormously expanded the Security Bureau's isolation institute network. He had undoubtedly been motivated by compassion for those who would otherwise have to fight the Screemies alone and unattended.

The Englishman laughed. "You appear as surprised to learn our director was a Screamer as I was to find out the governor of New York had gone through the isolation routine. Perhaps we ought to get together sometimes and compare notes further."

"Yes, we'll have to," Gregson said indifferently, hoping to discourage the subject.

"The President of Italy, too, belonged to the club at one time."

Gregson had already been aware of that. And, even though Wellford seemed to be moving persistently toward a point, he didn't appreciate the other's harping on the matter of plague victims.

"All right," he said impatiently, "so a lot of former Screammers are prominent people today. We've already agreed that those who pass the barrier successfully are best qualified to assume responsibility."

"True ..." the other admitted tentatively.

Gregson remembered that Governor Armister, in his campaign, had made a forceful case for ex-Screamer leadership when he had said: "Conditions are in a frightful mess. People who've developed immunity to the plague by going through the mill, as I did, are good risks-in business, politics, or what have you."

Or, again, in a more emotional appeal for votes: "We have this awful barrier we call the Screemies. On one side, like frightened sheep in a corral, we have the vast, miserable majority of the human race. On the other side-a handful of 43

ex-Screammers. Isn't it logical that those who have already successfully crossed the barrier should shoulder the burdens of preserving our conventional world, of supervising the continuity of our institutions?"

Wellford broke into Gregson's reflections. "I've just fed you some leading suggestions. I'd hoped you would sift through them and arrive at the same conclusions I did."

Annoyed at the other's insistence, Gregson looked away. "They went over my head."

Wellford came directly to his point. "Why should ex-Screammers be prime targets for assassination by the Valorian-human cells?"

Displaying a critical frown, Gregson said, "Your suggestions apparently went over your own head too. If the Valo-rians are hellbent on conquest, they can advance their cause best by sowing confusion, by knocking off authority wherever they find it."

\* \* \*

The auditorium had finally filled and Radcliff strode back onstage, the determined thuds of his heels gaveling order among the assembly. He mounted the dais and stared out at his special agents.

"Our purpose here," he said in a firm, powerful voice, "is one of enlightenment. I am most gratified to say that we have learned all we need to know to map our campaign against the Valorians."

Here and there a turbaned Oriental or robed African aimed a translingual pickup horn at the stage.

"We shall be as brief as possible," the director went on. "First, you have all received fact sheets on the Gregson contact in Pennsylvania. After I am through, I shall call him up here for a question and answer session so that you may wring him dry of any details that might strike you as being especially important.

"In connection with Gregson's experience, I must say that he has contributed as much to our understanding of the alien threat as anyone among us. He has suggested that the large cities, our centers of authority, are not the proper places to search for Valorians, although they will occasionally show up there on aggressive missions."

There was a noise behind the curtain. Annoyed, he glanced over his shoulder and cleared his throat.

"Now let's consider the experience of another of our agents-Eric Friedmann in Bavaria. Friedmann?"

44

A tall, slender Nordic stood up in the rear of the auditorium.

"Since we have not yet distributed a fact sheet on your encounter," Radcliff proposed, "suppose you tell us briefly what happened."

The man spoke gutturally, tersely. "We received a spot report from Security Bureau Air Transport on a Sunburst plane that had been observed landing south of Munich. We arrived in time to see its occupants drive off in a car. We chased them. But they turned off the road and drove across a field of weeds. When we tried to follow, we learned that the field was filled with stumps. We wrecked our car."

"Yet, the Valerians got through the field without difficulty?"

"Yes." The German sat down.

Radcliff took a sip of water. "Back to Gregson in New York. You should all be familiar with the fact sheet on his experiences in the Manhattan alley. He reported that, in struggling with the alien, he accidentally injected himself with his own hypo."

The director paused, then said, "Gentlemen, I propose that the Valorian car Friedmann was following didn't *actually* turn off the road. He only *imagined* it did. And I further suggest that Gregson didn't struggle with the alien in the alley. Rather, the Valorian caused Gregson to *imagine* the struggle and to inject himself."

\* \* \*

Against a general murmur of surprise, Wellford whispered, "I'll be damned!"

"For you see, gentlemen," Radcliff continued soberly, "the Valorians are more than merely persuasive. They are spinners of hallucinations, experts at hypnotic illusion. To learn that much cost us one Valorian prisoner who escaped from our stockade."

Astonished, Wellford straightened in his chair and exclaimed, "Aliens with a whammy!"

Dabbing perspiration on his forehead, Radcliff drank a full glass of water.

"As to why the Valorians are here," he said more softly, ". . . if we didn't know, we could readily guess. They are planning, of course, to take over, with a minimum expenditure of effort, materiel and personnel. We suspect that they were somehow responsible for our Nuclear Exchange. We have every reason to believe that they, themselves, brought the 45 Screemies to Earth to facilitate conquest without direct aggression."

Oregon stiffened. Had Helen actually become involved with *something like that*? Now, more so than ever, he wanted to return to Pennsylvania.

Radcliff brought his fist down on the lectern. "But now we know how to fight them! Our

main strategy shall be to deprive them wholly of the secrecy which allows them to circulate in the rural areas and recruit unsuspecting persons for the human-Valerian cells that will be used to destroy us."

He stared profoundly out over his audience. "Tomorrow, gentlemen, the entire world shall know all of the details that you are learning now. Hereafter, we will not be alone in the fight."

Again, his voice moderated. "I said *one* of our Valerians escaped from the compound. That left us with two. One is here with us today-properly sedated so as to be no threat."

He signaled into the wings and the curtains parted abruptly on a Valerian trussed in a chair, chin lolling on his chest.

Radcliff tugged the alien's head erect "Where are you from?"

"The Valerian System," came the delayed, sluggish response.

"How can you pose as a human?"

"Remote observation. Intensive training. Surgery."

"What are the Screemies?"

"A plague found in another system."

"Did you bring it here?"

After much hesitation: "Yes."

"Can you cure it?"

"There is no cure. It will run its course and wear itself out"

"Are the Valerians immune?"

"Yes."

"How can they persuade humans to help them?"

"Through hypnotic compulsion."

"Why are the Valerians here?"

"Earth's system and order will collapse under the plague. Then we will strip your world of its resources."

Radcliff walked around behind the chair. And Gregson, alarmed, watched him draw a laser pistol from inside his coat.

The single *zip* sounded harshly in the hall as the beam burned into the Valerian's head and he slumped forward.

Radcliff grimly faced the assembly. "This was *meant* to be

4tt

a grisly demonstration. The point I've tried to get across is that there is no latitude for human sentiment in dealing with the aliens. Only a dead one is harmless."

Gregson's arm was seized in a frantic grip and he turned to see Wellford shuddering beside him. The Englishman's eyes were glazed with terror and his lips were working frenziedly but soundlessly.

Finally the first serrate scream erupted from his throat as he clamped his hands over his eyes.

Then he filled the auditorium with anguished cries.

Gregson administered the injection and the hypodermic siren's strident tones lamented Wellford's purchase of the Screemie package.

*chapter vi*

Spawned by the *Nina's* aborted expedition, the aliens-among-us fixation had gained the force of a nearly paralyzing obsession following 1995's Nuclear Exchange. For months, a dazed world had been resigned to the expectation that what had been only rumored and suppressed would inevitably be acknowledged as true.

Yet, no one was quite prepared for the impact of the press conference that Tuesday in the old U.N. General Assembly Chamber.

Before the battery of trivision cameras were arrayed the Security Bureau hierarchy-headed by Director Radcliff, the commandant of the International Guard and officers-in-charge of the bureau's Communications and Space Divisions.

Gregson and Eric Friedmann, the special agent from Bavaria, were seated at a table on the right while on the left, bound and gagged, was the human conspirator Wellford had overpowered on Forty-Third Street.

Radcliff made his sober introductory presentation much along the same lines he had followed at the London briefing. At one point, both Gregson and Friedmann were required to elaborate on the accounts he had given of their experiences.

Then the prisoner's gag was ordered removed.

The man swore for some time and surged against his bonds. Then he shouted, "You damned fools! Don't you see

48

what they're doing? They want to put you in chains! The Valerians can't hypnotize anybody! They . . ."

Motioning for the gag to be replaced, Radcliff faced the press with his head bowed. "This is what we are up against. A force that can turn us into insensate robots. Destroy our will to resist. Synthesize in each of us a distorted sense of loyalty. Reduce us to unthinking servitude."

When he showed the film clip on his questioning of the Valorian at the London briefing, it brought Gregson's thoughts painfully back to the appalling sight of Wellford going Screemie and being rushed to London's Central Isolation Institute in Hyde Park.

Then, dismayed, he recalled that the attack had been predicted by the same woman who had prophesied his own final seizure at Forsythe's farm day after tomorrow.

The *zip* of Radcliff's laser pistol in the film ended Greg-son's preoccupation and he was surprised to see that the director had shown the slaying. But then he realized it had been intended as a battle cry-an exhortation that would bring all human sentiment to a fighting pitch and set the tone of attack.

\* \* \*

Even before the press conference's question and answer period was over, reports on initial reaction were already flowing into the Security Bureau's Communications Division.

A Buenos Aires woman, turning Screamer as she watched the expose on a trivision set in the window of an International Guard post, was ignored by the crowd about her. Instead, the frightened Argentineans directed their wrath on a slight, olive-complexioned man with little hair who futilely shouted that he wasn't a Valorian.

In Monroe County, Pennsylvania, house-to-house and farm-to-farm searches were organized spontaneously. Some of the vigilantes thought it might help matters if they burned out the forests and fields in their wake.

In Osaka, a horde of confused Japanese, depending on a faulty translanguial pickup device for their interpretation of the tricast, assumed they were being told not that the Scream-ies were *caused* by the Valerians, but that the Screamers *were* Valerians. Consequently, they burned their Central Isolation Institute to the ground.

Most encouraging of all the early reports, Gregson realized when he learned about it later, was the development in Bel-leau Wood near Paris. There, two haggard and bruised men 49

staggered into a National Police post and surrendered to the International Guard detail.

They had been cell members, they explained, but now wanted to be quarantined. Even before the tricast had ended, there had been a fight. One man had been killed. Two others, refusing to believe the tricast, had fled with their Valerian leader.

After the press conference ended, Radcliff insisted to Greg-son that he was not concerned over the incident of misdirected human indignation. Perhaps, he admitted, the initial reaction had been too extreme. But at least it showed no lack of righteous belligerence.

Tuesday's expos£ had one unanticipated result hi Manhattan. Thousands crowded East Avenue and the shores of the river, determined that the headquarters which was directing the counteroffensive against the Valerians would not again come under assault by an enemy

cell.

This development, of course, simplified Gregson's newly assigned duties as officer-in-charge of the Secretariat Building's defenses. And he found time both on that Tuesday and Wednesday to place comviewer calls through to Helen. He wasn't surprised that on each occasion she appeared somewhat reluctant to let the matter of the press conference enter their conversation.

And, solicitous of the concern that threaded her normally attractive features, he did not push her. For he couldn't know the exact circumstances that would trigger the conditioned reflex which would transform her into a raving defender of the aliens.

Wednesday afternoon Radcliff left for Montreal, where a special detail of Guardsmen, operating on leads provided by local Canadians, had smashed a cell and broad-beamed two Valerians.

Before leaving, he smiled and told Gregson, "We appear to have them on the run finally. Thanks to you, we know where to look. You've earned a vacation. Delegate your authority to a subordinate. Report in occasionally, but don't come back until you've had a good rest"

\* \* \*

It was under these circumstances that Gregson, late that Thanksgiving Eve, verticaled down to the farm's bull's-eye and found Bill waiting in the tractor-utility truck. Driving wind, sweeping out of the northwest, tunneled through the

SO

TLTFs open cab and Forsythe zippered up his jacket, staring blindly toward the landing target.

"Greg? That *is* you, isn't it?" he called out uncertainly as he gripped the steering wheel.

Assuring him it was, Gregson approached and said, "Move over. I'll take us back to the house. Helen drive the TUT out here for you?"

"Figured that's about what you'd say. No, she didn't Maybe I'll never get a license. But they can't stop me from chauffeuring myself around my own farm. Hop in."

Dubious, Gregson climbed into the right-hand side of the cab and studied the other's face. There were both pride and determination in those features, capped by a profusion of grizzled hair which whipped about in defiance of the cold wind that assaulted it. Forsythe, set upon doing most of the things he had done before the accident, was apparently ready to make no concessions to his blindness.

He backed around, then drove off, obviously unconcerned over the fact that he had no apparent way of knowing when to turn.

"Valerians, eh?" he mused aloud. "Figured all along there was something to your brother's reports from the *Nina*. Guess almost everybody did. But who'd ever think of looking in places like this?"

"I suppose that's the way the aliens reasoned it out too."

Forsythe's arm shot up in the air outside the cab. As the TUT moved forward, his hand, closing in at an obtuse angle, intercepted a cable strung from one pole to another. So *that*, Gregson saw, was how he did it. If he drifted off course, he merely maneuvered until his fingers touched wire again.

"Should've been around last night," Forsythe went on. "Formed a motorcade in Stroudsburg; drove over here, and burned down Wilson's Lodge and all the woods around it"

Gregson watched the TUT approach the post on which its guidance cable was anchored and wondered how collision would be averted. Then he saw the knot in the wire just as the other's upraised hand encountered it.

They veered sharply to the right, skirting the barn, and bore ahead until Forsythe's groping fingers located another cable, stretched out toward the house.

"How's Helen?" Gregson asked.

"Don't know. Too quiet. And nervous. Maybe she's afraid of this Valorian stuff. Heard her up walking around last night 'til after dawn."

Ten yards from the back door, he reached another knot in the wire and eased on the brakes. "Well?"

But Gregson was wondering whether his mere mentioning of the knowledge that she had had something to do with the Wilson Lodge cell, together with his identity as a Security Bureau agent, would be enough to throw Helen into a violent fit of conditioned behavior.

"Well?" Forsythe repeated, proudly fondling the wheel.

"Good job," Gregson said, but without enthusiasm. "You must have been practicing a long time."

\* \* \*

Forsythe went to bed early after supper, while Gregson stoked the open hearth fire in the living room and settled down before it with a brandy. In the kitchen, Helen busied herself with preliminary preparations for the next day's Thanksgiving meal.

He was there but a few minutes, however, when she appeared in the doorway, her eyes casting about indecisively. She came and sat beside him on the divan and the fire's reflections, playing upon her gossamer flaxen hair, crowned her head with a crimson halo.

Gregson rose, placed his brandy on the table and unobtrusively opened his self-injection kit in case she would need precipitate quietening. He couldn't delay the confrontation any longer.

As he hesitated, though, she stared into the flames and said, "Greg-about that cell at the hunting lodge. I... You didn't get all the cell members in that raid."

He waited, hopeful that she would remain rational as long as it didn't appear he was trying to force information out of her.

"There was someone else-hidden in the attic. He was supposed to be on lookout while Kavorba slept. He ..."

"Kavorba?"

"Kavorba was the Valorian leader of the cell. The man in the attic remained hidden when the Guardsmen attacked. Later-just before he left Pennsylvania-he said Kavorba mentioned me in front of you. And I knew you must have realized I was-a member of that cell too."

Suddenly she was crying into her hands and Gregson knew now there would be no need for the hypodermic. He made her drink the brandy and she told him how she had been contacted by the cell more than a month earlier, how Enos

Cromley and the Valerian had played upon her fears as a means of using her to get through to Gregson.

Cromley had passed Forsythe's place frequently and had stopped often to talk with her in the fields or out in the yard. At first, she was amused by the man's aliens-among-us obsession. She had even laughed when he warned her that the Security Bureau was the only force preventing the Valerians from helping Earth and that Gregson was in danger because he worked for the bureau.

"I didn't know then," she explained, still trembling, "that they regarded me as a means, of reaching you. I suppose they wanted to get their hands on someone from the bureau."

"Where did you meet the Valerian?"

Helen had been walking in the woods behind the farm when she encountered Cromley and Kavorba. They tried to pierce her shield of amused incredulity and convince her that the latter was an alien.

"He was so persuasive. Most of what he said didn't make sense. But he was so sincere-and so tired and helpless and troubled."

"What were some of the things he told you?" "That they wanted to save Earth." The salvation gimmick again. "From the Screemies?" She nodded. "But more so from the Security Bureau-before the bureau could destroy them, and us too." "And you believed him?"

"Oh, Greg! I didn't know, until yesterday's tricast, how they operated; that they could confuse and persuade, make you believe things that aren't true. At one point Kavorba even told me the Screemies weren't a disease at all, but another means of perception." "A... what?"

"A sixth sense. A new way of seeing things. He said the Screemies were something we'd all go through eventually." "It didn't occur to you that he might be lying?" She shook her head in a gesture of self-derision. "He *showed* me. He said he was . . . hyperperceptive, but that he couldn't use the faculty very well here. He told me what I was thinking. He said that if I scratched the ground where I was standing I would find a root, forking twice within six inches. But I didn't know he could make me see things that aren't there."

\* \* \*

She began sobbing once more and he poured her another 53 snifter of brandy, then held her close against him until she quieted.

"You say they wanted to reach *me*?"

"Yes. They said they needed bureau personnel with them."

"And you agreed to deliver me?"

"More for your own good than for theirs. You see, they had convinced me that they were going to destroy the bureau. And always their actions were for the same, unvarying purpose-to save the world."

"So you arranged to get me over here."

Again, she nodded. "Uncle Bill's accident in the shower was the first opportunity I had."

"You *knew* he hadn't gone Screemie?"

"That's right. Between shouts of pain, his oaths were too coherent for that. So I put in that frantic call over the corn-viewer. Kavorba planned to contact you the day after you arrived. But it never occurred to me that you might already know about the cell."

She lifted her head from his shoulder and frowned up at his pensive silence.

"So," he said, "you pretended you were suddenly interested in marrying me."

"Oh no. They didn't make me think *that*. I decided it weeks before. But when they told me about the danger you were in, I was all the more determined to make you quit."

She stared into the embers of the dying fire. "And then-i last Friday-when you let me believe there was someone else -I didn't know what to do. Besides that, you seemed so dedicated to the bureau that I knew you would never leave it."

"There wasn't, isn't anybody else," he said, firming his grip on her shoulder.

"I know that now. The tricast explained everything-how I was tricked and deluded into a sense of loyalty to the Valo-rians, how important your work is, how you'll have to keep on with it until all the cells are destroyed."

He simply remained silent, letting her believe that his duties were the only barrier between them, pretending even to himself that the so-close threat of the Screemies didn't exist.

"Did you find out anything else about what the cells are supposed to do?" he asked.

"The important thing now, as I understand it, is to expand and consolidate their position. Oh, of course I knew there were the aggressive cells that had finally armed themselves

54

enough to start attacking bureau outposts. But the rest of us was just starting to organize."

It was apparent that Helen, even though her experiences with the cell had been limited, could provide vital information on the aliens' plans. But how to place that information in the proper hands without implicating her?

"I suppose the bureau will get around to me eventually," she said distantly.

"Maybe not. We're filling the quarantine compound with prisoners. We won't be able to question all of them."

"I'll be ready when they come," she said softly.

But they *wouldn't* come, Gregson promised himself. After all, he should be entitled to

some privileges. Radcliff would understand when he explained.

\* \* \*

The next morning Gregson walked into a kitchen delightfully provocative in its savory redolence. Helen, refreshingly composed in contrast to the distress she had shown the night before, wagged a ladle in his face and said, "No breakfast for late risers."

But, basting the turkey, she relented. "Of course, we might scrape up enough dressing for, say, half a sandwich."

He stood by the door, basking in the warmth of the kitchen and squinting against the glare of brilliant sunlight on a newly-laid mantle of snow. Humming a tune, she spread the dressing and bent the bread back upon itself. It had been ages since he'd seen her so pleasantly disposed. She wore snug snow slacks and the same heavy-knit red sweater whose collar flared up like petals to call attention to naturally rouged cheeks and large, soft eyes.

"And that," she said, handing him the half sandwich, "will have to hold you until twelve."

Until twelve. Another couple of hours and he would have shown Lady Sheffington up for a fraud. "I wouldn't go counting on no turkey dinner," she had said. But, then, hadn't Wellford also imagined he had disproved the prophecy?

"If you were an early riser," Helen went on facetiously, "you might have helped me this morning with my snowman out by the barn. Care to inspect it?"

Outside, he advanced on the grotesque, glistening construction, surveying its leering face. As he stood there, a soggy snowball squashed against the back of his head and, when he turned, Helen let a second fly.

He grabbed for her, but she twisted from his reach and

scooped up another handful of snow. But before she could ball it, he tackled her above the knees and sent her nailing into a drift.

His momentum carried him forward and he stumbled and fell on top of her. He trapped her squirming body beneath him and she laughed and twisted her head frenziedly.

Snow silvered her hair. Sunlight washed down on her face, deepening the azure of her eyes. Her teeth, exposed behind moist lips, were fascinating in their pure whiteness. She was motionless beneath him now and frivolity had fled her expression. Still pinning her wrists, he kissed her.

It was a moment before he remembered he hadn't wanted anything like this to happen. He sat up and ran a hand through his hair. "I . . ."

But there was no chance to complete the thought. The sun itself, blazing in all its vehemence, exploded hi his skull. It was an awful, wrenching agony that seared every neuron, fused every synapse, ruptured each cell wall.

He was aware somehow of his own coarse shouts of terror and anguish, while he sensed in all his desperation that this was not just another sporadic seizure-that the Screamies in their entirety, in their final and permanent fury, had descended upon him.

The prick of the hypodermic needle and the stridency of its siren went unnoticed among the merciless excruciations.

56

*interlude*

*Against a backdrop of galactic brilliance, the Valorian observation ship Starfarer lay to in interstellar space, her endless curving corridors and vast compartments obscured by their own sepulchral darkness. It was an eternal blackness broken only by thermionic emission emanating from various control instruments.*

*Whatever light was accidentally generated aboard the vessel came as a tolerable by-product of raultronic processes, just as noise was a necessary consequence of machinery. Incandescent or fluorescent fixtures to illuminate the interior of the Starfarer would have been as wasteful and incongruous as use of sound-producing apparatus by humans to help them "hear their way" about one of their own ships.*

*Thus did Mission Leader Lanurk think in terms of analogies as he paced the polished*



deck of his conference compartment.

He listened to the rault generators ("light casters" would be the nearest human equivalent, since comprehension of the concept would be limited by their meager five senses) as the great dynamos labored to hold back the stygumness (which the Earthmen would probably call a "sort of metaphysical darkness"). But here, in this position in space, the Stygumbra (and how could you explain that to an Earthman?) was of awful intensity and he was afraid.

Indeed, how could you go about explaining the Stygumbra 57

to a human? First, you would have to tell about Chandeen, that magnificent concentration of cosmic forces at Galactic Center. You might say that Chandeen hyperradiated all the natural rault which made zylphing possible. But here you would have to elucidate that "rault" existed in the same relationship to "zylphing" as did "light" to "seeing."

Then you would tell him about the Stygum Field near the center of the Galaxy-a counterforce capable of blocking off all rault emanations and throwing into impenetrable raultless-ness everything that lay beyond it-as far out as the galactic rim. And you would say that, in the dread Stygumbra, no one could zylph-not even a Valorian.

Lanurk prided himself over having put it in terms which an Earthman might appreciate. Then he returned to his apprehensions.

Here, on the very fringe of the Stygumbra, fear imparted an almost palpable tremor to his hearts. He imagined he felt much the same stifling insecurity an Earthman would experience on standing at the edge of a yawning abyss in the floor of a dimly-lighted cave. Here, Lanurk drew little comfort from Chandeen, rising like a raultburst of reassurance over the edge of the cancerous Stygum Field.

The stygumness was so dense that he could hardly zylph the cerebations of Evaller and Fuscan, who were awaiting the strategy session. Why, he could scarcely zylph the soft spatter of visible and hard radiation against the hull of the Starfarer. They must be drifting farther into the Stygumbra!

No, Lanurk, he zylphed Evaller's thought, The anchor holds. But we've had to turn down the rault generators to prevent overheating.

Through scores of bulkheads Lanurk sensed the wrongness of the dynamos. Their coils were charred from sustained peak voltage. Anxiously, he conveyed the order to pull farther out of the Stygumbra lest they be marooned without any rault at all.

The drive system throbbed to life and the Starfarer got under way.

Lanurk seated himself at the head of the table. Speaking orally, too, he said, "We can readily zylph that things have not gone well with our expedition. We've heard no word from them at all. It's obvious something must have happened to their communications gear."

"Perhaps we should dispatch another party," Fuscan suggested.

SB

Lanurk had unconsciously zylphed in on the microstruc-ture of the table's surface, fascinated by one of the lignocellu-lose molecules that was being dislodged from its lattice by the assault of air particles. There was another impact. And another. Then it was free.

He resumed oral conversation. "No, I don't think we should place another party at the mercy of those savages- not at the moment."

"Should we try to maneuver into orbit around their world?" Evaller asked.

"Great, rault-shedding Chandeen-no!" whispered Fuscan.

Lanurk agreed with the latter. "It would be insane to take the Starfarer into that infernal Stygumbra. Perhaps we should consider another pod drop."

"That would take time," Evaller pointed out, "-training, language lessons, digital surgery. And . . ."

*Had Lanurk not been concentrating on the conference, he might have zylphed the trouble. But, as it was, there had been no warning whatever when, in the next moment, all the rault generators shorted out.*

*In the insufferable raultlessness, Lanurk was stricken with an intense fear. God, it was so stygum! And he had only his eyes!*

59

*chapter vii*

The Screamies were a brutal assault that seared the brain, cleaved the soul, trapped the spirit on the brink of a vast chasm of insanity. For Gregson, time was a flow of terror interrupted only by the hypodermic that came, oh, so seldom and brought only token relief.

The fires of the Screamies were neither radiant nor incandescent. Yet, without heat, they scorched the mind, blinded the senses with a fierce light that could be measured in neither wave length nor magnitude.

It was as though a fissure had opened into his brain to admit all the hallucinatory terror and pain ever spawned in a deranged universe. At times his entire being seemed to expand vertiginously through unknown dimensions to encompass all time and space, while the distant, fiery stars burned like embers into the weft of his soul. And his spirit appeared to wander among bewildering surroundings where he sensed, rather than saw, the orderly arrangement of contented forces humming indifferently in their inscrutable latticeworks of design and purpose.

Once he was lucid long enough to ask the date. The nurse's appalling disclosure that he had gone Screemie more than a year earlier sent him plunging into a new abyss of despair and brought the Screamies back upon him in all their vehemence.

Soon thereafter he realized it was also his lot to share the

60

writhing anguish of the other Screamers. For there were times when his whole consciousness seemed to encompass all the suffering and terror that arose about him like a stifling miasma. In this strange, false perception, each physical feature of the Screamer institute was grotesquely distorted, as though reflected in an incredibly warped mirror.

Without seeing, but as though through some incomprehensible means of *knowing*, he sensed the walls of his sprawling ward-ominously restraining but unbelievably small and insignificant. The illusional beds cried out shamefully of a wrongness which suggested that not even the least part of any one of them could be contained within the entire institute. And the Screamers themselves were monstrous entities that glowed invisibly but gave no implication of form and crowded one another out to the farthest infinity.

With them Gregson seemed to share a strange familiarity -as though they all existed within the finite boundaries of his mind. And he participated in their agony, and they in his -until the experiences were overwhelming in their brutality and invariably sent him plunging mercifully into an abyss of unconsciousness.

It was after one such occasion that, utterly crushed beneath bitter helplessness, he dedicated himself to the only possible release-suicide.

Three hours later, perhaps, he finally squirmed out of the straps that held him in bed. All the while he cringed before the demoralizing possibility that he would be engulfed in the throes of another seizure before he could accomplish his purpose.

Somehow he managed to haul himself off the floor, where he had fallen. And he stood there-debilitated and confused, almost unable to recall the simple movements of walking. Suddenly nauseated, he clung to the bedstead, retching and shuddering.

Then he shoved off, summoning infinite effort in order to place one trembling foot in front of the other. Far in the distance, the nearest window mockingly beckoned.

Plodding and weaving from one bedstead to the next, he advanced toward his taunting objective. An eternity later, he found himself only a few yards away, but too exhausted to continue. Hoarse Screamer cries welled all about him, however, becoming a frightening stimulus that drove him onward.

Rational shouts of warning and the sound of footsteps racing down the aisle were like the splashing of cold water upon 61

his face and he knew the attendant had come back. But it was not the sudden challenge to his suicide that galvanized him into effort beyond physical capacity. Rather, it was the instant return of all the horrible hallucinatory agonies of the plague.

The ward whirled about him. All the beds and the Screamers confined in them seemed to implode upon his senses, and driven by his own desperate shouts, he lunged across the remaining distance and hurled himself through the window.

But he had no way of knowing beforehand that his ward was on the ground floor and that his plunge would land him in soft shrubbery after a drop of only a few feet

\* \* \*

When next he was conscious it was winter and through the same window, he could see the bare branches of a tree veined with the silver of snow and wavering before a bitter wind. Beyond loomed a huge, new wing that had been added to the Monroe County Isolation Institute.

"Greg." The voice, anxious and soft, was scarcely audible above the screams that were inseparable from the basic nature of the ward.

He turned his head and saw Helen standing there, trying bravely to hide her concern. But her mere presence, the strong and competent manner in which she bore herself, the blush of health and outdoor exposure upon her high-boned cheeks, all silently mocked Gregson's own wasting life.

"You're going to make it, Greg!" she promised, touching his shoulder.

But he shrank away, embarrassed by the gauntness which pulled at his face.

"We'll be waiting," she said. "Bill has faith in you too. He *knows* you're going to come through all right."

He tried to answer, but discovered, only then, that months of shouting had left him voiceless. And he was seized with another convulsion. He clamped his eyes shut and his limbs stiffened in an attitude of rigid resistance so she might not know of the attack. But rasping sounds tore from his throat as he cringed before the inner rivers of fire.

He plunged into a phantasmagoric gulf in which he imagined himself utterly lost among all the grotesque things of his fancy. And somehow he was aware of Helen, now one of the formless entities about and within him, being led away. Again -the hallucination of knowing without seeing or hearing.

62

For his eyes were still shut and his ears were open only to the frantic shrieks of the other Screamers.

Abruptly, a huge, ominous thing took unseen shape in the ebon brilliance of Oregon's internal universe, bringing a horrible sense of alarm, but at the same time a wave of relief. Then he recognized the new object as a hypodermic syringe and welcomed its thrust into his arm.

In early February, 1999, he experienced three hours of wakefulness without a Screamer attack. On the twenty-fifth and again on the twenty-seventh, he was rational for an entire evening. In early March, there was a whole day during which his mind was spared the fiery assault of invisible light, savage hallucinations, terrifying disorientation. At the end of the month he strung together, like beads on a rosary of hope, three horror-free days.

The next morning his ward supervisor asked, "Want a scenery change?"

Gregson only stared at him, not comprehending.

"You're getting along in withdrawal now," the man said.

"But," Gregson rasped, "I don't feel like I'm being cured."

"There *is* no cure. Return to normal life depends upon your ability to beat the attacks down by the sheer force of will power. You are showing that ability. We've curbed your injections. Almost on guts alone you're fending off most of the seizures."

The new ward was smaller. Through its broad windows he could gaze out upon a vista

of towering new additions to the institute. Beyond, fields were green with the life of spring.

No one screamed here. Nor were injections administered. But each patient was a brooding, silent island of isolation who fought off his occasional attacks alone, without crying out in agony.

Eventually Gregson remembered that even the majority of those Screamers who recovered sufficiently to be withdrawn from sedation ended up as suicides. And he could understand why. A life dedicated only to endless, intense concentration on warding off the next Screamie seizure could hardly be worth living.

Suddenly, in early June, he was released.

\* \* \*

Helen met him at the entrance and helped him into the car. Soon the immense institute disappeared behind a range of hills as they bore southward toward Forsythe's farm.

She was purposely effusive, chatting on inconsequential 63

subjects-the two men Bill had hired on a part-time basis to help with planting, this lovely spring weather, how she and her uncle would see that he regained all the weight he had lost.

Her ebullience was undulled by his withdrawn concentration on not having a Screamie attack in front of her.

At the farm, Forsythe helped him from the car and into the house. Helen went off to warm the coffee, while he dropped listlessly into an upholstered chair and was conscious of the sharp, bony knots that his elbows and knees made under the material of his suit.

"I feel so out of touch," he said, exhausted, "-as though I've stood still for two whole years while everything passed me by."

"We'll reorient you," Forsythe assured.

"At the institute, they wouldn't tell us about what was going on outside. Guess I have a lot to catch up on."

"Quite a lot. But it'll all come to you in due time."

"The Valorians?"

"Pshaw! All over with-almost, anyway. At least that's one thing we don't have to worry about any more."

All over with-*just like that!* Gregson thought. Gone, as though by the light brush of a hand. But, of course, two years had been a long time.

"Took almost a year," Forsythe went on, staring un-seeingly ahead. "But we rooted 'em out. Oh, there're a few cells left. But the minute any of 'em pop their heads up, we lower the boom."

Helen returned with the coffee, but had to stir Gregson's when she saw that he was trembling too much to manage the spoon.

"On the other hand," Forsythe said, "there's the economic situation. On top of having our treasury drained to stamp out the Valerian threat, the Security Bureau has this new crash research project under way that . . ."

Helen frowned at her uncle, but said lightly, "I don't think Greg is up to listening to the world's woes."

"I was just getting around to the good part."

"Research on what?" Gregson asked, almost indifferently.

"The Screamies."

Gregson sank dismally into the chair.

Helen apparently understood that he should be spared any suggestion of the Screamies. But there was no way she could warn her uncle without being obvious.

64

"Bureau's all excited over a research breakthrough," Forsythe pushed on cheerfully.

"They don't think the disease's organic at all-but a condition caused by something in the region of space the Solar System's going through. Some sort of radiation that's supposed to affect the mind directly."

"Bill," Helen broke in tactfully as perspiration began to appear on Gregson's forehead, "I

think I left the fire on under the coffee. Will you check it please?"

"Eh? What's that? Oh-of course." He shuffled out chuckling to himself, apparently convinced he had merely been called upon to accommodate the couple's desire to be alone.

But Gregson had been oblivious to the exchange between the two as he reeled on the edge of a seizure.

Helen knelt before him and took his hands between hers. "Everything's going to be just like it was two years ago, darling," she assured. "Only much better."

He looked down at the promise that glowed on her face, drawing courage from her sincerity, and his mind closed itself against the horrible ravages that had come so close.

\* \* \*

Over the weeks that stretched into mid-July, Helen was a constant and devoted attendant, forcing upon him calorie-laden sweets and large amounts of rich food. Never did she appear discouraged by the silence he occasionally displayed whenever he withdrew into himself to muster his resistance against the next seizure.

Of course the attacks came despite his intense resolution -but with less frequency. And they were generally limited to those quiet moments just before falling asleep or after awakening. On these occasions, his mind was hurled open, as though by a violent wind, and exposed once more to blinding, dazzling torment almost as fierce as during his first Scream-ie assault.

Generally, though, not much was to be seen of Forsythe. He appeared at times to direct the two men who drove out several mornings a week to help with the crops. But, for the most part, he stayed to himself, even to the extent of taking meals in his room.

At first, Gregson hardly noticed Bill's preference for solitude. And, when he had become sufficiently observant to detect the anomalous behavior, he charged it off to a grudging decision on the old man's part to avoid complicating the recovery of his guest

But with returning strength came increasing attention to 65 details and Gregson was eventually able to note that Helen, too, seemed to be under some sort of strain.

He was reluctant to discuss it with her at first. And, when he finally did, it was during another stroll in the pasture where they had walked together almost two years earlier.

Underneath the same tree against which she had leaned then, he came sharply to the point of concern.

"What's wrong with Bill? Why's he staying to himself?"

He thought he caught a flicker of uncertainty on her face before she smiled and said, "Bill's fine. He may be sulking a bit, perhaps. I told him to stay out from under your feet."

But Gregson couldn't dismiss the impression that there was considerable concern beneath her bland expression. "I'm no longer the little fellow who's always getting sand kicked in his face at the beach. Put on thirty pounds in the last six weeks. Haven't had a Screamie attack in the last four. See? I can even talk about them now. In other words-you don't have to hide anything."

It seemed she *was* ready to tell him something. But she simply laughed and said, "Only thing I'm hiding, is plum pudding with rum sauce for supper."

She leaned back against the tree, just as she had done so long ago, and the pleasant warmth of this July Saturday seemed to bring a special softness to her eyes.

No longer was he emaciated and hollow-eyed, as he had been on leaving the institute. No longer did he feel presumptuous in even touching her.

But when he pinned her against the bark and kissed her, she responded coolly and turned her face aside almost immediately.

"Turnabout on top of turnabout," he observed, puzzled. "Two years ago you accepted, right here on this spot."

Distantly, she said, "And you rejected."

"And now it's your turn again?"

She bit her lip and nodded.

"But I don't understand. I'm not going back to the bureau."

"The bureau wasn't the only thing between us then, was it?" she asked thoughtfully. "You remembered Philip, didn't you? And you didn't want me to have another prospective husband go Screemie."

He couldn't deny it.

Her eyes focused on the distance. "First there was Philip. And then you. And now . . ."

66

"And now?"

She shrugged. "I don't want to take the chance."

"I've *been* through the barrier!"

"But / haven't. You ever think what it might be like-having children under plague conditions? God, it would be awful going Screemie while you're pregnant. Or having your own child screech himself to death in your arms."

Against both logic and emotion he was powerless to argue.

\* \* \*

The hopper, heralded by the roar of its jets, swooped low over the hedgerow, zoomed back into the sky to position itself over the bull's-eye, then verticalled swiftly down.

Helen welcomed the interruption. "A visitor! Come on, I'll race you back to the landing area!"

He was proud of the fact that he beat her by half a block as he drew up in front of the lean young man with the Security Bureau Medical Corps arm band who stood beside the craft.

"You Arthur Gregson?" the doctor asked.

When Gregson nodded, he added, "How're you feeling? All right, I'd say, judging from that furlong sprint. I'm Horace Miles."

Gregson introduced Helen and asked, "You on bureau business?"

"I'm supposed to give you a physical. But from what I've seen so far, it'll be superficial. Any trouble with Screemie seizures?"

"Not in over a month. Why?"

"Hm-m-m." Miles accompanied them toward the house. "De-isolation six weeks ago, and no relapses over the last four. Full recovery response, I'd say. Radcliff will be glad to hear that."

"I hadn't planned on going back to the bureau. I don't owe them anything."

"Of course not," Miles readily agreed. "You did more than your share during the initial Valerian operations. But Radcliff asked me to pass on this message: The work you, and only you, can do now will be even more vital than what you've already done."

"What is it?"

"Can't say. I'm just an MD entrusted with a message. But I hear tell you're needed to help bring an end to the Screemies. Radcliff expects to see you at his office Monday."

An hour later, after they had seen Miles off at the bull's-67 eye, Helen said dejectedly, "I suppose you'll be leaving Monday."

"I wouldn't be endowed with human curiosity if I didn't And if I can stop just a single person from going through what I did, that trip will be worth the effort"

She watched the craft disappear over the hedgerow, then looked down at her hands. "I wasn't going to tell you this- not now. I was going to pick a time when I could be sure there'd be no chance of a relapse. But, since you're leaving day after tomorrow . . ."

He seized her shoulders. "What is it, Helen?"

"I know why Bill's so quiet and withdrawn, why he's secluded most of the time. I found a supply of sedative vials in his room."

"You mean . . . ?"

"Quietly, without complaining, without even uttering a sound, he's going Screemie."

68

*chapter viii*

It wasn't until Sunday night, under pressure of Monday morning's departure, that Gregson decided he could no longer put off his confrontation with Forsythe.

There was no doubt that Bill was doggedly trying to fight off the disease. That morning Gregson had watched from the kitchen while Forsythe had leaned against the barn and suddenly lowered his face into his hands, shuddering violently. It was obvious, then, that the nuclear fires of hell were raging in his brain.

Still, all that day, Gregson had procrastinated, not knowing how to approach him on the subject. And it wasn't until late in the evening that Helen led him upstairs and into Forsythe's room.

She turned on the table light, gently folded back the covers and eased the sleeve of Forsythe's nightshirt up along his arm, exposing an area of livid flesh mottled with hypodermic punctures.

"He's been injecting himself with a diluted solution for weeks!" she exclaimed.

Forsythe snorted himself awake. "Greg? Helen?"

"Yes, Bill-Helen and I are here."

"Then you know. But I don't suppose I had much of a chance of hiding it, did I?"

"I'm going to call the Pickup Squad."

Forsythe reached for his robe. "Not until I start screaming 69 and can't stop. Until now, though, I've been doing all right"

"I thought I was too," Gregson reminded. "But the roof caved in on my seventh attack."

"Seventh? Hell, I've had seventy. Still going strong." Forsythe sat on the edge of the bed. "Figure you have to learn' how to turn the stuff on and off before you can see what it's all about."

"And what do you *suppose* it's all about?"

"Helen told you, and then me-two years ago. A sixth sense."

"I didn't say that," Helen protested. "I just said that talking about a sixth sense was one of the tricks Kavorba used to confuse me."

"And I don't believe he was trying to confuse you. I say he was just trying to tell you, in terms he could only hope you would understand, what the Screemies *really* are."

"And what's that?" Gregson asked.

"As I said, something basic, natural-a new form of perception."

Gregson wondered whether the other's mind had been affected by his resistance to the disease.

"Hell," Forsythe went on, "the Security Bureau itself just admitted the plague might be caused by 'radiation from space.'"

"But bombardment of the brain by some sort of radiation is a long way from a new form of perception."

"Is it?" Forsythe laughed dryly. "What is *any* form of perception except excitation of a specially sensitive area?"

\* \* \*

Gregson saw now that he could readily discount everything the old man was saying, for Forsythe had evidently convinced himself the Screemies were something to be accommodated.

Helen dropped into a chair. "You mean you're going through all this just because of what that Valorian told me two years ago?"

Forsythe shook his head vigorously. "For reasons of my own. Consider an entke world that's never known light, even though its inhabitants all have eyes. Let's take the case of Mr. X. He's gotten along on four senses. But he turns a corner and somebody throws a hundred-candlepower beam in his face. What do you suppose happens?"

"I ... I don't know," Helen said. "I suppose it frightens him."

70

"It *scares living hell* out of him! Unless he can learn to dose his eyes and keep them

shut against this strange, roaring, burning silence, he'll go insane, die of terror or kill himself."

Gregson gripped the bedstead. "Really, Bill—we're not interested in your attempt to explain the plague. We're just determined to see you get the proper attention."

"That's right, Bill," Helen said earnestly.

"But I'm going to be all right! I just want more time to experiment. Don't you understand? I can explain so many things now!"

Helen shook her head. "You're only rationalizing. Now that you've gotten the Screamies, you're trying to convince yourself they aren't all that bad."

Forsythe snorted. "Don't drag out your psychiatric couch for me, young lady. What's the main symptom of a Screemie seizure, besides intense pain?"

When there was no answer, he supplied his own: "Hallucinations. And isn't it odd that, sooner or later, you begin imagining those hallucinations are grotesque, twisted representations of the things about you?"

"Bill," Gregson pleaded, "let me call the isolation institute."

"Don't you understand?" the other went on, undiscouraged. "That's the way it would *have to be* if you were bumping heads with a new form of perception? At first you wouldn't recognize your surroundings as perceived through a new sense. Take a congenitally blind person who suddenly starts seeing. He'd have to learn to identify a waterfall by the way it looks, rather than by the way it sounds."

Gregson could see there was no hope of quietening him now.

"Greg!" the other said tensely. "I can even tell you what the sixth sense will be Eke! Look at your hands. You can see a wealth of detail—lines and creases, hair, coloration, the whorls of your fingertips. That's infinitely more than you would perceive through feeling the hand, or 'listening' to it with a bat's sonar system.

"Now, can't you imagine how much more refined a perception our sixth sense would permit? It would be as superior to seeing as seeing is to hearing or feeling. We'd be aware of infinitesimal detail, of special relationships between things, perhaps even of cosmic and microcosmic principles that we can't begin to understand now." 71

Gregson looked down at his hands finally. But not because Forsythe had asked him to. Rather, it was an expression of sympathetic understanding. For now he knew that Bill desperately *wanted* the Screamies to be a new means of perception, because he needed *something* to compensate for his insufferable blindness.

"Think what it would mean in terms of communication," the old man entreated. "Merely by exchanging glances, you and Helen know a lot about what each other is thinking. When we can interpret sixth-sense impressions, we might 'see' deep into one another's thoughts!"

He evoked only an impatient sigh from Helen.

But he continued, almost desperately, "It would be like *seeing* into the future! If a sighted person in a world of the blind sees robbers lying in ambush ahead, he can 'predict' he'll be waylaid when he reaches the spot!"

In the ensuing silence, he called out hopefully, "Greg?"

"Over here, Bill," Gregson said compassionately after a while.

"You said that woman in London accurately *predicted* your seizure. Doesn't that suggest anything at all—that she might have been using some of her sixth-sense powers without even realizing it?"

Gregson knew then that Forsythe had built his whole case on that one coincidence. "Bill, you've got a head start toward being the one in every thousand who survives the Screamies. I showed the same ability to fight off the initial attacks. And I made it safely over the barrier. You've got to let us bring you to the institute."

"Only way you'll take me there," the other said adamantly, "is kicking and screaming—literally."

Later that night, while Helen served Gregson coffee in the kitchen, she asked, "What are we going to do?"



"I don't know. I wouldn't have wanted anyone dragging me to an institute against my wishes."

"But it's more than that! He's *obsessed* with the idea of a sixth sense!"

"Not really obsessed. It's just something for him to cling to at the moment."

"You're going to New York tomorrow?"

"I have to."

"What am I going to do?"

"Just stand by with a sedation kit until I get back."

Her face brightened. "How long will that be?"

72

"Right away. I'm telling the bureau I can't go back to work for them no matter what the job is."

\* \* \*

From the window of Security Bureau Director Weldon Radcliff's outer office in the Secretariat Building, Manhattan impressed Gregson as not having changed appreciably during the two years of his absence.

Apparently no additional headway had been made in reconstruction. Those buildings which had stood gaunt and gutted against the skyline in 1997 were, for the most part, still gaunt and gutted. There were fewer persons in the streets below and, proportionately, less traffic.

But now there were the ululations of many hypodermic sirens, all blending into an ominous undertone, which was a derisive and relentless reminder of the horror that lurked everywhere.

He turned his attention to a commotion at the corner of East Avenue and Forty-Second Street, where a line of pickets, bearing crudely lettered placards, had come marching into view. Emblazoned in bright red and deep black characters, the posters were legible even from Gregson's distance:

"seebu-drain on our resources!" "seebu usurps national power!"

"representation dead!"

"billions down the drain-no screamie cure!" "why an international guard-with no alien threat?"

"dissolve the bureau!" "national government first!"

Gregson watched an Army truck jolt to a halt at the corner and disgorge a contingent of United States Militia. Clad in ill-fitting and occasionally torn fatigues, the soldiers vividly contrasted the flawlessly uniformed Guardsmen who protected the Secretariat Building.

Adjusting masks, the militiamen hurled tear bombs, then began rounding up the demonstrators and herding them into the truck.

A sedate, elderly receptionist called to Gregson from across the room, then ushered him into the office of the director.

Heavy set shoulders hunched low over the desk, Radcliff sat there swiftly signing one form after another.

Gregson approached. But he was altogether unprepared for the jarring *thud* that exploded behind him as the receptionist slammed the door on her way out 73

In the next instant his startled mind, stripped of its defenses, was again laid bare to the scorching, blinding radiance of the Screamies. But he quickly restored his composure and locked out all the horrors of the attack.

Radcliff looked up and smiled. "Don't hold that against Miss Ashley. It was a test. And apparently your control is excellent"

"Thanks," Gregson said stiffly. "I really needed that"

Radcliff came around the desk, hand extended. "Welcome back to the grind. We have plenty of work cut out for you."

"Sorry. But all I'm interested in is a heavy dose of quiet life-and my own problems."

"I think you'll change your mind."

Gregson accepted a chair. "Hear anything about Well-ford?"

"That British agent? The one who went Screemie just before you did? He was released from isolation six months ago."

Then Ken had made it safely through the barrier too! "Where is he? I'd like to get in touch with him."

"If you do, you'd better take along a battalion of Guardsmen and some heavy artillery. He's been collected by one of the remaining Valerian cells. Four months ago, I believe."

Gregson shook his head incredulously. "Not Wellford!"

"Afraid so. That's what put us on to the fact that the aliens would rather condition an ex-Screamer than a pre-Screamer -so they don't have to worry about their puppets becoming plague casualties."

"But I thought the Valorian threat was over."

"It is, for all practical purposes. Oh, there're a few cells here and there. But every time we close in on one, the others scatter. We're changing tactics though. We're going to try for a grand slam-knock them out all at once with nuclear stuff the next time we pin down their locations."

"Of course you're going to get Wellford back first"

"We're working on that now."

"I'd like to get in on it."

"Can't be spared. We need you for something more vital." Radcliff paused, then said tensely, "Greg-I think we can put an end to the Screemies! We may finally have the answer."

"Based on the idea that they're caused by radiation from space?"

The director nodded.

74

He reached into his drawer and placed on the desk top a small metal box equipped with a single, knurled knob. There was a recessed red bulb in its face.

"This," he said, "should prove to be the solution-if its limited effect can be built up sufficiently to give universal coverage."

Gregson bent anxiously forward. "What is it?"

"It's a suppressor. It can cancel out-over a small range- the radiation which has nearly ruined our civilization during the past sixteen years." Radcliff turned the knob and the crimson bulb cast its soft glow into the room.

"I don't feel anything," Gregson said.

"Of course not. But... well, here's a demonstration."

He touched a button on his desk and drapes were drawn across the windows. A panel opened in the wall to his left, unveiling a projector which cast its picture across the room.

The scene was in one of the wards of an isolation institute. Radcliff turned the volume up and his office was filled with desperate, coarse cries as scores of Screamers writhed against their bed straps.

The director himself appeared on the screen and paused to display the same metal box that was now on his desk. He turned its knob and the suppressor's recessed pilot bulb flared into brilliance.

All the patients in the nearest beds instantly ceased struggling, as though a curtain had dropped over their terror and pain. They turned to stare in bewilderment at Radcliff, who was now walking along the aisle.

Their astonishment was no more than that felt by Gregson himself as he watched the incredible demonstration. There *was* a way to stop the Screamies!

As Radcliff proceeded along the rows of beds, it was as though he were the center of a sphere of calm that was washing over the Screamers, releasing them temporarily from their torment. Behind him, the patients were being engulfed once more by their agony.

The director switched off his projector. "What do you say?"

Gregson thought of his two years of isolation, of Forsythe and the millions of others who were following in his wake. "It's *tremendous!* You've got to let everybody know about this!"

Radcliff laughed. "And get ourselves promptly mobbed? So 75 far, we have only a handful of these suppressors. And we haven't fully tested them."

Gregson bent excitedly over the desk. "What can I do? How can I help?"

"You were project engineer in charge of systems aboard Vega Jumpoff Station-right?"

"Up until we abandoned VJO. Then I transferred to SecBu."

"Greg, you're the only man we can find who knows all the station's systems. And Vega Jumpoff is essential to our plans."

"What's VJO got to do with it?"

"We're going to construct a super suppressor-with a range of thousands of miles. In order to get it to operate over that distance, its generating units will have to be somewhat removed from Earth's intense, surface-level magnetogravitic field-somewhere out in space. We've already started reactivating our Space Division to handle the logistics of the job."

"And VJO . . . ?"

"VJO, Greg, is already up there. All we must do is reactivate it and modify the station to accommodate the super suppressor. Then we'll be able to cancel out all the radiation that's causing the Screemies. You with us?"

"I'm ready to shuttle out to the station tomorrow. Hell, today-now!"

RadcliffE grinned. "I'd hoped for such a response. But I'm afraid we can't go about it that directly."

He wrote hurriedly on a note pad, then tore off the sheet and handed it over. "Tomorrow you will report in at this address in Paris, where we're setting up a control point for Operations VJO. You'll get a superficial briefing, I suppose, then be tested as to further qualifications. Then you'll be sent on to Versailles for special training."

"I don't need any training to handle VJO systems. I lived with them for three years."

"Your training will have to do with the radiation we're trying to suppress. You'll find it much stronger twenty-two thousand miles out, you know. If you aren't properly conditioned, you may start fighting your Screemie battles all over again."

7tt

### *chapter ix*

Coming in over the Bois de Vincennes in its approach to New Orly Airport, the Security Bureau Transport plane provided Gregson with his first view of Paris since before '95's Nuclear Exchange. Most of the western half of the city had escaped major damage. But the devastation wreaked by unin-tercepted rockets was all too apparent

To the northeast, beyond Montmartre, there was only gouged, blackened terrain where a multiple warhead had struck. Although the hill itself was almost flat now, Montmartre had at least protected most of the city from holocaust.

Much of the Bois de Vincennes no longer existed. A series of crater lakes, fed by a diverted Seine, had replaced broad areas of forest. The river, as though drawn in fascination towards the lakes, had established a new bed, bypassing the city and leaving only a stagnant ribbon of dark water extending like a slug's trail through the heart of Paris.

The plane landed on a strip obscured by weeds and taxied up to a frame building with a tarpaper roof and identified by a hand-lettered sign: division de la aerotransportation-BUREAU DE LA SURETE-PARIS.

Gregson alighted and headed for the building with the other passengers. In the austere lounge, he found an empty comviewer station-"audio only, no video," the sign said in French-and placed his call through the Security Bureau communications network to Forsythe's farm in Pennsylvania. 77

When Helen's voice came through, he explained that he'd been unable to reach her from New York as a result of line trouble. When she learned where he was, she seemed both surprised and dejected.

"This was something I couldn't walk away from," he apologized. "It's a job only I can do."

Her voice was toneless as she said, "I imagined it would be."

"You don't understand! And I can't go into details. But," he lowered his voice, "-well,

there's a possibility that *within a few weeks* they'll be able to start tearing down the place where I spent my last two years."

Her exuberance came through over the wire. "Oh, Greg! Really?"

"I'll keep in touch as much as I can until then. How's Bill?"

"Stubborn as a mule."

"Don't push him too hard about the institute. I held off two months. Maybe he can stick it out for as long as will be necessary."

\* \* \*

*Dix-sept Rue de la Serenite*, the address on Gregson's slip of paper, was an ancient, though well-preserved apartment building just off Avenue Foch, practically in the shadow of the *Arc de Triomphe*.

Brooding behind its ironwork fence, it looked patronizingly down from its eight-story height upon the quiet courtyard and shaded street below. The antiquity of the section softened the harsh sounds of injection sirens that chorused throughout the rest of the city.

Gregson paid the cab driver and went hesitatingly through the massive gates and on into the building's main entrance.

"*Monsieur veut quelque chose?*" the stern-faced *concierge* demanded.

"I'm Arthur Gregson."

"But of course, Mr. Gregson. Madame Carnot will be found in her eighth-floor suite."

"I'm supposed to be met here by a Miss Karen Rakaar."

"And you will be. Meanwhile, Madame Carnot awaits you." The man indicated a tiny, glass-walled elevator enclosed in the helical coils of a staircase.

That *17 Rue de la Serenite* was no apartment building became clear as the elevator ascended, giving Gregson a view of each level through which it rose. The second floor was an

78

assembly hall. The third and fourth floors were compartment-ed into glass-enclosed cubicles. The next two appeared to be living quarters, with plush carpeting running down narrow corridors.

On the seventh floor, many persons were busy at switchboards. Centrally located, a huge, inner-illuminated Earth was impaled on a shaft extending from floor to ceiling. Reaching out into the room from its equator was a stiff, transparent collar. At the edge of this flange, and positioned above the Atlantic Ocean, was a radiant point flagged with the letters "VJO." It was the same ground control device that had directed Vega Jumpoff Station shuttle operations.

As the elevator continued upward, Gregson pondered the tight secrecy that cloaked this operation and wondered why it was necessary to conceal Ground Control Headquarters behind the false front of an apartment building. Unless the idea was to develop the super suppressor in total obscurity so there would be no false hope for a demoralized world. One day, the Screemies-fierce, relentless and horrible. The next, silence and calm.

On the top floor he was deposited in a hallway that led to the opulence of a richly paneled sitting room, verdant with its profusion of tropical plants and quiet in the sound-muffling lavishness of its carpeting.

"*Entrez, Monsieur Gregson.*"

The quavering voice drifted past delicately-laced French windows, opening on a roof garden whose tiled terrace was splashed with sunlight. He stepped out into a jungle of shrubbery and ivy that clung to wrought-iron trellises after springing from miniature beds of fragrant blossoms. Then his eyes were drawn to the woman on a satin chaise longue near the vine-matted railing.

Like discolored ivory veined with antiquity, the flesh of her exposed forearm seemed merely to be draped over bone. Distorted into talons, her fingers clutched nothing, trembled incessantly. Her hair, thin and white, was conspicuous only in its sparseness.

"Ah yes, *monsieur*," she acknowledged, as though conscious of his thoughts, "I am,

indeed, *une vieille femme*."

Her admission to being an old woman, he decided, carried no regret.

"And what have I to rue, *monsieur*? You regard not a picture of weakness, but one of strength. For I am the most 79

powerful person in the entire world," she said with puerile conceit.

He studied her warily. An old woman, doddering in her senility? Or something more than that? Twice she had seemed to know almost exactly what he was thinking, hadn't she?

She laughed. "More than that I know even what you *are going* to think. Monsieur Forsythe was close to the truth, *vraiment*."

Astonished, he seized her arms. But he had no opportunity to speak.

There was brisk movement beyond a clump of shrubbery and he looked up into the menacing eyes of an International Guardsman with a laserifle. In another roof garden across the courtyard, two more armed Security Bureau men stepped into view. Gregson released the woman and the trio became inconspicuous once more.

Madame Carnot gestured feebly toward a chair. "Seat yourself. Mademoiselle Rakaar will be here soon."

Gregson only stared numbly at the woman. She *was* aware of his thoughts! How else could she know about Bill? And what did she mean by saying Forsythe was close to the truth? Bill had spoken of the Screemies as being a means of *seeing* one another's thoughts. And-

"*Mais non, monsieur*. He insisted it was *not* 'seeing,' did he not?"

Confounded, Gregson muttered, "Bill was right, then?" But, of course he was. For wasn't this frail, childish woman not only verifying, but also demonstrating everything Forsythe had said?

Madame Carnot chuckled, baring stained teeth eroded to the pulp. "*Voild!* You have answered your own question."

"You were a Screamer?"

She nodded and her features assumed a sober cast. "A very long time ago. That much, *monsieur*, we have in common. And now you come to us so that you, too, may learn what powers are available. Very well, I shall try to teach you while we await Mademoiselle Rakaar."

With considerable effort, she raised herself erect and sat on the edge of the chaise longue. "First, *monsieur*, let us welcome the fierce light of the Screemies into our brains. And then perhaps we shall learn that your old friend isn't as mad as you imagined."

Perplexed, he continued staring at the woman.

"Can you not invoke the blinding darkness, the roaring si-  
80

lence, at will?" She chuckled. "Until you learn to do that, you will never be able to *zylph*." *Zylph?* The word had a strangely familiar ring, as though he had heard it somewhere before but couldn't remember in what context.

Madame Carnot closed her eyes. "Very well. Since you know next to nothing at all, I shall take you by the hand. Let us pretend that we have eyes *inside* the head. And now we are opening them-slowly."

Abruptly, the searing, invisible flames burst in on his consciousness and he recoiled from the scorching terror.

"We are *not* afraid," the woman encouraged. "The fire does not harm. Nor does it consume. The flames are but like a pastel crimson sunset over the cliffs of Calais."

At length the nuclear holocaust raging within his brain no longer seemed painful.

"Won, *monsieur*. It is not pain at all. It is something we *desire*-just as a moth is drawn by the light. Let the gentle radiance wash down upon you. Accustom yourself to its softness."

Eyes closed, Gregson became lost in the bewildering sensation. It was as though he were adrift in an infinite field of burning, yet soothingly cool radiance. There was no terror, no anguish. The sensation, he realized, was not optical at all, nor had it anything to do with light.

Vision, he understood now, had merely been the nearest thing to which he could liken the manifestation.

"No, not light," she agreed. "Something above light. A hyper-vision. At the moment, we are zylphing only the super radiance itself. But, come-let us expose ourselves more fully."

\* \* \*

The infinite sea of brilliance began churning and seething, spawning things of unguessable shape and bewildering design -things that suggested their own integrity as objects merely because they were separated one from the other.

But there was no stability of form or permanence of position. Mere hulks of substance-indescribable because they violated all known concepts of shape and materiality.

Were these the things he had accepted as hallucinations during his seizures? Things he had occasionally imagined were grotesque, twisted representations of the objects about him-the Screamers in their beds-a distorted hypodermic needle thrusting toward his arm to bring relief? But what *were* these hallucinations? 81

"They *are* the objects about you, *monsieur*," the woman whispered. "You do not know them because you have never before *zylphed* those objects. You have only seen or heard them. Did not Monsieur Forsythe say that a blind person learning to see would not recognize a waterfall by the way it looks?"

"How do you know what Bill said?" Gregson asked weakly.

"What is said or thought leaves its impression on your brain. And the hyperlight can reveal all such traces. Even now I zylph that your attention is being attracted by the huge form that is towering so close to you in your nonradiant field of perception. Concentrate on it, *monsieur*. You desire desperately to know what it is! You *must* zylph it in its entirety! You *must* learn what it means-what it is!"

Gregson brought all his perceptive faculties to bear on the object And it became firm and stable as his attention trapped it.

And now he knew! It was the imposing Arch of Triumph, rearing into the sun-washed Parisian sky only a few blocks away!

Suddenly, with explosive force, he was aware of almost everything there was to know about the huge monument-its exact dimensions, its mass and weight, the precise number of stones that had been assembled into the gestaltic whole. And he could even recognize the radial pattern of boulevards converging like the spokes of a wheel on the edifice.

"Ah, *monsieur* learns quickly," the woman said.

In Gregson's field of appalling perception, he now sensed the vast, recondite impression that he recognized as Madame Carnot. The distortion was incredible. She was a great, hulking form that clutched all the grotesqueries of a Dalian Paris. And he could sense her avarice and malevolence, as though they were attributes inseparable from the hyperimage.

"*Eh bien*," the woman observed, "*monsieur fait le zylph, n'est-ce pas?*"

Her words were clearly enunciated. But he had been more directly aware of the vivid thoughts behind them, of her amusement over the fact that he was studying her hypervis-ually. The very impressions he was receiving seemed to be radiant with her ideas and attitudes.

"Very well," she added, and he could readily sense the mischief lurking in her words, "perhaps we can-as he would say in his language-throw some light upon the subject"

82

Even with his eyes still closed, he was somehow aware of Madame Carnot's hand slipping beneath the quilted cover of the chaise longue, reaching for something-incomprehensible. Then the most terrifying blaze of nonradiant light he had ever encountered seared his brain, swamping all his senses with its supernatural brilliance.

\* \* \*

One of the guards on the opposite roof shouted and dropped his rifle. Down the street, desperate, shrill cries suggested someone had gone Screemie. Confirmation came a

moment later when a hypodermic needle's siren subdued the outcries.

Gregson's mind seemed instinctively to close itself to the hyperradiance that had engulfed nun and he opened his eyes and stared at a grinning Madame Carnot.

Beside her stood a slender, auburn-haired girl, hands lodged upon her hips as she laid down a barrage of snarled French phrases.

Madame Carnot only bared her stained, crooked teeth in a tolerant grin and, in English, said, "I was *not* merely amusing myself. With the rault caster I was examining your candidate."

That appeared to quell the girl's indignation. "And?"

"I predict Radcliff will regret having enrolled him."

"Are you sure?"

"*Tres certain.*"

"But you could be wrong.\*1

Madame Carnot elevated a skeletal hand. "*C'est possible.* There is a small chance I may be wrong."

"But Radcliff is going to take that chance."

"It was inevitable that he would. I could zylph as much."

With that, the old woman lay back on the couch and, exhausted, said, "*Je suis ireintt.*" She appeared to fall asleep immediately.

The girl turned to confront a still confused Gregson. Her face, he noticed, was strikingly beautiful-hazel eyes complementing reddish-brown hair that fell softly to her shoulders, lips full and vibrant in the subtle smile they now presented.

"I am Karen Rakaar," she said. And in her almost negligible accent there was the suggestion of tulips wavering upon the slope of a Dutch dike. "I'm to be your tutor at Versailles. You must forgive Madame Carnot. She is at times childish in her senility. She has foreseen her own death and is afraid you are in some way connected with it" 83

Ignoring the fierce pounding in his head that had been set off by the recent blast of nonradiant light, Gregson remembered that Forsythe had said, "The new form of perception . . . would be almost like *seeing* into the future." Was it in this sense that the old woman had "foreseen her own death"?

Karen Rakaar reached under the quilt on the couch and retrieved a small box almost identical to the one Radcliff had called a suppressor. The only difference was that this one had a recessed green bulb instead of a red one above the knurled knob.

She placed it on the table.

"Is that the thing that ..." He grimaced and passed a hand over his still feverish brow.

". . . that brought back the Screemies hi all their fury?" She laughed, but without derision. "Yes. Radcliff has already introduced you to a rault suppressor. This is a rault caster."

She came over and stood behind him and engulfed bun with a fragrance that was provocatively feminine as her slender fingers massaged his temples, soothing away the pain.

"Rault?" he repeated.

"Rault, in its natural form," she said, "is the hyperradiance that causes the Screemies. A rault caster is an instrument for generating that radiance artificially, just as a suppressor is one for canceling it out."

Her voice was soothing, like the rustle of soft velvet-silken, but coarse enough to suggest the capacity for deep feeling.

"The caster and suppressor-they are Valerian devices?" he asked.

They are adapted from Valorian technology."

"What do the aliens use them for?"

"The casters? Just as we would a flashlight-to see better in the dark. The suppressors? To cancel out the rault when they do not wish other rault-sensitive persons to zylph what is happening. In general, they use both instruments to confuse and terrify us."

Gregson remembered the Valorian he had chased in Manhattan. The alien had at first

blundered into everything in his path. Then he had demonstrated superhuman coordination hi his flight while three persons had gone Screemie in his wake and Gregson, himself, had suffered a seizure. A hyperpercep-tive who had turned on a rault caster hi midflight, the better to zylph his way to safety?

*Zylph?* But, of course-that was the word the Valorian

84

had used at the hunting lodge just before the Guardsmen had beamed him. And, Gregson remembered too, it was also the word he had once seemed to hear bis brother shouting during an imagined empathic contact across billions of miles of space. Did that mean Manuel was still alive somewhere-perhaps a prisoner of the aliens?

"Then the Valerians are hypersensitive too?" he asked.

"Most hypersensitive."

"Why has the bureau hidden the facts of a sixth sense?"

\* \* \*

She stood before him and offered a benign smile. "Really, Greg-that's what everybody calls you, I'm told-really, you ask so many difficult questions. I'm afraid Madame Carnot has complicated things by prematurely introducing you to these concepts. You will learn the answers to all the questions you can possibly conceive-but in due time. That is why you were ordered to Versailles, you know."

"But the bureau has known . . ."

". . . for several months now of the true nature of the Screemies," she completed his sentence. "Yet they've concealed it. The fact is, as I've just said, we aren't equipped to become rault-sensitive. Some people may argue that perhaps we are and . . ."

"/ am. *Carnot* is. And *you* must be." He rose from the chair.

"True. But each one of us who has learned to handle hy-perperception represents a thousand persons who died screaming. Too severe a price to pay for a sixth sense, isn't it?"

Her features were suddenly tense with compassion. "No, it's better that the hyperradiance-the rault-be canceled out by the bureau's super suppressor."

Yet, Gregson could not understand the bureau's indirection. Why couldn't Radcliff have told him all these things? Why had there been duplicity?

Carnot stirred, coughed feebly and went back to sleep.

Smiling, Karen gestured toward the old woman. "I suppose she even told you she was the most powerful person in the world. Well, she is. Using her hyperperception, she has guided the bureau's fight against the Valerians for years now."

She trapped his arm intimately and they started for the elevator. "If you'll just place yourself in my hands," she said, "I'll set the proper pace of indoctrination. We can't go too 85 fast, you know. There's still the danger of pushing you too rapidly-and throwing you back into the Screemies. I wouldn't want *that* to happen."

She squeezed his arm tightly against her and beamed up at him until he could feel the warmth of her nearness.

"What will / do at Versailles?" he asked.

"Work. Plenty of that. And you will meet others who are hypersensitive, like ourselves. You will all be trained to cope with the sixth sense so that we may continue to be the equal of any Valorian we meet. And so that we will be better equipped to set up the super suppressor on Vega Jumpoff Station," she added with a smile.

As they waited for the elevator, she added, "But there will be opportunity for fun too. We shall see to that," she promised, firming her grip on his arm.

86

*chapter x*

*Andelia shifted in her pod until she settled into launch attitude. But she stayed her finger on the disanimation switch.*

*How could she be certain everything was just right in all this insufferable stygumness-and optical darkness too? She forced her glial receptors to full sensitivity, but zylphed*



*practically nothing. For, here on the fringe of the Stygumbra, it was like being in an oppressive fog while the launcher bore her toward the ejection coordinates.*

*But there was enough rault seeping through to permit token contact with other members of this new expedition-still huddled apprehensively in their cocoons. She could also zylph the automatic circuits engaged in computation of pod trajectories.*

*Andelia thought of the Starfarer, at anchor outside the cone of raultlessness and directing this complex operation. Indeed, it was a miracle of technological improvisation, with raultron-ic instruments useless for maintaining remote control over the crewless ejector.*

*Abruptly, subtle vibration betokened discharge of the first pod. And she tensed in anticipation of sudden, new velocity. A second before ejection, however, as she zylphed the spattering impact of hard and soft radiation against the hull, she sensed the artificially ordered probing impulses-radar. The savages below had detected the pod-dropping operation!*

*In the next instant Andelia's cocoon shot from the tube, and she threw the switch that would bring on her disanimation. 87*

The formal gardens at Versailles were particularly beautiful in the summer of 1999. Terraced beds of blossoms and symmetrical hedging swept gracefully toward the Grand Canal. Effulgent sunlight silvered flowering pools and tinted the deep verdure of the chestnut groves.

Engrossed in the view from the palace window, Gregson started when Juan Alvarez rapped for attention. "So, Mr. Gregson," the lecturer challenged, "receptivity of the glial cells is a matter of-what?"

Gregson made a stab at the answer. "Endocrinal balance?"

"Precisely," acknowledged the small, unimposing Latin.

*Glial cells*, Gregson repeated the words meaningfully to himself, remembering that a research technician in Rome's Central Isolation Institute had guessed there was a relationship between the Screemies and those cells two years ago. Had the bureau known, almost as far back as then, what the glial cells really were?

Alvarez had paused and was now staring severely out over his class. "Miss O'Rourke, you aren't trying to zylph, are you?"

An attractive young blond, seated next to Gregson, drew attentively erect and her eyes, blue and surprised, sprang open.

"This, Miss O'Rourke, happens to be a rault suppressor," the instructor said, displaying the instrument with its glowing red bulb. "While it is in operation there can be no zylphing, which allows me to retain your undivided attention."

Since most of the class spoke English, only a few translin-gual horns swung in Sharon O'Rourke's direction. But she only smiled at Gregson, soliciting his sympathy. Embarrassed, he let his gaze wander off to the elaborately carved ceiling.

"We shall proceed then," Alvarez resumed.

An elderly man in the front row held up his hand.

"Yes, Mr. Simmons?"

The only other American in the group, Simmons rose hesitatingly. "Where does rault come from? I mean natural rault -not the stuff put out by our casters."

Alvarez folded his arms. "Since so many of you have asked that question, I believe we are ready for the answer." He retrieved his rault suppressor and twisted the dial to zero. "Now if you will open your glial cells to zylphing, I shall give you-Chandeen."

After a while he coaxed, "Slowly-deliberately. Imagine

88

you are simply lifting inner eyelids. There, now-everybody zylphing?"

It was a moment before Gregson could reestablish trans-sensitivity. And, when he finally managed to open his receptors, he was disoriented. For none of the rault-borne impressions of which he had become hypervisually aware could be associated with any of

the things about him. Instead, it was as though he could *feel* a surge of ultraradiant energy exciting submicroscopic units into frenzied activity-until they split and rejoined and split again.

Then he recognized the fascinating molecular phenomenon in which his errant attention had been trapped. And he could only marvel at the chemical Tightness of photosynthesis as he zylphed it in progress hi one of the leaves in the garden.

\* \* \*

Gregson expanded his range of perception until he sensed in their entirety and as a harmonious whole the palace and all of its gardens and fountains. Finally he managed to focus his awareness within the classroom-on the transsensory impressions he was receiving of the lecturer Alvarez, the Irish girl Sharon O'Rourke, the American named Simmons.

Neither controlling his coordination nor identifying the component impressions had been easy. But then, he asked himself, didn't an infant require months to master *optical* coordination?

"I direct your attention to Chandeen," said Alvarez. "Just imagine you are zylphing deep into space-beyond the nearby stars-over your left shoulder, approximately."

Gregson's hyperperspective changed even as the instructor spoke. And now he was sensing the great, warm stars in their wheeling course around the center of the Galaxy, the nebulous wisps, the huge expanses of empty space. Then he zylphed Chandeen-majestic and shimmering in preternatural radiance as it sent out its flood of rault to embrace the billions of stars revolving in the galactic concourse.

"It's beautiful!" Sharon exclaimed. And Gregson could almost feel her straining emotionally toward the magnificent wellspring of rault.

"Chandeen," said Alvarez softly, "may well be likened to the sun. For the rault it showers upon the Galaxy is the medium which makes zylphing possible. By permeating 'all physical things, this hyperradiance joins each zylpher in an empathy of total relationship with the microcosm and macrocosm alike."

89

Jfc

Enthralled, Gregson continued to bask in the splendor of Chandeen, drinking in its shimmering deluge of rault-until he heard Alvarez say impatiently, "Yes, Miss Rakaar?"

Withdrawing from transsensivity, Gregson saw Karen standing in the doorway. Hair drawn tightly back from her forehead and gathered into a streamer in the rear, she appeared lithe and sleek in synthetic stretch coveralls that illuminated her figure in sheening highlights.

She located Gregson, smiled, then went over to talk with Alvarez. Registering resignation, the instructor said, "Mr. Gregson will be excused."

Twenty-one other pairs of eyes followed him toward the door-all ex-Screamers who, like himself, had been recruited by the bureau to help rid Earth of what was almost universally believed to be a plague. But only he was receiving special treatment. And the others resented that. He could sense it-almost hyperperceptively. And not the least fretful was the Irish girl Sharon. But, at the moment, her petulance appeared to be directed mainly at Karen.

Outside, his special tutor led him by the hand to a bench in the terraced garden and they sat before a spraying fountain amid the preserved horticultural elegance of Louis XIV's France.

"That little Irish wench!" Karen exclaimed, only half smiling. "I wasn't really trying to zylph, Greg. I was just sitting here thinking of you."

"Sharon didn't say anything like that," he protested good-naturedly.

"No, but she *thought* it!"

It wasn't always easy to tell whether Karen was being coy or merely jestful. It would help considerably, he told himself, if he could acquire the faculty of zylphing thoughts.

"But it would put *me* at a disadvantage." She laughed. "I prefer it this way. Did I zylph your reluctance to leave the lecture?"

"Alvarez was leading up to the Stygum Field."

"But I've already told you about that."

"I still don't understand it."

She took his hands between hers. "This helps concentration. First, we must zylph--on a cosmic level. Ready?"

\* \* \*

He closed his eyes and glial receptivity came even more quickly this time. Once again he was sensing the scintillating, wheeling majesty of the Milky Way in its entirety. It was as  
90

though he could perceive each of its billions of stars, feel the warm and vibrant clusters, hear the gentle susurrations of fluorescing nebulae.

His attention wandered to the terrestrial level and, at once, he shared a unity of comprehension with Earth's seething molten core, its restless, churning magma, the intricate pattern of gravitational and magnetic force lines that it wore like a mantle. These impressions were easy to recognize because they were ponderous concepts that forced their identities on him.

"So you get an 'A' for recognition," Karen quipped. "Shall we return to Chandeen?"

Still clasping both his hands, she brought them against her bosom and he found it somewhat more difficult to concentrate.

But finally he recaptured his transsensory impression of the Galaxy, with Chandeen dominating its center like a fiercely lustrous jewel. Only, now he sensed the presence of an enormous, impenetrable shadow that held a conical wedge of the Milky Way in its grip, obscuring stars and clusters and nebulae alike. At the very edge of that malignant veil he could perceive Earth swimming through desolate, rault-starved space.

Karen elevated her voice to a thinner register, mimicking Alvarez. "You have succeeded in perceiving the Stygumbra, if I may be so bold as to borrow from the Valerian vocabulary. The Stygumbra is projected by the Stygum Field of hy-perforce which revolves imperceptibly about Chandeen and has eclipsed Earth from all rault for the past fifty thousand years. But we are now drifting out of the Stygumbra-into millions of years of rault-filled space."

So valid was her impersonation of the Latin instructor, that they both laughed, breaking the spell of zylphing.

"And dormant glial cells," he said, "are beginning to respond to rault seeping through the fringe of the Stygum Field."

"Exactly," she said, in her own soft voice. "The more sensitive persons respond first, of course-by going Screemie."

"How long before we'll be completely out of the shadow?"

"Very shortly now. Then almost everyone will be responding to rault stimulation. But if we can complete our suppressor on Vega Jumpoff, we'll cancel out all the hyperradiation."

"Couldn't we tell people what's going on? Can't we take the edge off then- fright by letting them know hyperpercep-tion is involved?"

ei

"Not any more than you could prevent combat neurosis by telling a soldier he shouldn't be afraid of the battlefield."

They had long since quit zylphing. But still the Dutch girl hadn't allowed them to stir from the "attitude for concentration" which she had imposed. They sat facing each other, only their clasped hands separating them. And, in speaking, her lips had been close to his ear and her satiny cheek had occasionally brushed his.

Finally he found himself staring into the depths of her eyes. She moved even closer, the synthetic material of her stretch coveralls rustling in small whispers against his thigh.

Fascinated by her attractiveness, he started to kiss her. But suddenly he turned away.

She released his hands. "This Helen-is she beautiful?"

He started at her mention of Forsythe's niece. But then he remembered how completely open his thoughts were to her glial receptors. "I was wondering why she hadn't called."

"But that's as you arranged it. Didn't she say two weeks ago that she wouldn't disturb you unless something happened?"

None of this had he told Karen before-nor was he thinking of it now. And he could only marvel at a form of perception capable of drawing at will from the unconscious.

She rose, appearing not in the least dejected, and said, "Time for lunch. Then we shall have a laboratory session."

\* \* \*

Gregson's laboratory period that afternoon was particularly taxing, dealing as it did with recognition of familiar objects and coordination. Even Karen's jocular approach failed to lighten the difficult session as he spent several hours groping blindfolded among the tables, ornate chairs, statues and *ob-jets d'art*.

The exercise was designed to sharpen his hyperperception. Through his glial receptors, however, the articles he encountered were seldom what they seemed. Geometrical shapes that displayed symmetry or harmony of design testified to their Tightness of form and dominated his attention. On the other hand, the bronze casting of a dolphin, awkwardly done, seemed ashamed of its wrongness and shrank from his attempts to zylph its location. He collected many a shin bruise on its account.

Long before the session was over, it occurred to him that a newborn uncertainty might be responsible for his inability to concentrate, for he had come to recognize the nonessential

92

nature of everything in which he was currently involved. Why all this indoctrination to rault sensitivity? Why must he learn to *use* the sixth sense?

So he would be better equipped to cope with hyperradiation aboard Vega Jumpoff Station, they had said-which wasn't an altogether satisfactory answer. For if they had suppressors that could cancel out all rault, couldn't they simply use them aboard VJO to shield the workers who were constructing the super suppressor? Why did they have to go to the trouble of teaching rault sensitivity if, in a few weeks, they were going to make it impossible for anyone to be rault sensitive?

After the session he sought out the solitude of one of the palace's gardens and strolled pensively along paths bordered with precisely trimmed boxwood and flowering hedges.

At the far end of a statue-lined lane, two International Guardsmen approached each other stiffly, about-faced and marched off again. Even here, in the beauty and serenity of Versailles, security was necessary. The Screemies, as Karen had explained, were too severe a price to pay for the sixth sense. So the bureau had decreed the public shouldn't even know that hyperperception was involved.

But how had the secret of transsensitivity been so successfully guarded? Hadn't Forsythe, groping in his own blindness, figured out what the plague actually was? Shouldn't others have made the same discovery? Yet, somehow, only those in the Security Bureau knew the true nature of the epidemic.

Once again, he remembered the woman who had stumbled down the corridor of the Central Isolation Institute in Rome, muttering that she "knew" what the Screemies were. Had she really known?

"How beautiful the garden zylphs! Don't you agree, Greg?"

He flipped his cigarette into a mirror-surfaced pool and watched Sharon O'Rourke stroll up behind him. The Irish girl's eyes were open but unfocused as she apparently concentrated on hyperperception.

"I wouldn't know," he said. "I'm not zylphing."

She walked along with him, closing her eyes. And he could almost feel the intense concentration of her glial receptors upon him.

"You are a... peculiar one," she offered.

"Why? Because I've had enough zylphing for one day?"

"Of course not. It's that you don't seem impressed with the 93 potential of the gift we share in common-what it implies- the power."

He started at her words. Ever since he had come to Versailles, he had sensed a subtle atmosphere about the place. It was almost as though he had received the impression hyper-perceptively, so vaguely that he couldn't identify it. But now this blond Irish girl had nailed it down for him with one word-"power." An anticipatory attitude. That of a predator anxious for the kill because it knows the weakness of its prey.

"Does power mean that much?" he asked.

"Perhaps not to you. Nor to the other American. But then, I understand Simmons was unbalanced during isolation."

She searched his eyes. "Greg, don't be like Simmons. Accept what's happening and realize that the advantage belongs to us, as it has never before belonged to any small, elite, ruling group!"

He drew back from her vivid enthusiasm.

"We stand above an entire world!" she exclaimed. "Ours can be a modern feudal system, with each one of us as the lord of a manor!"

Absorbed in her own provocative thoughts, Sharon strolled on ahead, apparently forgetting that she had even paused to talk with him.

\* \* \*

Half an hour later Gregson had still not left the grounds. He had wandered into the southern garden when he saw in the gathering dusk ahead the huge, hulking form of Henri Lanier. The superintendent of the Academy at Versailles was hurrying towards his private residence.

Impulsively, Gregson closed his eyes and zylphed. He was surprised at the almost instant response of his glial receptors, the surging flood of hypervisual impressions that engulfed him, the considerable detail he could sense, the minimum amount of distortion.

As he perceived it, the palace was in its proper place, almost as precisely proportioned and ordered as though he were viewing it visually, each architectural feature whole and firm and recognizable. And the horticultural beauty of the southern garden was a flawless perfection.

He was aware, it seemed, of each blossom and each leaf in the entire garden; of even the most inconspicuous fibrillae of every root system; the wrongness of parasitic presences; the quiet, toilsome dedication of each nitrogen-fixing bacterium as

94

it assimilated that element for symbiotic delivery to the plant to which it clung.

But nowhere in his composite appreciation of all the things he was zylphing was there even the hint of an impression that might be identified as Henry Lanier.

Then he surmised the cause behind this inconsistency. Lanier must be carrying a rault suppressor.

But why? Was it that, by shielding himself from the hyper-radiance and making it impossible for his thoughts to be zylphed, he was concealing information forbidden to the students? Again-why the secrecy; why the duplicity?

It was almost night now and a rustling of leaves attracted Gregson's attention to a hedge on his right. Almost re-flexively he began zylphing and was again reminded, by the instant flood of rault, that nocturnal darkness did not have its natural counterpart in sixth-sense perception.

And then he sensed the presence of Simmons, hidden from his vision among the shrubbery.

The other American lunged into the open. "Help me!"

Gregson tensed. "What's wrong?"

"They're going to kill me!"

"Who?"

"Lanier. I caught him with his suppressor off and zylphed what he was thinking. He's going to have his guards kill me!"

"But why?"

"I'm not interested in power. So they don't want me here! But they can't let me go! You see, I found out . . ."

In the distance, a pair of Guardsmen met as they paced off their assigned areas, then turned to retrace their steps.

"You found out what?" Gregson coaxed.

Simmons' eyes caught pale light from a gibbous moon and hurled it frantically back into the darkness. At the same time Gregson's hyperperception was distorted beyond recognition by the other's surging terror. It must be as the Irish girl had said-that the man had been unbalanced by his isolation as a Screamer.

Casting a distressed glance at the guards, Simmons charged off down the terraced slope and Gregson hypervisually traced his progress past tinkling fountains, through soft, rault-ca-ressed woods. Then, exhausted from so much transsensory perception, he let his glial receptors settle into the endocrinal balance of nonsensitivity, knowing that the security forces would find Simmons and do whatever had to be done. 95

*chapter xi*

*Against the crisp sound of spraying water, Bill Forsythe's quavering voice rose in anguished shouts. He clutched at his sightless eyes as he hopped about on a wet, naked foot. His lacerated toe throbbed unbearably as the shower's jets lanced into the open wound. And Gregson felt the pain as though it were his own.*

*But the shower stall turned into an isolation ward and Forsythe's screams became jagged explosions of terror as nonra-diant fires swept across his consciousness. Enraged by his shouting, the other Screamers snapped their bonds and chased him down an endless corridor.*

*Only, it wasn't Forsythe shouting at all. It was the American named Simmons as he raced through the formal garden at Versailles, crushing vivid blossoms, splashing through shallow pools and stumbling among the umbrageous trees of the palace's horse chestnut groves.*

*In relentless pursuit was an army of International Guardsmen, charging the calm air with the slicing beams of their laserifles. But, as though through some hyperperceptive hallucination, the troops changed into a mob of screeching Madame Carnots who hobbled through the forest on gold-handled canes, shrilling Forsythe's name-until they all became fire-breathing Valorians with foot-long fingernails.*

*Abruptly Gregson, clad only in pajamas, found himself racing along with Simmons-Forsythe and dodging the taloned*

*96*

*laser beams of the Guardsmen-Carnots-Screamers-Valorians. Simmons turned Forsythe's frantic, blind eyes upon Gregson and blurted out:*

*"They-don't-want-me-here-but-they-can't-let-me-go-help-me-help-me-"*

*\* \* \**

Tangled in his sheets, Gregson lurched awake and squinted against the assault of sunlight through the lofty casement window. The aftereffects of the dream quickly faded, for the nightmare itself was hardly more uncanny than the distortions of perception he had experienced during two weeks of hectic sixth-sense indoctrination.

Yet the chimerical episode of Forsythe in trouble reminded him that Bill was having a difficult time and that it might be a matter of only days before the latter encountered his first uncontrollable, violent seizure.

Concerned, he dressed hurriedly and went down to the lounge. But as he strode for the comviewer booth, an International Guardsman blocked his way.

"No outside calls," the man said stiffly. "Superintendent Lanier's orders."

"Get Lanier on your squawk box and tell him Gregson says if he can't *call* outside, he's *going* outside . . . permanently."

The guard returned to his desk and relayed the message. Within minutes he was back. "The superintendent says it's okay."

Again, the advantage of special privilege, Gregson mused appreciatively as he placed his call to Pennsylvania.

But, after a long while, he received only the frozen face and impersonal voice of the operator at the Security Bureau Communications Center in New York. Indifferently, she reported no answer from his party.

In a subsequent call to the Monroe County Central Isolation Institute, he learned Forsythe had not been admitted. Then he finally got an answer from Bill's nearest neighbor, who revealed, "I ain't seen nobody around that place for days; figured they pulled out."

Confounded, Gregson went into the dining room and ordered *croissants* and coffee, while he considered the possibility of asking Radcliff to send a special agent to the farm, or of going there himself.

He was still wrestling with the decision when Karen, fresh and sprightly in a pleated skirt and gauzy blouse, joined him at the table.

97

"Beautiful morning for zylphing," she greeted.

He shoved his bun aside. "How does one go about getting out of here, Karen-say, on a temporary leave?"

She shrugged. "For anybody else, there are appropriate application forms. For you . . ." She shook her head. "You're getting the de luxe crash course treatment. Super priority. Critical VJO assignment waiting in the wings. You have troubles?"

"Possibly."

When he said no more, she reminded, "I could zylph it out of you, you know."

He had no objections. She might even be sympathetic enough to help him get in contact with Radcliff.

But she seemed satisfied that he didn't pursue the subject. She glanced down into her cup. "Greg-suppose the Security Bureau isn't exactly what you think it is. Suppose its policies, its actions, its methods could be open to various interpretations."

"What do you mean?"

"It's not always possible to avoid tailoring the means to fit the end. And . . . well, the bureau is doing a wonderful job leading humanity through the Screemies, even finding a way to end the 'plague' by canceling out the hyperradiation."

"If Operation VJO works," he reminded.

"Oh, it'll succeed. But, well, through this whole crisis-the Nuclear Exchange, the epidemic, the Valerian expedition- we've had to exercise arbitrary authority over practically everything."

Gregson drained his cup. "It's only provisional."

"Provisional. But nonrepresentative, authoritarian."

He had the vague impression she might be zylphing his thoughts, trying to lead him to certain concessions. "That'll all be straightened out after Operation VJO is complete and Earth gets back to normal. Then authority can be returned to representative hands."

She hesitated. "Suppose authority *remains* with the bureau."

"I'm sure national governments will reassert themselves."

Bluntly she said, "It would be a shame if they did, wouldn't it?"

"Why-hell no. Delegated self-government is the only . . ."

"But isn't *world* government more important-centralized authority? No more Nuclear Exchange. One single source of power emanating from the pinnacle of the pyramid, securing

98

Earth against any return by the Valerians, shielding all of us from hyperradiation,

maintaining domestic order."

She touched his hand and went on. "It might be Utopia, Greg. It might be sudden, full realization of the goal toward which society has evolved ever since the time when there were as many fragmented seats of authority as there were cave families."

He stared obliquely at the Dutch girl. It was almost as though she might be trying to indoctrinate him politically.

A whistle shrilled on the palace grounds and he stared out the window to see several Guardsmen converging on one of the pools in the distance.

Grateful for the interruption, he said, "Let's find out what it is."

With Karen following, he drew up eventually at the crowded poolside and stared at Simmons, floating face up and half concealed by spray-spattered lily pads clustered about the fountain.

The full impact of Simmons' almost incoherent words in the garden the previous night pressed hi on him. Had Simmons been sane, sincere? Or had this merely been an accident?

Pushing to the edge of the pool, he instinctively tried to zylph. But it was like opening his eyes in a darkened room. There was practically no hyperradiance at all.

"I can't zylph anything!" someone complained.

"Temporary eclipse," one of the guards explained.

This puzzled most of the others. But Karen had told Greg-son there would be sporadic .decreases in the rault level as Earth drifted in and out of shadow rifts on the Stygumbra's edge. Still, even in the scant hyperradiance, he was able to zylph, but just barely, that what had happened to Simmons had been no accident.

There was a great wrongness about the body and evidence of struggle was unmistakable. Beneath the soggy matting of hair, he could almost *feel* the crushed skull. Latent stresses in flesh and bone betrayed the shape of the laserifle butt. And there was no zylphable water in the lungs.

Suddenly the meager rault was snuffed out, as though a final candle had been extinguished to surrender a cavernous cathedral back to sepulchral darkness.

Superintendent Henri Lanier shoved through the crowd and Gregson saw that his pocket bulged with the outlines of the rault suppressor which he always carried.

The superintendent-an obese but powerful man who wore 99 a tasteless, dark blue suit-spoke softly with two of the Guardsmen. Beneath shaggy, dark brows, his eyes crouched deep in the puffed creases of his face as he pointed occasionally to Simmons' body.

Why, Gregson wondered, must Lanier shield his thoughts with a suppressor? So that those who were about to be culled out of the Academy at Versailles wouldn't learn of their impending elimination? But if that were the purpose, then certainly Simmons' body would have been spirited away. Was this, then, also a warning to others?

Dismayed, he struck out for the palace. The elements of his confusion were profound: Simmons' murder, the power obsession that seemed to grip almost everybody at Versailles, his own devious sixth-sense indoctrination when he should instead be going about the task of reconditioning Vega JumpoflE Station, Karen's suggestion that the Security Bureau's authority might be extended indefinitely, Lander's cloak of secrecy.

And he wondered whether he might eventually zylph what was in the superintendent's mind, as Simmons had done. But, even if the opportunity presented itself, did he possess *that* degree of rault sensitivity? And, now that he had considered this course of action, how could he hope to avoid having his possible intentions zylphed?

It suddenly occurred to him that, since his suspicions had condensed so clearly, he might not be any safer at Versailles than Simmons had been. But how could he escape?

\* \* \*

Fortunately, the stygumness remained impenetrable. Even without the benefit of the Stygumbra's metadarkness, however, Gregson's thoughts would have remained private.



For, throughout both the morning and afternoon session, the instructor kept a rault suppressor in view on the table, its pilot bulb indicating constant output.

While Alvarez labored the point that rault was propagated at infinite velocity and that sixth-sense impressions were transmitted instantaneously, Gregson worried over the possibility that his own rebellious thoughts might at any moment be laid bare by the instructor's sudden employment of a rault caster.

Toward the end of the late afternoon session, his attention was drawn partly back to the lecture when Alvarez spread his arms and said, "Can you think of the historic connotations suggested by Chandeen, by Earth's current movement out of the Stygumbra?"

100

When there was no answer, he leaned back against a marble bust of Louis XIV. "Ah, yes-and mythological implications too. Consider that some fifty thousand years ago, Earth moved behind the Stygum Field. As that time man was probably in his infancy, aesthetically inclined, his society developing along nonmaterialistic lines.

"As Earth entered the Stygumbra, it must have been as severe a physiological incapacitation as if modern man should suddenly be forced into a world of eternal darkness. There must have been intellectual regression, reversion to savagery. Is it any wonder we should have the allegorical account of man's Banishment from Paradise?"

After a pause, he continued with animated gestures.

"Yes, I *am* suggesting that life based on transsensory perception might be more fulfilling, more profound than we could possibly conceive of now. We are just on the brink of glial receptivity. It may be years before the faculty is fully realized. We are merely infants, opening the eyes a few moments after birth."

His voice rose, almost trembling. "Don't you understand? In a society in which everybody zylphs, there will be room only for the strong-willed! Bourgeois affection for self-determination will be instantly exposed! There will be no chance for sanctuary in private thought. No one will have even an initial opportunity to reject the body of accepted behavior subscribed to by the group."

Gregson was appalled by the philosophical discourse. But if zylphing were so desirable, from that fanatical perspective, and if the Security Bureau subscribed to this philosophy, then wasn't it unlikely that the bureau would envelop the world in total, permanent stygumness just to stop the Screemie epidemic?

Gregson felt certain he was caught up *in* just such a conspiracy. But where could he verify that suspicion? Here at Versailles? At *17 Rue de la Serenite* in Paris?

Alvarez was still talking about his "body of accepted behavior subscribed to by the group." And it occurred to Gregson that the Latin was laying ideological groundwork. For the "group" could be intended to imply not humanity as a whole, but merely the bureaucratic oligarchy. In which case the "accepted behavior" would certainly not conform with any previous appreciation of morality.

The lecture ended and students and instructor alike began filing through the doorway. Reluctantly, Gregson followed. 101

Out there in the corridor-beyond the field of the classroom's rault suppressor-would there be sufficient natural hyperra-diation to convey his unsubmissive convictions to the others? Would his escape attempt be blocked?

Then, from up ahead, he heard the Irish girl Sharon O'Rourke exclaim, "Oh, zylph the rault! It's returning in full force! And there's Chandeen! Isn't it glorious?"

He eased back into the room. Uncertain, he crossed over to the table and studied the rault suppressor. If such a device could shield Lanier's thoughts, then why not his own? Of course, he would have to avoid others until he had a chance to escape-so that they wouldn't wonder why he could be seen but not zylphed.

Thrusting the suppressor into his pocket, he stepped cautiously into the now deserted corridor.

\* \* \*

Only as he welcomed the descent of deep twilight, beside one of the Grecian statues in a chestnut grove, did he savor the success that had attended the first phase of his flight to safety. And he settled down to await a later hour when the guard would have been changed and vigilance possibly relaxed-visually, at least.

Before then, however, his gaze was attracted by Lanier's lighted cottage, not too far from the grove. Between him and the superintendent's home there were few obstructions . . . and no guards.

Would a trip there perhaps provide an opportunity to zylph the secrets hidden behind that dense brow which remained perpetually within the fortress of a rault suppressor?

Boldly, he struck out for the cottage.

He had to peer into a number of windows before he located the superintendent-slumped in a massive wing chair, eyes closed and jowls spread out upon his chest. On the table were a silver ice bucket, from which protruded the neck of an un-stoppered wine bottle, and an energized rault suppressor. Beside the latter was a rault caster, its function revealed by the glowing green light below the dial.

Sight of a suppressor and caster in operation at the same time puzzled Gregson-until he surmised that a smaller field of rault could be generated within a larger field of projected stygumness, like a light bulb shining in darkness. That arrangement would allow Lanier to zylph things in his immediate area, while preventing rault-borne impressions from escaping through the greater sphere of metadarkness.

He tried two more windows before he found one unlocked. Snoring sounds led him to Lanier's study, but he hesitated in the hallway. It was apparent that the superintendent's sleep, induced most likely by a full bottle of wine, was profound indeed.

Gregson turned off his suppressor and, as anticipated, discovered that the greater field of the room's suppressor still prevented him from zylphing. But, approaching Lanier, he started when a flood of rault enveloped his glial receptors. Instantly he was zylphing everything in the superintendent's immediate vicinity.

He drew back into the stygumness, but not before he had verified the man's drunkenness. The rault-borne impressions were unmistakable-the chemical wrongness of alcohol in his system, deadening his brain cells, stifling his glial sensitivity.

\* \* \*

Then Gregson pushed back into the inner field of rault. He turned aside the torrential flood of transsensory impressions that assailed him from each prominent and microscopically insignificant feature within the sphere. He directed his attention instead to the superintendent's mind, trying for the first time to detect unconscious thought.

And, vaguely, he began to sense major attitudes-an expectation of power, a thirst for strength. Now the abstract concepts were becoming more zylphable. The imperium of which he dreamed seemed to have been promised by the oligarchy. He appeared to have been assured supreme authority over all of France, perhaps the entire continent.

It all added up to a single concept that seemed to be emblazoned smugly, boastfully across the superintendent's mind -a concept that hinted of a conspiracy so bold, so vast that it defied convenient description.

And, as though he had sensed it somehow from the other's unconscious thoughts, Gregson realized his own presence at Versailles had been required so that, while being instructed in hyperperception, he could be won over tactfully to the power-complex persuasions of the bureau. And Karen's principal function was that of a seductress who was to help pervert his sense of values.

Lanier abruptly shook himself awake and, in the return of awareness to the befuddled mind, Gregson zylphed the great concentration of perceptive power, the advanced faculty of hypersensitivity.

He reached out for the superintendent, having sensed be-103

forehand that Lanier's first impulse would be to turn off the rault suppressor and let staff members zylph the wrongness in the cottage.

But Lanier eluded him, having likewise sensed Gregson's move. In trying to snatch up the suppressor, however, the superintendent succeeded only in knocking it off the table.

Somehow, Gregson managed to get an arm around the huge man's neck from behind. But Lanier's heel came back in a vicious thrust at his groin and as he folded over in pain the superintendent reached for the massive ice bucket. Befuddled as he was by the wine, he staggered and Gregson, seizing the silver bucket first, brought it hard down on the man's head.

Then, as the superintendent collapsed, Gregson snatched the rault caster from the table and twisted its dial until the green pilot light went out, depriving Lanier of his superior hypervision.

As Gregson sifted back through the last rault-limned impressions he had received, he realized he had zylphed the man's fatal concussion. Even now the other lay lifeless on the carpet.

Among other impressions he had zylphed during the struggle, were the keys in Lanier's pocket, one of which would fit the ignition lock on the high-powered car outside the cottage. And the car would be his means of reaching VJO Ground Control Headquarters in Paris, where an inordinately boastful Madame Carnot might unwittingly contribute to his knowledge of the Security Bureau conspiracy.

104

*chapter xii*

Gregson drove cautiously toward the palace exit. On the seat beside him, the cherry glow of his rault suppressor's pilot bulb assured that his approach would not be detected hyper-visually, at least. As for his chances of being spotted optically -he could see, through the gatehouse window, that the guards were relaxed.

He coasted until he reached the gate. Then he fed full power to the engine and roared off.

Within minutes, he was tensely negotiating the sweeping turns of the new highway around *Mont-Valerien*. Ahead, moonlight washed down on gentle slopes, suffusing the mist-enshrouded, ancient American cemetery near Suresnes with a nebulous glow.

Soon he began resenting the presence of the rault suppressor, regretting his resultant inability to zylph back in the direction of Versailles and determine whether Larder's body had been found.

Relaxing his grip on the wheel, he reviewed the avalanch-ing evidence of the Security Bureau's conspiracy. First there had been the Versailles Academy's almost universal preoccupation with power-as so vividly exemplified by the Irish girl Sharon's bold anticipation of an "elite, ruling group," supported by a "modern feudal system." And Karen had verified the bureau's adherence to the "power" concept, although she had dressed the whole thing up (solely for his benefit?) in euphe-105

mistic terms of benevolent, though authoritarian control over all of Earth.

Then Simmons had been slain because his persuasions conflicted with the bureau's-because he wasn't "interested in power." And, finally, Lanier had dreamed of an imperium whose oligarchy was already parceling out satrapies and designating "supreme authorities."

Sufficient evidence to prove the Security Bureau was actually involved in a scheme to maintain permanent control over all Earth? Perhaps. Perhaps not. But if there were such a pattern of conspiracy, Madame Carnot might have all the details.

Dismissing his concern for the moment at least, Gregson welcomed the opportunity to turn his glial attention on Chan-deen, which he could now zylph just around the edge of the Stygum Field. The brilliant hyperradiance filled him with a sense of confidence and ...

He started. How *could* he be aware of Chandeen? Wasn't he shielded from its emanations by the rault suppressor?

Dismayed, he glanced down at the seat. The glow of the instrument's indicator light was almost out! It was losing power and its projected field of artificial stygumness was

collapsing!

Then he cast about for hyperimpressions and was promptly aware of the Security Bureau car bearing down on him from behind. He depressed the fuel injector and the car lurched forward with a burst of acceleration.

Of course they had zylphed him! With his suppressor putting out barely enough stygumness to conceal himself, how could they have missed the hypervisual anomaly of *part of a car* speeding down the highway?

Then he saw what was happening. With the motion of the vehicle, the instrument's control knob was robbing against the seat and edging gradually towards zero position. He reached out for the suppressor, but stayed his hand on the knob as new, incomprehensible impressions assailed his glial receptors, compelling his attention.

It was a moment before he realized he was zylphing frenzied activity high overhead, on the fringe of the atmosphere. And it was yet another moment before he recognized, in hy-persensory detail, the Security Bureau Space Division's shuttle craft that was descending *in* full free fall and lashing out viciously with its heavy laser weapon.

Target of the attack was something unidentifiable,  
106

completely unfamiliar because he had neither zylphed nor seen anything like it before. The object, in the atmosphere now and finally out of range of the space craft, was decelerating from supermach speed while its outer surface was flaking away, molecule by molecule.

The strange vessel had been slashed by several beams. Inside, structural members were disintegrating (as intended, he sensed) at such a rate that the entire capsule would evaporate shortly after drifting to the ground. And on the impact site, he knew, would be deposited-a Valorian.

Even from this distance, he could perceive the twin hearts, beating now at an enfeebled pace as a result of a head injury sustained during the attack. And he zylphed that the alien was unconscious.

Gregson's car, negotiating a sharp curve, careened toward the ditch and he restored control just in time to avoid a •smashup. He twisted the suppressor's dial back on. Its pilot bulb blazed anew and at once he could no longer zylph anything at all.

The car righted itself and he glanced back to see that his pursuers had gained considerably and were in visual contact now. Just then an intense laser beam speared through the darkness, cutting down a tree on his left.

The concrete ribbon twisted into a series of descending curves, flanked by coppices. Around the next bend a side road loomed in the glare of his headlights. He thrust down on the brakes. Screeching almost to a halt, he wrenched the vehicle off the highway and around behind a grove of trees, then he switched off his lights.

Seconds later the Security Bureau car sped past.

Guided only by moonglow, he drove on, hopeful that the side road would lead to yet another arterial approach to Paris.

Then something glistened in the moonlight near the ground on his left and he remembered the descending capsule.

Aware that the Guardsmen had undoubtedly zylphed the pod and would eventually be attracted to it, he nevertheless stopped the car and started across the field on foot.

Long ago he had wanted to question a Valorian. But there was the danger that curious special agents would wind up as hypnotized puppets in a conspiratorial cell. Or so the bureau had said.

Continuing on towards the capsule's impact site, he remembered his encounter with the alien hi Manhattan. He had 107

been certain, at the time, that being injected by the hypo had stemmed from his own carelessness and his adversary's superior agility. But Radcliff had blamed it on suggestive compulsion.

Now he wasn't so sure. And he intended to find out for himself.

When he reached the spot where the pod had come to rest, he found only the unconscious alien. He carried the Valerian back to the car, disappointed in the realization that he would have to await a less hazardous opportunity for exploring the man's unconscious thoughts.

The *man's*? he asked himself suddenly as he placed the Valerian on the back seat.

Briefly, he turned on the dome light and verified his suspicion. Accentuating his prisoner's feminine form were a Parisian-style blouse and slacks and intensely dark, straight hair that made her complexion appear less olive by contrast.

Concerned over how seriously she might be hurt and not knowing what to do with her, he sent the car lunging off in search of another, safer route to Paris.

\* \* \*

It was almost two o'clock when he finally solved the maze of secondary roads west of the city, turned into the *Route de Madrid* and started through the more familiar *Bois de Boulogne*.

But what he remembered as a delightful amusement park had been replaced by a huge Screamer isolation institute that reared into the night sky and gleamed in the antiseptic brilliance of its own illumination. Ambulances were converging on the facility along all approaches and it seemed that an inordinate number of persons were going Scremie.

Leaving the *Bois de Boulogne* through its *Maillot* exit, he allowed himself a final, suddenly distrustful glance at the towering building. And he remembered, with alarm now, that the Security Bureau directly supervised *all* the isolation institutes.

In effect, the bureau was able to maintain surveillance over almost everybody who went Scremie. Were the institutes actually *screening stations*-designed to select some of the plague survivors for roles in the conspiracy and to condition others to keep their glial cells perpetually closed?

Sickened, he envisioned a conspiracy that grew on its own strength, ruthlessly brooked no opposition, drew nourishment from its own insidious objectives, used the advantages of hyper-perception to elevate its members to the highest positions

108

of authority in the governmental and economic institutions of all nations, and assassinate anyone in position to reveal the intrigue-as they had assassinated Simmons at Versailles and the woman in Rome's Central Isolation Institute?

Then he gripped the wheel in sudden distress. *Forsythe* was determined to master the sixth sense! And he was *outside* the conspiracy. Moreover, the bureau knew about him, because that knowledge was engraved on Gregson's memory cells, which had been exposed to all the Security Bureau zylphers at Versailles. Therefore the conspiracy couldn't tolerate For-sythe's independent existence!

Was that why the farm was suddenly abandoned, with no trace of Helen and BUI left behind?

More determined than ever to reach Madame Carnot, Gregson turned into *Avenue Foch*, but had to reduce his speed. The sidewalks and lanes were crowded with haggard Parisians. Numb fear on their faces was starkly illuminated by glaring xenon vapor lights. And, in frightened anticipation, almost everyone wielded an unsheathed hypodermic syringe.

Gregson found it incredible that *so many* persons were going Scremie. Then he reasoned that the raultburst which had begun on the previous day, pouring through an almost unobstructed rift in the Stygum Field, must have been the fiercest yet.

\* \* \*

After having been delayed twice by ambulances, he finally turned off into *Rue de la Serenite*. Here it was a different world-peaceful and quiet, as the name of the street implied. Braking to a stop alongside the ornamental fence, he surmised the reason for such vivid contrast:

All the buildings around No. 17 must be part of VJO Ground Control Headquarters. And they must all be within the field of a large rault suppressor. He tested his hypothesis by turning off his own suppressor. He had guessed right, for he could still zylph nothing.

Before he left the car, he stared uncertainly at the unconscious Valerian on the rear seat. Even if he wanted to, though, there was nothing he could do for the woman now.

On the sidewalk, he paused again, studying the steady flow of personnel into the main entrance. There was an aura of imminent happening about the building and he wondered whether it had anything to do with the sudden raultburst from Chandeen.

He joined a group striding anxiously across the courtyard. 109

Then, as he passed a guard at the doorway and headed unchallenged for the helical stairs, he thanked the general air of confused urgency, whatever its explanation, for his uneventful entry.

With the others he mounted the stairway. Most of those arriving had as their destination the second-floor assembly hall, where a gathering audience confronted a still empty stage. In the glass-partitioned compartments of the third and fourth levels, he noticed that the walls were illuminated with projected maps of various land areas throughout the world. Predominating were charts representing sections of the United States and Europe.

On the seventh floor, the huge planetary sphere that was to serve as the focal point of VJO Ground Control Operations was in darkness, as was the room itself, with all its electronic equipment and kinescopic screens.

Considering the intense activity throughout most of the building, he was not surprised to find Madame Carnot awake -hi her satin-paneled sitting room. Drapes drawn over the French windows obscured their view of the roof garden.

Wearing silk pajamas and a robe, the withered woman sat hi her wheelchair before a portable video screen and a compact control board. Each time her crippled fingers touched a button, the scene on the face of the tube shifted from one center of activity in the building to another.

On the table beside her was a rault caster, whose green pilot bulb was now lifeless. That she had not zylphed his presence in the hallway was further assurance that the caster was not operating.

But as he eased into the room she started to turn around. He lunged forward, seizing the wheelchair and pulling it away from the control board.

Fear erupted among the wrinkles of her face and she tried to rise. But she only fell back and sat there breathing heavily. Then she clasped her robe more securely about her and seemed to draw composure from its warmth. "You are late, *monsieur*. I was expecting you much earlier."

"You *knew* I left Versailles?"

"I knew you *would* leave. I zylphed as much when you were here two weeks ago. But you do not frighten me. For you see, *monsieur*, you are very close to death."

Her pale eyes, recessed beneath thin, gray brows, were suddenly animate with amusement over his confounded expression. "*Oui, monsieur*-close to death. All this day I have

110

zylphed its nearness-in this very room. All the forces, all the patterns of matter and time spoke of it and I feared that I was sensing my own end,"

Her smile, though feeble, was mocking. "But eventually I zylphed that it would be a violent, fiery death and I knew I was safe because no violence can befall me here. Then, when you came, I saw that the omens would be satisfied."

He brushed aside her shallow, obvious attempt at frightening him. "The Security Bureau wants total, permanent world control, doesn't it?" he asked.

She shook her head. "We do not *want* that. We already *have* it. There is hardly a national government which does not hold its reins of power at the sufferance of the bureau. For, *vraiment*, we have patiently put our own men, our very own zylphers, in charge of those

governments everywhere. Just as we long ago began placing our personnel in all positions of economic responsibility."

Gregson straightened thoughtfully, remembering that ex-Screamers in high office, both public and corporate, had long since become the pattern of society's practical response to the plague. It had all along been the consensus that those who had survived the Screamies were best qualified to act as caretakers of the world's governments and economic resources.

"And the world's wealth?" Madame Carnot went on boastfully. "We have as much of it as we now need. And the rest is assured. Through national assessments, we already take more than half of the revenues of all governments. Of course, that is but little compared with the flow we expect after we suppress the Screamies and the world recovers its productive capacity."

Gregson bent close to the woman. "It won't work," he predicted earnestly. "When that suppressor on VJO goes into operation, the people of the world will rise up and throw off the harness."

She shrugged. "They may try. But they won't succeed. We have our International Guardsmen everywhere. And, should it appear that our authority is in danger, we have only to turn off the suppressor and let them have another taste of the Screamies."

Coercion on an astronomic scale. And Gregson saw that it  
•*would* succeed-that, actually, there was little choice. Either Earth was doomed to almost total depopulation by the fatal consequences of hypersensitivity, or it had to settle for an

111

end to the plague-for world-wide suppression of rault-*on the bureau's terms.*

\* \* \*

He caught her wrist. "Tell me about the Valerians. Why are they *really* here?"

But she wrested her arm free. "One who can hardly zylph," she protested childishly, "does not demand answers of Madame Carnot." She sat there with her lips stubbornly compressed against each other.

He snatched her rault caster from the table and twisted its knob until his glial receptors barely began responding to the assault of artificial hyperradiance. At first he zylphed only the physiological complexities of his own body, the flow of blood through minuscule capillaries, the slow catabolic attrition of dying cells, their anabolic replacement

He advanced the setting another notch, until he sensed Madame Carnot's presence in the same field. He dismissed the impulses carrying undesired major impressions-just as a person observing the totality of an intricate mosaic would ignore the whole to study detail within a small area. And he directed his attention instead at the complex structure of her mind, trying desperately to discover the secret of sensing attitudes and thoughts.

Vaguely, he perceived the evil, the total malignity, the lust for power that would not be blunted by senility. But there was something else in her mind-an avid anticipation that ran like a vibrant chord through the entire spectrum of her unconscious thought. Something that seemed to throb with the eagerness of her malicious expectancy.

In the next moment the rault caster was knocked from his grasp by a hand which had darted into the compact field of hyperradiance so suddenly that he had hardly had a chance to zylph it. The instrument shattered and his arms were pinned to his side by two International Guardsmen. A third bent attentively over Madame Carnot

"*Tuez-lui! Tuez-lui!*" she screamed. "*Tout de suite-tuez-lui!*"

In response to her frantic order to kill him immediately, one of the Guardsmen leveled a laserifle at Gregson.

But just then the entire room came ablaze with a tremendous burst of rault and abruptly Gregson was zylphing the whole building-everyone in it, all the electronic activity in every circuit of each computer and switchboard and automatic projector.

112

Madame Carnot screamed in terror, her eyes turned upward as though looking through the ceiling.

Then Gregson sensed the source of the fierce surge of hy-perradiance. There was a powerful rault caster aboard a long-range hopper which was even now verticaling down to the tiled floor of the roof garden. As it landed, crushing tropical plants and scattering terrace furniture, the Guardsmen opened fire.

Valerians and humans alike poured from the hopper. The French windows burst open and laser rays sliced into the room. Caught in the crossfire, Gregson dropped to the floor. Two of the guards collapsed and Madame Carnot, raked by several beams, slumped in the chair. Her brief, agonizing death scream lashed out like chalk screeching on a blackboard.

Even in the confusion of the moment, however, Gregson could zylph several outrageous things hurtling through the night sky, perhaps hundreds or even thousands of miles away. His attention had been demanded by their enormity, their deadliness, their brutal purpose. And he could sense the nuclear nature of each payload.

"Gregson! Gregson!"

It was visually that he recognized Kenneth Wellford, his British friend who had bought the Screemie package in London.

Gregson started to rise.

And Wellford tried but failed to knock aside the rifle in the hand of the Valorian next to him. Its linear amplifier spat out a beam that caught Gregson full in the chest.

113

*interlude*

*Suspended over the Atlantic Ocean more than twenty-two thousand miles out in space, the massive, wheeling hulk of Vega Jumpoff Station lumbered through its synchronous orbit.*

*Laboring at but fractional efficiency, its life support systems were nagging inconveniences. As soon as qualified personnel was obtained by the Security Bureau's Space Division, however, deficiencies would be eliminated. It could then be expected that the air would be purer in recycling, spin stabilized for a constant G factor, and radiation dampers brought up to more than minimum allowable efficiency.*

*Critically needed were technicians who knew how to operate the systems without having to rely on rault to zylph their designs and purposes. For Vega Jumpoff was even now generating the embryonic field of stygumness that would be expanded to blanket all Earth. And so strong was the field, already, that localized casters could produce no zylphable hy-perradiance within hundreds of miles of its center.*

*In Command Central, August Pritchard, the Security Bureau's assistant space director, confronted the bank of telescreens, fascinated with the surface scenes they were relaying.*

*But he paused long enough to address the intercom: "What's your guess on the radius of our field now, Swanson?"*

*"About five thousand miles," came the prompt reply. "We'll have to ship more generator units up here and hook*

114

*them into the suppressor circuit before we can enlarge it beyond that."*

*Pritchard undid the top brass 'button of his uniform blouse and the loose flesh of his neck, until then bulging out over the stiff collar, sagged comfortably.*

*"How soon before we run another output test?" Swanson asked.*

*"There's a shuttle craft on the way up. He'll give us a 'mark' as soon as he enters our stygumness."*

*Pritchard ran an impatient hand over his bare scalp. His nose wrinkled as he sniffed air that seemed once again to be cycling on the foul side. And, crossing back to the telescreen bank, he found his steps becoming disturbingly heavier. Station spin, still not*



*under proper reciprocating control, seemed to be speeding up somewhat.*

*Damn! When would they send someone who could straighten out the whole mess? They had said something about a man named Gregson. Used to be project engineer in charge of systems aboard VJO. Now there was someone who could help out!*

*The hatch swung open to admit a gangling man whose height was only exaggerated by his high-neck uniform blouse bearing the Space Division insignia. Five stars on his collar identified him as director of that division.*

*"Test ship approaching," General Forrester announced. "We can watch it on No. 13 telescreen."*

*Pritchard energized No. 13 and its tube instantly showed the craft superimposed upon the blue-green pastel of Earth.*

*"We're still out of contact with Paris Ground Control," Forrester disclosed. "Wonder what's happened."*

*"Nothing significant, I'm sure. They've probably had their hands full pulling the string on those Valorian bases of operation."*

*"I suppose so. But what puzzles me is the fact that we've launched only four of our nuclear birds. I thought we had twenty-two Valorian cells staked out to smash."*

*"Takes time, I guess. We'll get around to the others before the night's out."*

*"But that's just the point. We were supposed to hit them all at the same time so that none would get away."*

*Pritchard turned back to the array of telescreens. On the right, in the sunlit hemisphere, he watched a nuclear cloud boiling up over the Southern Ukraine; another in Egypt, east of Cairo. On the left, in the black of Earth's night, two patch-US*

*es of residual nuclear fury coruscated against ebony velvet- one in Quebec and the other northwest of the Gulf of Mexico.*

*"Makes a nice show," Pritchard observed.*

*"I'd enjoy it better if we could count more of them," Forrester said uneasily.*

*The intercom rasped, "Shuttle nearing stygumness field."*

*Pritchard glanced at the test ship, looming large now against a small Earth.*

*Shortly, thereafter they received their "mark" from the craft as it climbed into Vega Jumpoff's immense field of stygumness.*

*"How about a range reading?" Pritchard called into the intercom.*

*After a moment came the answer: "Eight thousand miles!"*

*Pritchard grinned and nodded. "All we have to do is extend our radius to a little better than twelve thousand."*

*"Then we can move VJO down into a lower orbit and keep Earth perpetually -within its field-shielded from all hyperra-diance."*

*"Only one hitch," Pritchard reminded. "We need Gregson to get this wheel down there safely and stabilize the thing in its new orbit."*

116

*chapter xiii*

Gregson rolled over on taut canvas and winced from a deep ache in his chest. Then he remembered Madame Carnot's and the laser fight and he sat up on the cot, shaking his head.

All around were masonry walls damp with age and mottled by mold. The room was immense. A stairway hewed out of stone blocks climbed into the chamber along one wall, reversed itself and continued upward.

Gripping his chest, he stumbled to a window. Below stretched a panorama of tumbled ramparts and battlements, surrounded by an outer moat. There were several smaller buildings, turrets, lesser embankments, bastions projecting into an inner moat. All was vine-covered, weed-infested and crumbling with decay.

Beyond the peripheral ditch, a wooded hill climbed toward blue sky. In the other direction, the same slope, mantled now with scraggly, neglected grapevines, continued on down to the bank of a broad, swift river.

This could only be the Rhine Valley. And he was in a room halfway up the central tower of a medieval castle.

Motion in the inner moat attracted his gaze and he peered through scrub trees growing from the ramparts and almost completely concealing two long-range hoppers. Then he remembered his glial cells and sensitized them. But he could zylph nothing in the stygumbric blackness.

Seconds later, however, a powerful surge of hyperradiance 117 assaulted him. It had not been synthetically produced, for he could zylph its emanation from Chandeen. Someone had turned down a suppressor that had, up until then, been canceling out all rault and cloaking the castle in a field of artificial sty guinness.

Visually, he directed his attention at the two men who could be seen through the open hatch of the nearer hopper. Yet he could not zylph them, for the craft was concealed in a sphere of metadarkness which expanded and shrank in his hyperperception. Evidently, the fluctuating field was the same one that had recently enveloped him.

Gregson turned his transsensory attention on the castle. It was fully abandoned except for two areas. In a decrepit chapel in the courtyard, several men were assembling components into a massive and complex device that very evidently, at first zylph, was designed for long-range, hyperelectro-magnetic communication-a cosmic transmitter meant to function on a principle involving a tight-beam rault carrier signal.

Two of the men were Valerians. Even from this distance it was not difficult to zylph their twin hearts. Scattered about the chapel and still producing hyperradiance, even though the artificial field of stygumness had recently collapsed, were several casters. They were like reassuring lanterns hung on the wall of a cave, Gregson thought, to push back the awful, threatening darkness.

Then movement in the central structure of the castle, two floors below, caught his attention and he zylphed Wellford and two Valorians. One, the alien he had retrieved from the field outside Paris, sat on a cot, her head bandaged.

Suddenly he sensed Wellford had become aware of him and was zylphing in his direction. Just then, however, the hopper's sphere of stygumness ballooned outward and Gregson could perceive nothing more.

\* \* \*

Moments later, anxious steps pounded on the stairs and Wellford, grinning, climbed into view. "Welcome to the ranks of the zylphers. I had no idea you belonged to the club."

He had changed but little. The part in his blond hair was askew and his expression, though superficially jaunty, couldn't conceal the persistent worry that shallowed beneath the surface. Despite his concern, however, he still seemed to be the genial, alert Englishman of two years earlier.

He approached and seized Gregson's hand. "I say, I'm  
118

sorry about that laser blast last night. Did my best to divert it. But, fortunately, it was a broad beam."

When Gregson only stared uncertainly at him, he added, somewhat testily and with a tinge of feigned melodrama, "Oh, come now, Greg. You've been misinformed. I *haven't* come under the evil influence of the vicious Valorians. I'm *not* simply a senseless automaton in their hands."

"How did you know I'd been told that?"

"I had a chance to give you a rather good zylphing after we picked you up last night." He sat on the cot and provided cigarettes for both of them.

Gregson felt a bit less ill at ease, but not much. "What do you have in the works with the Valorians-a counter conspiracy?"

"Of sorts. But we do seem to have made some headway last night, wouldn't you agree?-What with our raid on Paris Ground Control."

"Evidently it succeeded."

"Completely. We even managed to snatch some of the hornets from their nest for an exhaustive zylphing, besides doing a thorough job on Carnot. And there's bound to be some confusion when the top of the pyramid is lopped off."

"She actually was the top?"

"One of the first rault sensitives. Incredibly adept at zylphing."

"As good as the Valorians?"

"Oh, of course not. We're only *merely beginning* to zylph -even Radcliff. The Valorians have been at it all their lives. And we're zylphing in almost total stygumness, compared with the rault-rich space where Valeria is."

Gregson looked up from his cigarette. "And where's that?"

"Closer to the center of the Galaxy. It emerged from the Stygumbra a few thousand years ago. Incidentally, thanks for picking up Andelia. We zylphed her in your car just before we regrouped. And, by the way-she is *not* a hypnotist. None of the Valorians are."

Gregson, however, wasn't quite ready to be convinced that the aliens represented the other side of the coin. For it might well develop that the choice between the Valorians and the bureau, if fully illuminated, would merely be between the lesser of two evils. And the most invalid evidence of all might be that offered by the aliens themselves or the humans in their cells. Suppose the Valorians *were* adept at hypnotic compulsion?

119

"The bureau went to a lot of trouble to make us believe the Valerians were masters of the suggestive technique, didn't it?" he said tentatively, and watched for the Englishman's reaction.

"Did it! As you know, they even made up one of their lackeys as a heavily sedated alien so they could display him on a stage in London and have him admit to the faculty of hypnotic suggestion. Poor fool, though-he didn't know he was going to be slain in the interest of a convincing demonstration."

Was that what had *really* happened? Or, Gregson wondered, had the Valorians only *persuaded* Wellford to believe that version?

The Englishman shrugged. "It was all well worth their effort, however. At least, everybody was overwhelmingly conditioned to kill Valorians on sight, rather than give them a chance to speak."

Was Wellford even now acting under compulsion-biased in such a manner that he could only advance the aliens' cause? For the present, Gregson decided, he would appear to be convinced of whatever they told him. And his reservations would go undetected as long as they maintained their field of zylph-forbidding stygumness around the castle.

Abruptly, he recalled the impressions he had received just before being lasered at Madame Carnot's. "There was a Nuclear Exchange!"

Wellford shook his head. "No, not an Exchange. Just an attack. The *beginning* of an attack, rather-on our Valorian establishments. That was the principal purpose of our raid- to nip their offensive in the bud. And we almost did. Only four birds got airborne. Two hit their targets, but we'd already evacuated one. The raid bought us a period of grace, however, in which we were able to evacuate all the others."

"For a moment I thought it was '95 all over again, rather than '99."

"Oh, no. That can never recur. There's only light nuclear armament left. And all the arsenals belong to the bureau. Since the countries belong to them too, they won't want to cause any further damage to their properties, as they did in '95."

"You mean the bureau . . . ?"

"But, of course!" Wellford assured, brushing hair back off his forehead. "That was a master stroke in their strategy. It was the bureau's finger that squeezed the nuclear trigger four

years ago. And for a very practical reason. The Exchange not only reduced national authority to impotence; on top of the Screemie scourge, it also created a vacuum of fear and military incapacity. By stepping into that vacuum, the bureau was able to assume-'benevolently,' of course-almost unlimited power."

Wellford ground out his cigarette and rose, staring out the window at a sun dropping low over the hills. "You must be famished. I have something prepared below."

On the way downstairs he added, "Incidentally, I've some delightful news. But there's someone more deserving than I of being its bearer."

"Helen and Bill!" Gregson guessed.

Wellford paused on the stairs. "No, not your friends. Nor is there anything we can do about them at the moment."

"I'd like to try to call the farm again."

The other shook his head solicitously. "We're operating under the strictest communications blackout. The project involved here is most crucial. We can't jeopardize our chances by having the bureau learn where we are."

"What's the project?"

"A summons for help to the Valerians. Within a day or two we hope to dispatch our message. Then you may look after Forsythe and his niece."

\* \* \*

In an identical room on the next lower level Gregson was left alone with his meal of synthetics while Wellford went to help out with assembly of the transmitter. After he had finished eating, he searched his pockets for the rault suppressor he had taken from Versailles. But it was gone.

Lighting a cigarette, he went onto the balcony and leaned upon its stone balustrade, gazing out over a hillside now touched by moonlight. Depressed by his uncertainty, he wondered whether he shouldn't try to escape before it was too late-before they had a chance to bring him under slavish compulsion.

Studying the inner and outer ramparts that girded the castle, he located one of the tunnels that led beneath them to the hillside. The place didn't appear to be guarded at all.

Then his eyes were attracted by movement at the tunnel's mouth. There was a man coming through into the inner courtyard-cautiously, crouching. He stepped into the open and moonlight glinted on the linear intensifier of his outthrust laser pistol.

Other movement, even more stealthy, drew Gregson's attention to a figure crouching on the rampart above the tunnel exit. In the next instant it launched itself into space and hurtled down upon the armed man.

Thrashing about on the ground, they flayed at each other and the laser pistol discharged a zipping beam that sliced the tip off one of the chapel's minarets. Then the weapon was knocked from the man's hand and his guttural voice exploded with German expletives.

Floodlights suddenly lighted the scene and Valerians and humans alike came running out of the chapel.

Gregson backed into the shadows of the balcony so they wouldn't know he was a witness to what was transpiring.

The intruder was now struggling in the grip of several Valerians. A stout, middle-aged man, he bellowed incessantly at his captors.

Wellford went up to him, but had to shout several times before he quietened down. Then they spoke in German.

"What does he say?" one of the Valerians asked after a while.

"He's a tugboat skipper who lives close by. He was attracted here by our lights."

"He's not with the bureau?"

"I'm quite sure he isn't. We can definitely establish that later, of course."

The Valerian who had disarmed the German retrieved the laser pistol and brushed

himself off. "I like his spirit. We could use him."

"It's obvious we shan't be able to let him go," Wellford offered.

"Then let's keep him under guard until we have a chance to persuade him."

They hustled the German into the chapel and the floodlights went out, leaving Gregson with an appreciation of the thoroughness with which the castle was guarded.

"He'll be all right-as soon as he learns," said a slight voice behind him.

Gregson started and turned to face the Valerian woman who stood in the doorway, her slim form outlined by the sparse light in the room.

"I'm sorry if I startled you," she apologized. "I'm Ande-lia."

Warily, he went back into the room. "And what *will* the man down there learn, Andelia?"

122

"Most of the things you already know-and much more that you haven't yet become aware of."

Even by Earth standards, she was attractive. The head bandage, sitting almost like a turban above her sleek, olive-complexioned face, imparted an Oriental quality to her appearance.

"And when we teach him to zylph," she went on, seating herself at the table, "everything will seem credible and he will no longer doubt us."

"You can *teach* him to zylph?"

"Quite easily. In just a short while-a few weeks."

"You can teach anybody? Everybody?"

"But of course. That's what we intended to do when we sent our first expedition, wasn't it?"

This time the deception was too bold. *Nobody* could learn to tolerate the Screemies and become functionally hypersensitive in a few weeks. He could vouch for that himself.

"You saved my life," Andelia went on pensively, "and your friend Wellford has told me that I can best express my gratitude by telling you about-Manuel."

Gregson was astonished. "You know something about my brother?"

"He survives and is well. You will zylph him eventually."

"How do you know? What happened?"

"Our ship detected your expedition as it left the Stygum-bra. For days your crew had been fully exposed to unobstructed rault. Many had died. Some had gone mad. A few we were able to save."

Gregson stared skeptically at the quietly spoken Valerian woman. "If Manuel had survived, he would have insisted on coming back here."

"He cannot return. Not until your world is entirely out of the Stygumbra."

"Why not?"

Andelia walked around the table, slowly, carefully-like a woman on a tightrope. At first Gregson was puzzled. Then he understood that a person accustomed to zylphing would not be sure-footed in the absence of rault. She would not *know* what lay before each next step.

She reached the window and stared out upon the ascending slope. "Perhaps an analogy would help you understand about Manuel. Suppose one of your race had lived all his life in a cave. Suppose you brought him out and assisted him in becoming accustomed to sight. In learning to depend upon his

eyes, he would forget how to rely on his other senses. If you forced him to return to the cave, he would be much afraid. And his fear of the darkness would be justified. For he would most likely fall into a pit and die."

Gregson rejected the explanation. It didn't seem reasonable that just a few years of zylphing would make Manuel afraid of the stygumness in which he had spent all his life.

"What was your ship doing outside the Stygumbra?" he asked.

"For some time we were aware of your world. But we couldn't enter the stygumbraic cone because our navigational instruments are rault-oriented. Expecting us to bring a craft into metadarkness would be like asking you to fly a hopper into a cave with neither lights nor

radar."

"Yet, despite all that," Gregson asked dubiously, "you were going to help us?"

"Yes. We didn't want the same thing to happen to you that happened to us when Valeria came out of the Stygumbra. Our political upheaval was intense. We suffered through many generations of slavery-under the yoke of Valerian tyrants."

\* \* \*

Even more skeptical, Gregson said, "But when you finally sent a mercy party, it was powerless to do anything."

Andelia cast her eyes downward. "Quite powerless. The expedition was to evaluate the situation, contact your authorities and arrange to set up hypersensitivity adaptation clinics. But our transmitter was destroyed during pod drop. So we had no way of reporting that handfuls of neozylphers all over the world had already risen to power. And everywhere we turned to tell your people what was happening, we were blocked by the Security Bureau."

Gregson was silent a moment. "When you complete your transmitter, what message will you send back?"

"That if we are going to overcome the bureau and prevent billions from either falling into slavery or dying as they become sensitive to rault, it will be very shortly or not at all. We shall requisition the equipment we need to set up our clinics-and hope that by the time it arrives there will be no opposition to destroy it."

"How do you intend doing away with that opposition?"

Andelia drew erect and seemed suddenly concerned. "You're asking more than I know. They haven't taken me into their confidence on *all* of our plans."

124

Or had she merely decided to tell him enough to encourage his trust, but not to reveal anything significant? "Why are there no rault casters around? So I can't zylph those plans?"

"All the casters are needed for construction of our transmitter-so we can determine whether we are assembling it correctly."

"Oh, I see," Gregson tried to appear convinced, realizing he had made a mistake by letting his suspicions become so obvious.

She headed for the stairs, but paused before descending. "Oh, I was supposed to tell you that you are assigned the room immediately above this one for tonight. And Wellford suggests that you get some rest."

Throughout most of the night, however, Gregson lay awake on his cot, glumly watching the moon set beyond the mist-filmed hills on the west bank of the Rhine.

He drew both frustration and satisfaction from the fact that the powerful rault suppressor aboard the long-range hopper continued to broadcast its field of intense stygumness.

In the total blockage of Chandeen's hyperradiation, he was unable to zylph anything at all. And, not zylphing, he was powerless to distinguish between truth and deception; to determine whether Kenneth Wellford was a free agent, or was acting under vicious compulsion. Nor could he hope to learn how much time remained before he, too, would be reduced to a helpless puppet.

On the other hand, the same metadarkness shielded his own thoughts and suspicions from the Valorians. And as long as the rault suppressor remained in operation, he was reasonably safe-he hoped.

Nevertheless, he could see no advantage to remaining at the castle. Particularly not when it was imperative for him to get back to Pennsylvania, where he might pick up some trace of Helen and her uncle.

So, in his sanctuary of zylph-forbidding stygumness, he lay there considering and rejecting an endless succession of plans for escape until he finally fell asleep.

125

*chapter xiv*

The castle was still smothered in its field of artificial stygum-ness when Gregson and Wellford had breakfast the next morning.

So much his characteristic self did the Englishman seem that, in the reassuring Rhenish sunlight, Gregson found it difficult to believe the man was not an altogether free agent.

"We're making great headway with the transmitter," Well-ford said, finishing his coffee. "Might have had it assembled by now if there hadn't been that interruption last night. Hope it didn't disturb you."

"The German trespasser?" Gregson had thought they would try to conceal the incident.

Wellford nodded. "Andelia said you had witnessed it. Poor chap. I should imagine it's rather upsetting-having to cast aside all your ingrained notions about the Valerians,"

"How is he?"

"Still wants to put up a fight. But Andelia's working on him. We have hoped of convincing him shortly."

Gregson asked cautiously, "You going to teach him to zylph?"

"Eventually. When the opportunity presents itself. But we're much too busy at the moment."

"Andelia says the Valerians can bring him through the Screemies into functional hyperperception in only a few weeks."

128

J

"Three, I understand."

"Have you ever *seen* anyone go through this indoctrination in three weeks?"

"Why, no. But they have clinics operating at two of their bases."

Far enough in that direction, Gregson cautioned himself, lest Wellford sense his suspicion. "How long has SecBu known about the Valerians?"

"Ever since they pod-dropped their first expedition here in '96, the year after the *Nina* blasted off."

"How did the bureau find out about them?"

Wellford lighted a cigarette and leaned back, blowing a dense plume of smoke into the shaft of sunlight that fell across the table.

"The Valerians' first objective was to reach persons of high authority, heads of state if possible," he explained. "But almost every official they contacted turned out to be a hyper-perceptive ex-Screamer who belonged to the conspiracy. The Prime Minister of Great Britain was the first to be approached. That was when the bureau learned that its materializing dream of absolute world power had been complicated by the arrival of aliens who wanted to prevent just such a conspiracy."

"The first Valorian we saw-the corpse in Rome ...?!"

"He was one of the last to try to get through to established authority. But the President of Italy was also an ex-Screamer who held his office only through design of the bureau."

Gregson tried not to appear too skeptical. "But certainly there were other ways of getting their message across."

"Hardly. Years before then, the bureau and its civilian co-conspirators had already begun seizing control of all communications media as a prerequisite to absolute rule over Earth."

The Englishman rose abruptly. "It's back to the mines for me if we expect to get that transmitter assembled. Whenever you feel equal to a chore, let me know. You'll fit in somewhere."

Gregson said nothing. Evidently they expected to gain his confidence merely on the strength of persuasive argument- until they had an opportunity for more thorough treatment.

At the stairway, Wellford turned and said, "Incidentally, stay close at hand, Greg. We should hate to lose you back to the bureau. You're quite a significant cog, you know."

"Oh? How so?"

"Don't pretend modesty. You're aware that you're the only one of the bureau's located who can handle Vega Jumpoff Station. And they must be fairly frantic now over losing you."

"They'll eventually manage without me."

"Granted, But not in time."

"Not in time for what?"

"Earth is rapidly pulling out of the Stygumbra. Persons are going Screemie by the thousands-all over. The incidence of dawning hyperperceptivity is too great for the new Screemers to be controlled within the framework of the bureau's isolation institutes. Unless VJO can quickly cast its cloak of artificial stygumness over Earth, things are apt to get out of hand for the bureau."

Pacing the stone floor, Gregson waited a half hour after the other had left. Then dismay suddenly distilled into determination and he made his way cautiously into the courtyard. He had to know whether everything was as Wellford had convincingly represented it-or whether all was deception, with the Englishman merely serving as an unwitting instrument of Valerian intrigue.

He stood staring at the chapel, where work was under way on the raultronic transmitter. Everything in the castle, except in the immediate vicinity of the transmitter, was engulfed in artificial stygumness generated by the hopper's rault suppressor. But the chapel's working area was hyperilluminated by rault casters.

Perhaps if he went to the fringe of that isolated field, he might zylph the Valerians at a time when they were too intent on what they were doing to notice Ms interest in them. In which case he might learn whether their purpose was benevolent, or whether they were merely vying with the Security Bureau for despotic control over Earth's population.

Advancing on the chapel, however, he was confronted by an alien who sternly announced, "You may not enter."

It was evident, then, that there *were* restraints on his freedom, limitations to his supposedly open-armed acceptance.

Yet, as he subsequently strolled indecisively about the castle grounds, his movements were not contested.

He wandered through a tunnel under the inner rampart and was even more perplexed to find himself between the two long-range hoppers with no one challenging him.

Suspecting a trap, he nevertheless entered the craft whose suppressor was blanketing the castle. And a moment later he sent the hopper surging up through the foliage, steering  
128

sharply westward as he climbed to transoceanic altitudes. If it *had* been a trap, he had escaped with the bait.

\* \* \*

Within three hours he crossed the United States coastline and flew on toward the deepening twilight of dawn. Easing his grip on the controls, he finally acknowledged his inability to bring order out of confusion.

The Valerians, despite his profound mistrust of them, were still nothing more than a defiant question mark. It was, of course, possible that they *were* on a mercy mission. Yet, they might instead be laying a vicious snare which would lead to an oppression even more terrible than that planned by the bureau.

But if those suspicions were valid, the price of verifying them would be immediate enslavement, blind compulsion to serve the aliens.

Grim-faced, he crossed the New Jersey-Pennsylvania line and descended steeply, reducing speed as the hopper plunged into denser air.

Coming in low over the ridge east of Forsythe's farm, he verticaled swiftly down to the bull's-eye, cut the engine and leaped out.

"Bill!" he shouted. "Helen!"

But Forsythe's house was somberly quiet, its windows darkened in the early morning light.

Disturbed by the desolate stillness, he stared uncertainly back at the hopper. Then he realized that if he turned off the craft's rault suppressor he might be able to zylph through the



mystery which seemed to enshroud everything.

But a coarse voice shattered the quiet. "Hold it! Don't move!"

Wielding laserifles, two Guardsmen came out of the barn.

"You Gregson?" one demanded.

"Of course he is," the other assured. "Who else would vertical down *here* with a rault suppressor on?"

The first approached and ordered, "Turn around."

As he did so, a hypodermic needle plunged into his neck.

\* \* \*

He regained consciousness in the glare of fluorescent lights strung along an acoustical tile ceiling. Shielding his eyes, he sat up on the plastic couch, numb from the aftereffects of the injection.

When finally he brought his vision in focus, he was staring out a window upon a vast concrete apron lined with scores of 129

shuttle craft whose sleek, gleaming noses were pointed toward space. In hangars and around the buildings bordering the strip scurried personnel in the uniforms of the International Guard, the Space Division and the United States Army. Beyond, rugged and bare mountain peaks imparted a harmony of upward striving to the entire scene.

There was a rustling of paper and he turned to see Weldon Radcliff sitting at a polished desk and riffling through a file folder. Plush carpeting stretched like a lawn from wall to mahogany-paneled wall. By the door stood an alert Guardsman, laserifle cradled in his arms. At the head of the couch was another.

Among the articles on the desk was a rault suppressor, its red light aglow. But Gregson suspected that the instrument had only recently been turned off while the Security Bureau director had zylphed his unconscious thoughts.

Radcliff glanced up and said, "I'll be with you in a moment. You are at Space Division Command Central."

After a while he stored the folder and the suppressor in a drawer and motioned to the nearer guard. "Bring him over here."

Gregson was prodded to the chair indicated by Radcliff.

"I trust you don't consider yourself excessively inconvenienced," the director said. "But if you were foolish enough to return to Forsythe's farm, then you have mostly yourself to blame."

"What do you want with me?"

"We blast off tonight for Vega Jumpoff. I am transferring my top-echelon personnel there. You will be in charge of Maintenance and Station Propulsion."

He folded his hands on the desk. "I am indebted to you for the wealth of information you supplied. We had been searching for that transmitter. However, it is now something with which we need no longer concern ourselves."

"You destroyed it?"

"Hours ago."

"What about the people who were there?"

"Wellford and the Valerians? They escaped, unfortunately. All except one. We managed to pick up the Valorian girl. It's regrettable you didn't find out where their other bases are now located."

Somehow Gregson found himself regretting Andelia's capture. She had seemed so sincere, and helpless. He rose and

130

hunched over the director's desk. "Are the Valerians here to take advantage of us?"

Radcliff gestured impatiently. "Good God, man! Use your head! What else would they be here for?"

"They say they want to help us become hypersensitive."

"You sound as though you're acting under Valerian compulsion."

"Is there such a thing as Valorian compulsion?"

"I . . ." Radcliff glanced up in exasperation. "You've seen what they can do. You've just come from observing Wellford acting like their bootblack."

Gregson sank back into the chair, aware now of the thoroughness with which the director had zylphed his unconscious thoughts.

Radcliff came around the desk and gripped his shoulder. "You've been over on the Valerians' side and you realize now that there is no easy way through the Screemie barrier. So let's have a look at the practical side of matters."

Gregson stared up at him.

"The world is up for grabs," the other went on. "It's as simple as that. If the bureau doesn't do the grabbing, the Valerians will. I think it should be us. After all, we're human. They're not. And, we're offering an end to the Screemies."

"Will the suppressor on VJO work? Can you stop the Screemies?"

"We've already canceled all rault within a radius of ten thousand miles of the station. As soon as we expand the field to twelve thousand miles, we can bring an end to all hyper-sensitivity-if you help us move Vega Jumpoff to a low enough orbit."

"And then the bureau hierarchy will continue using personalized rault casters so they'll have the advantage of zylphing whenever they need it. That's how you intend to perpetuate yourselves in power." "

Radcliff thought about it a moment. "I'm afraid so. But you're considering only secondary matters. However, you've already realized the main issue: Unless some group establishes world-wide control and maintains that control as a bulwark against both hyperradiation and the Valerians, then billions of persons will die screaming."

"The Valerians say we can become completely rault sensitive with no ill effects-in just a few weeks' time."

"Do you believe that?"

"Apparently Forsythe's learning to tolerate hypersensitivity 131 without going Screemie. He's come through scores of seizures."

"Good God, man, you can't generalize from Forsythe's case! He's blind. And, as I zylphed from your unconscious, he had often expressed a desire to 'see those damned lights.'"

Out on the base someone went Screemie, but the inevitable howl of the siren brought an end to his shrill cries.

"Over and above what I have said," the director went on, ignoring the distraction, "the fact remains that mankind isn't ready for the sixth sense."

He permitted himself his first smile. "This is proved both by our economic upheaval and the relative ease with which the early ex-Screamers were able to seize the reins everywhere. But the power grab terminates with the bureau. Otherwise, as more persons emerge as scheming hypersensitives, the struggle for control would become chaotic."

Gregson was silent a long while. "Suppose I refuse to go along with you."

"You won't," Radcliff assured. "You see, we hold a cudgel. We have Forsythe and his niece. And we know how concerned you are about them."

Gregson lunged up. But one of the Guardsmen leveled his laserifle. The director only sat there unperturbed, regarding his folded hands.

\* \* \*

The desk viewer buzzed and Radcliff energized its screen.

"Colonel Reynolds to see you, *sir*," said a feminine voice.

"Send him in."

Reynolds, short and somewhat thin, wore a U.S. Army uniform. Standing there before the desk, he used a wadded handkerchief to dab at his forehead-but it was not warm in the building.

"We have another civilian at the gate telling us the Scream-ies are actually some kind of new way of-ah, seeing things," he said.

Radcliff leveled a finger at the officer. "If you've forgotten the prescribed procedure, let me remind you that you are to hand him immediately over to the International Guard detail."  
"But.. ."

"Colonel Reynolds, we have discussed this before. Your government subscribes to the authority of the Security Bureau in these matters. You will therefore not only execute my  
132

orders, but you will also explicitly carry out the directives of the Space Division commander in charge of this base."

Reynolds seemed both frustrated and determined. "I'd like to question the man at the gate."

"Under the Compact, that's the Security Bureau's responsibility."

Reynolds drew erect and his jaw firmed. "I've *already* spoken with him. He named every article in my pockets, even told me about the metal pin in my thigh."

Silence descended upon the room. Without having been announced, another Army officer strode in. Tall, elderly, he wore a silver star on each epaulet. His appearance was thoroughly in the military tradition, except for the hypodermic pouch that disturbed the drape of his blouse.

"What seems to be the trouble, Colonel Reynolds?" he asked.

But it was Radcliff who answered. "Reynolds has arrested another civilian. Wants to question the man himself."

"Is this true, Colonel?"

"Yes, General Munston."

"But certainly you understand we would be pre-empting a Security Bureau function."

"That's not the only function I'd like to pre-empt!" Reynolds blurted out. "All we do is sit on our butts, polish hardware and wait for the bureau and the Space Division to tell us what to do!"

"Under the Compact," the general reminded, "certain matters are legally in the hands of those international organizations. However . . ." he seemed to relent, "why do you think we ought to question the man at the gate?"

"Because I believe what he says!"

General Munston stiffened. "Very well, Colonel. I'll back you up and the Compact be damned. Let's go. We'll both question him."

Moments after they left, however, a hypodermic siren began sending its shrill ululation through the corridor. Eventually General Munston returned, the pouch at his waist hanging open.

"Isn't it unfortunate?" he said blandly. "Colonel Reynolds just went Screemie and had to be rushed to an isolation institute."

Radcliff shook his head. "How dreadful."

"How brave," the general amended. "He didn't even scream."

133

That afternoon, when they locked Gregson in the guardhouse, he was still waiting for the moment when he might find himself out of range of a rault suppressor. Then he would be able to zylph around Space Division Command Central and perhaps learn whether Helen and Bill were on the base. But the stygumness was impenetrable.

Pacing in his cell, he was even more frustrated in the realization that once aboard Vega Jumpoff Station he wouldn't be able to zylph any information from Radcliff or the others. Not at the very center of a field of stygumness twenty thousand miles in diameter.

He dropped down on the edge of his cot and sat there with his hands gripped together, wondering whether he could force himself to cooperate with the conspiracy. A conspiracy more callous and powerful than any the world had ever known. He recalled the brutal slaying of the man in London, Simmons' body in the pool at Versailles, the woman who had been hurled out of the isolation institute window in Rome. Even more recently, there had been the indifferent and fraudulent consignment of Colonel Reynolds to another isolation facility.

Could he bend his efforts to the interest of the oligarchy?

Then he thought of Helen and Bill as hostages of the bureau and of the billions who would soon be screaming and dying if the rault suppressor aboard the satellite did not accomplish its purpose.

He had no choice-not even if the Valorians *were* altruistic. For weren't they powerless before the bureau's might?

And even if they had intended summoning help for Earth's screaming millions, they wouldn't be able to do that now- not with their transmitter destroyed.

Gregson saw then that the most immediate necessity was a world-wide field of stygumness so that the Screamers would scream no more.

134

*chapter xv*

Vega Jumpoff Station was a huge doughnut that rotated serenely about its nodular hub in the quiet of space. Encouraging its resemblance to a wheel were eight spokes connecting nave with outer ring. Tapering toward the hub, the radial members contained living quarters, workshops and offices. But where they joined the gravityless focal structure, they were scarcely thick-stemmed enough to enclose the elevator shafts that ran the quarter-mile length of each.

The outer doughnut was six hundred feet in cross section. Traveling its peripheral corridor in an electric cart, one would have to drive more than a mile and a half before returning to his starting point. Along the outer extremities of the wheel were arranged, alternately, iris-diaphragm air locks, to receive the noses of docking shuttle craft, and pairs of fore-and-aft spin-stabilization jets.

A city in itself, the circumferential ring housed the more desirable living quarters, Command Central, Life-Support Control, Gravity Management, Earth Communications General, recreational facilities, assembly halls, dining rooms and even a miniature park with its tiled swimming pool and equi-solar radiation.

"Spinward" and "contraspinward" were curvilinear directions along the ring. "Up" meant toward the hub. And the ceilings of all the rooms and halls and public facilities were so oriented.

135

Gregson, at the moment, was in Gravity Management before a control board perhaps twenty feet long. At his direction, two men were making adjustments along an accessway behind the panel.

"Another turn to the right should do it," he instructed.

Presently, an indicator moved and there was a slight increase in weight as spinward jets came to life and sent Vega Jumpoff wheeling ever so insignificantly faster about its hub.

The men came out from behind the panel and joined Gregson as he backed off to survey scores of dials. Needles flicked occasionally as lights flashed to report precise firing of spin-control rockets.

"That's it," he said. "Now we're fully automatic."

"It was hell a few days ago-just before you shuttled up here," one of the men said. "We must have gained a fourth of a G."

"That," suggested the other, "was because they were moving all that heavy equipment contraspinward."

Gregson pretended appreciation of the barely perceptible tremors as the nearer peripheral rockets cut on and off. Behind his superficial engrossment, however, he was straining for even the barest hint of rault. But the intense stygumness was oppressive, choking. And once again he wondered where the super suppressor was hidden.

If he could reach it and find some way to turn it off-even if only momentarily-then he might sylph whether Helen and her uncle were being held somewhere aboard the station.

An International Guardsman entered Gravity Management and came over to Gregson. "You finished here?"

As before, the man was armed with a laserifle, its selector tuned for a broad beam that would stun rather than kill.

Gregson nodded.

"Then you're wanted in Command Central."

Gregson drove his cart slowly back along the peripheral corridor, glancing into transverse passageways, staring at closed doors or through glass walls that partitioned recreation lounges and dining halls.

Somewhere aboard Vega Jumpoff they had assembled a mighty rault suppressor. He had no idea how large it was, physically. But, certainly, it should be recognizable-if not by its appearance, then perhaps by the flurry of activity that must surround it as new banks of generators were added to increase its output.

But, he conceded as he glanced back at the guard who

136

would not let him out of sight, it wasn't likely that he would soon find an opportunity to search for it. For more than a week now, he had been under close surveillance aboard the station.

Ahead, a party of civilian and uniformed officials was filing out of a conference room. Leading them was a tall, distinguished man who bore himself ceremoniously erect.

Not taking his eyes off the latter, Gregson brought his cart to a halt to watch the group pass.

The guard pulled up beside him. "You a name-dropper, Gregson?"

"No. Why?"

"If you were, you could say you rubbed shoulders with a lot of important people." The guard nodded at the procession.

"Important only because they zylphed their way up to the offices they hold."

"See the tall, gray-baked man? That's Stanley Heath."

"Met him yesterday."

The guard shook his head in mock disapprobation. "And you aren't even impressed by the President of your country?"

The group had passed and Gregson turned to watch a stout man with an awkward stride who held a translingual horn to his ear to understand what the two women next to him were saying.

"Know who that is?" the guard asked, following his stare.

"No." Gregson had seen the man come aboard yesterday. Radcliff had made quite a fuss over the arrival.

"That's Sergilov Baranovsky," said the guard impressively. "Premier of the Soviet Union."

\* \* \*

In Command Central, Gregson found Radcliff drawn up before a bank of telescreens, watching shuttle ships close in on the perimeter of Vega Jumpoff and nudge their noses into iris-diaphragm docks.

Beside the Security Bureau director stood a rangy man with a rather blunt, intense face. He wore a Space Division uniform whose epaulets bore five stars.

Radcliff called Gregson over and said, "This is General Forrester, head of the Space Division. He will work with you when we ease Vega Jumpoff down to its two thousand-mile orbit."

Neither acknowledged the introduction. 137

"I see you've got our spin properly stabilized," Forrester said.

"He's accomplished wonders with Life-Support too," Radcliff testified. "There's still much to be done, of course, but that can wait until we become established in our new orbit."

"Will the orbital change be difficult?" Forrester asked.

"Not particularly." Gregson settled down in an observation chair. "It's a matter of cross-firing opposing pairs of spin-control rockets as they rotate past orbit-parallel."

"Sounds complicated," said Radcliff. "Is it done automatically?"

Gregson nodded. "But overall steering has to be supervised manually, by overriding the auto-control system."

"Can you do it?" Forrester seemed concerned.

"I've been checked out in Propulsion Control."

"Is the automatic system in proper operating condition?"

"Practically. As a result of adjustments we've just made in Gravity Management. More circuit checks will have to be run, though."

Forrester frowned and, on the evidence of his apparent confusion, Gregson gathered that he had earned his position more on the basis of hypersensitivity than as a result of technical qualification.

"What's Gravity Management got to do with it?" the general asked.

Patiently, Gregson explained, "Gravity Management and Spin Control are the same thing. Spin Control's regulatory jets do double duty as propulsion units."

"Oh."

But it was obvious Forrester was wishing for a bit of rault so he could zylph his way to full comprehension without having to embarrass himself by asking for details.

These, Gregson realized, represented the New Order in store for Earth: the oligarchy; the top of the pyramid; the barons of a brutal feudal system that would not oversee its vassals by the authority of bestowed title. They would rule by virtue of an already-achieved control of Earth's productive means, of its political institutions, its military establishments.

The general turned toward Radcliff. "You seem to have the right man for the job, Weldon."

"I'm quite sure we have. And he works willingly."

"Zylph potential?"

"Awkward. But he's just crossed the threshold. Given enough time, he'll zylph as well as the rest of us."

138

Then Radcliff faced Gregson. "Actually, *you* have iw over a barrel, in a sense, Greg. Quite frankly, we need you. And we should like to have you with us-voluntarily."

"You have my cooperation," Gregson pointed out, "not so much because you hold a couple of hostages, but . . ."

"If not for the sake of the hostages, Mr. Gregson," Forrester broke in, "why then *are* you helping us?"

It was Radcliff, though, who answered-with an amused smile. "Because he agrees that the time has come to bring Earth within range of Vega JumpofPs rault suppressor and stop the Screemies. He will, I imagine, go along with us until we accomplish that purpose. Afterward, he will-shall we put it melodramatically?-do everything within his power to fight the bureau. Right, Greg?"

Gregson said nothing.

"In which case," Radcliff went on facetiously, "I suppose I'll have to do something to mollify Mr. Gregson, in order that his reprisal will not be too severe. And such mollification has already been arranged. She awaits you at the pool, Greg."

\* \* \*

Gregson sent the electric cart scampering for the park, trying not to imagine Radcliff would have been humane enough to release Helen. Yet, it way possible. For a hostage would lose none of her value or availability if allowed free run of the satellite.

He drove on into the park and left the cart beside an artificial tree glistening with droplets from a recent sprinkling. Skirting flower beds, he drew up on a tile terrace bordering the pool.

There were perhaps thirty persons in swimming, sunning themselves or dozing in beach chairs. More than half were women. His gaze went hastily from one to the other.

Then he spotted her . . . lying face-down, wearing a brief two-piece bathing suit and with

a towel covering her head. It *was* she!

He hastened over and dropped to his knees. "Helen!"

Evidently having expected him, she said, "Hello, Greg."

But the voice was too low-pitched to be Helen's!

Karen Rakaar sat up and smiled. She laid a hand on his wrist and said, "Old home week for Versailles alumni?"

Gregson could not mask his disappointment as he dropped back on his haunches and reluctantly erased the poignant image that had flared briefly in his memory—Helen's lustrous  
139

blond hair sparkling with sun and snow as he had pinned her to the ground an eternity ago.

"I was so delighted to hear you didn't leave Versailles in the same manner as Simmons," Karen said cheerily. "I'm not here because I want to be."

"I understand. But you might change your mind, mightn't you?"

She shifted her position, drawing shapely legs up beneath her. It was obvious that the slightly sensuous movement had been purposely provocative. Her flesh-colored swimsuit was boldly scant,

"Oh, Greg," she chided, tossing her head briefly. "Be practical."

"Are you supposed to help me be practical?" "Frankly, yes." She clung to his arm, holding it tightly against her. "And practicality wouldn't be a bad idea. In the bureau's eyes, you're quite valuable, you know. For your essential services, delivered willingly, you could name your own price."

She moved closer still. "For us, Greg, it could be Utopia. And I'm not someone who's separated from you by the barrier of hypersensitivity. We're both superior. We're both zylphers."

She had obviously been briefed on all the details, if she hadn't zylphed them for herself at Versailles. He looked down at her and had to acknowledge her attractiveness. Her eyes were like the blue of the pool and there was a firmness, yet tenderness about her lips that suggested both gaiety and the capacity for consuming sensuality.

Rising to dry herself, she stood in the equisolar light like a tall, self-assured Grecian figure carved out of the richest Carrara marble. Though youthful, she suggested a woman destined to wield a scepter, yet one who would willingly serve vassalage to her own emotions.

Evidently encouraged by his appraising stare, she glanced at her watch. "Why, it's dinner time! I'll only take a moment to dress. Radcliff says you have nothing to do this evening. How about a cocktail or two, then dinner and—well, whatever you say."

He didn't answer. But she accepted his silence as an affirmative, caught his hand momentarily and promised, "I'll be right back."

Watching the flowing rhythm of her long limbs as she strode off, he reflected briefly and miserably on the odds ar-

140

ayed against him. There was nothing he could do to help either himself or Helen and her uncle as long as they kept him under close surveillance. But what if he reacted to their lure in the manner they hoped he would?

Feeling both purpose and compunction, he waited for Karen. When they left he noticed he was not under guard for the first time since he had come aboard Vega Jumpoff.

\* \* \*

Karen had been wrong, though, about the Security Bureau director's having nothing for him to do the rest of the evening. Quite the opposite was true. They had finished dinner and returned to her suite and she had tuned in soft music and mixed drinks when the knock came at her door.

Gregson thought they must be overwhelmingly certain of their tactics when the International Guardsman said, "I knew I'd find you here. You're wanted in Peripheral

Auditorium B."

Karen pecked him on the cheek. "I'll keep the drinks chilled."

Auditorium B, whose floor curved gently in two directions, was sparsely illuminated because it also served as an observation compartment. Through the one-way transparency of its deck was now visible a half-Earth, its darkened area bathed in moonlight and appearing much like a huge opal in a setting of chip diamonds.

Gregson waited at the rear of the hall. Altogether, perhaps fifty persons were assembled there, mostly men. On the stage, Radcliff, flanked by a pair of armed guards, leaned casually upon the lectern.

". . . and," he was saying, "immediately after the isolation institutes are closed, the International Guard will be beefed up by general military conscription throughout the Compact area."

"How long will it be before we're in position to go on the offensive against the Oriental power structure?" asked Soviet Premier Baranovsky through his translingual horn.

"Within a few weeks. We can't be certain now how much opposition we'll meet. But we'll be well prepared."

"And the Peking zylphers?" asked an Oxford-trained voice. "Will they be assimilated by our organization?"

"Possibly, Mr. Prime Minister. They're not nearly as well organized as we are, of course. But they *do* have control of their area. Therefore it will be more convenient to superim-141 pose our authority on top of theirs, rather than tear down their power structure and start from scratch."

When there were no more questions, Radcliff added, "That will be all then, until our first strategy session tomorrow."

As the audience filed out he motioned Gregson to the stage.

"As you can see," Radcliff said when they were alone, "we are finally getting things organized. I trust you were not disappointed with the surprise I arranged for you."

"Anything to keep the hired help happy?"

"If you put it that way. But it needn't appear so mercenary, you know. Karen, I understand, is somewhat infatuated with you."

"What's in it for her?"

"The Netherlands. But there could be more-for both of you."

With pretended thoughtfulness, Gregson said, "Karen's a very beautiful girl."

Radcliff smiled. "I had hoped you would think so. Well, day after tomorrow we weigh anchor and move toward our two thousand-mile orbit. Can you have the propulsion system ready by then?"

"Easily. I can run my checks in a couple of hours."

"Excellent."

"You have your suppressor putting out enough stygum-ness?"

"We are now generating a rault-free sphere of fourteen thousand-mile radius. You do your job and within a matter of days the Screamers will stop screaming-permanently."

\*V \* \*

It was perhaps three in the morning-with Vega Jumpoff orbiting through Earth's shadow-that Gregson finally dislodged Karen's head from his shoulder, fluffed his pillow and went to sleep.

But his slumber was not dreamless. For soon, with godlike omniscience, he seemed to be drifting languidly through vast reaches of galactic space, the spangled splendor of the Milky Way arrayed about him like a fiercely sparkling tiara.

Spiraling arms of glittering stars, suffused with the glow of warmly radiant nebulae, wrapped about Gregson, transfiguring him with a giddy sense of oneness with the entirety of cosmic creation.

During that moment of exalted awareness, it was as though he shared the mysteries of the universe. Countless were the



stars that whirled in timeless revolution about the galactic concourse. Yet he seemed aware of each individually, of their sizes and distances, their arrangement into complex systems and clusters, their absolute magnitudes and frequencies and radiation patterns. Crying for attention were those distraught stellar cauldrons whose frenzied thermonuclear processes had brought them to the very brink of self-immolation as novae.

It was his first hyperperceptive dream.

And in it, as though capable of changing his perspective at will, he was able to zylph the magnificent font of hyperradi-ance whose lustrous beauty dimmed even the brilliant stars which it bathed in all-permeating rault. Chandeen, he appreciated now as a jewel among jewels that imparted meaning and purpose to the Galaxy which it dominated.

The harmony it lavished upon every atom in its domain was disturbed only by the harsh presence of the Stygumbra of hyperdarkness that was choking countless millions of stars and clusters.

At the very edge of that awful shadow, Gregson recognized Sol and its family of planets as they drifted on toward their full baptism of rault after immeasurable millennia of stifling stygumbraic obscurity.

Again his perspective changed-from the cosmic to the mundane. And he was intricately aware of the nude Dutch girl who slept soundly beside him, dreaming her so clearly zylphable dreams of a Utopia in which she reigned regally.

Gregson shifted his head on the pillow and realized suddenly that it was no dream-this far-ranging excursion into the realm of zylphing while hyperradiance poured from Chandeen.

He was-had been, all along-*awake!*

The powerful suppressor aboard VJO had failed. And its projected sphere of stygumness had collapsed.

*chapter xvi*

Now he listened to the distant sounds of anxious activity that came through the bulkheads of Vega Jumpoff Station. Confounded, he sat on the edge of the bed, unaware that Karen had stirred beside him before retreating into even deeper sleep.

Concentrating on hyperperception, he found his glial attention focused on distant Earth, trapped in the fascination of its writhing lines of magnetic force fanning out like fingers of cold fire to pluck at all the seething electrical currents hi VJO. The planet's gravitational gradient was a rustling, bright halo-pulling, tugging, beckoning even this far out in space.

Intermingled with the cosmic impressions were the superficial features of Earth's darkened and sunlit surfaces. He could not miss the intriguing patterns of electrical energy that mottled the land areas-flowing, pulsating, trembling-as they marked the location of each metropolis.

And now he recognized the subtle hyperemanations of desperation that also seemed to rise miasmlike from the cities as Earth was carried more boldly, inexorably out of the Styg-umbra and as additional thousands everywhere were experiencing their first horrifying seizures of rault sensitivity.

Then, abruptly, he was zylphing the station itself in all the awful clarity of hypersensitivity. Each corridor and compartments of scores of laboring systems and their support ment, each scurrying charge in all the electronic instruments,

every bolt and rivet and metal panel, the individual components of scores of laboring systems and their support machinery. So overwhelming was the deluge of sensory data that he could never hope to assimilate it.

His perception shifted and then he was /ylphing only the swirling air currents as they raced through the station's ventilation systems. It was as though he had a schematic spread before him and was instantly aware of each filter and blower, every chemical recycling unit, all of the thousands of ducts and louvered panels.

There were the hundreds of persons aboard the station- many still asleep, others darting about in frantic response to the emergency of the collapsed suppressor field. Gregson noted with relief that they were far too busy to notice that he was an attentive zylpher of their actions.

It was then that he perceived the small, weak, pulsating field of stygumness that enveloped the nave and he knew he had at last located the super suppressor. It seemed only logical now that the stygumness generator *should* be at the very center of VJO, where minimum centrifugal force would simplify assembly and where security would be less of a problem.

It wasn't until that moment that he recognized his opportunity to learn whether Helen and her uncle were aboard.

Anxiously, he zylphed from compartment to compartment, taking in whole sections of the peripheral ring in single hyperperceptive glances, covering the satellite thoroughly and then going back to search it a second and a third time.

Meanwhile, the impenetrable field of stygumness that gripped the nave was expanding and collapsing like a monstrous marine creature which had been washed ashore and was gasping its dying breaths.

Eventually he satisfied himself that Bill and Helen were nowhere within zylphing range. If they were aboard VJO at all, they could only be in the hub, where the rault suppressor itself was located.

Abruptly, the field of stygumness swept forcefully outward, engulfing the entire station and leaving Gregson hypersensitively blind. Then, just as suddenly, it collapsed again.

But now he was aware of someone questing for his attention-someone in an optically darkened compartment in the outer ring a quarter of the way around the peripheral corridor. He could sense the gentle tugs on his consciousness, like a tapping upon his shoulder. 145

It was as though he might have been the only sighted person in a vast room filled with blind persons and had suddenly seen someone staring in his direction, beckoning to him. Apprehensively, he started to turn away from the disturbing sensation.

But nevertheless he focused his glial attention on the obscure compartment filled with crates that were cleated to the deck. He sensed the locked door and, behind it, the Valorian girl Andelia.

Despair and fright surrounded her like a nimbus, fluorescing in the hyperradiance. But she appeared outwardly calm, otherwise, as she leaned back against a crate and returned his direct attention.

Then he seemed to be zylphing straight into her mind, sensing her attitude of restrained desperation, participating in the thought images that were forming there. And it was as though he could reach deep into her mind and intercept her thoughts as she brought them forth for his perception.

*You must not do what they tell you, Gregson,* she appeared to be warning him desperately.

And her emotions came to him with such clarity and sincerity that it was impossible to suspect her any longer. For hyperradiation was like an all-revealing light, a sanctifying fire which unmasked duplicity and bared the basic attributes of the soul in all its spiritual nakedness.

*The suppressor must not be used,* she pleaded. *We've got to refuse to help them!*

*But I can't!* he felt himself thinking.

*I know it's horrible to deny Earth the suppressor's protection. Yet we've got to-for a while, at least!*

*But within days millions will be screaming themselves to death!*

He felt the fierceness of her desire to convince him as she begged, *Don't you see we must hold off? We're working on a plan-Wellford and two senior members of the Valorian expedition.*

*What is the plan?*

*Only the three of them know. That way there's little chance the bureau can learn our strategy from anybody they capture.*

*How can we help if we don't even know what they're going to do?*

Elsewhere aboard VJO, Security Bureau personnel scampered about, all bending their efforts to regeneration of the rault suppressor's field of stygumness. All of them so completely

preoccupied that they were unaware of the intimate contact Gregson and the Valorian girl had established. Who would notice a whispered conversation in an auditorium that was being evacuated to the frantic cry of "Fire! Fire!?"

*Isn't it logical, Andelia thought, that -whatever action they are preparing must be timed for the immediate future?*

*When the bureau tries to move VJO?*

*Perhaps before then!*

*So we have to hold things up until Wellford and the others can act?*

*Exactly. And anything you and I can do to interfere with the bureau now may be a decisive contribution.*

Hypervisually, he studied Andelia for a moment. Her straightforwardness was compelling. And he could only feel a deep sense of guilt, of lost opportunity over having doubted Wellford and the Valerians.

*We understood, Andelia assured. We realized later that we ourselves were responsible for the suspicions you must have felt at the castle. But we didn't know how thoroughly you had been conditioned against us.*

*The Valorians-they don't have a hypnotic faculty?* he said, embarrassed by his former gullibility.

*No, Gregson. None whatever.*

*What can I do?*

*You can see to it that the station doesn't leave this orbit before we are ready to act.*

*But you don't understand! I'm not free to do what I want! They've got . . .*

Abruptly his communicative thoughts were spending themselves within the confines of his own mind. For, again, the suppressor's sphere of stygumness had exploded outward, this time with decisive force.

And two hours later he was still sitting on the edge of the bed while the Dutch girl Karen Rakaar slept on beside him. There was so much he had wanted to ask Andelia. Perhaps she even knew whether Helen and Bill were in the station's hub.

But eventually it became evident that the trouble with the suppressor had been corrected and that he would get more information from Andelia only by talking orally with her.

When the station 0800 buzzer sounded softly in the corridor, he went to the snack bar for coffee before returning to Karen's suite for the sleep he had missed during the night. 147

Four hours later he was having lunch with an exceptionally effusive Karen in the main dining hall. Her auburn hair was upswept and sprayed firmly into place, as a safeguard against the tousling it might otherwise undergo from accelerative and centrifugal fluctuations while VJO changed orbits. Her eyes, always provocative, were especially engaging as she glanced up occasionally.

"Go along with them, Greg," she pleaded. "As I said before, you can name your own price."

Using his fork, he toyed, as though in indecision, with the food on his plate. He *had* to see Andelia. But how?

Karen laid a slender, well manicured hand on his forearm. "Don't you understand that Radcliff *needs* you? By supervising VJO under conditions of total stygumness, you'll be providing a service he couldn't buy-anywhere."

He pretended to be giving serious thought to her proposal, thankful all the while for the suppressor's complete cancellation of rault that was shielding his thoughts. At the same

time, though, he resented the stygumness because it prevented his zylphing Andelia.

"I could perhaps arrange to stay aboard permanently, you know," she suggested, staring earnestly at him.

But Gregson was mentally reconstructing the system of ventilation shafts he had zylphed during the suppressor's breakdown. As he recalled, there was a large intake grating in the park, hidden behind a clump of shrubbery close to the pool. Less than two hundred feet away the same shaft was connected to another louvered panel in the storeroom where the Valorian girl was imprisoned.

"And VJO is going to be more than just a housing for the rault suppressor," Karen went on. "It'll be a seat of authority. Gradually, they'll enlarge it, transform it into the most luxurious . . ."

Radcliff drew up unexpectedly before the table. "Not interrupting anything, I hope," he said approvingly.

Karen smiled over at Gregson, then back at the director.

Radcliff took a chair. "I let you sack in this morning," he told Gregson, "so you could stockpile your energy. Tomorrow night we start dropping down to our two thousand-mile orbit. You'll be pretty busy between now and then."

Gregson was surprised. "You're still going to take it down after . . ." He bit off the sentence, but not soon enough.

Radcliff raised an eyebrow. "Oh, you know about the suppressor trouble? Did you zylph what happened?"

148

"Trouble?" Karen asked, puzzled.

"No," Gregson lied. "I heard about it this morning. We slept through it."

"We slept through *what*?" Karen demanded.

"Our suppressor was out for almost three hours early this morning," the director explained.

"Anything serious?"

"Oh, no. We finally got all our stygumness generators hooked in and promptly overloaded the circuit. The field collapsed."

"But it's all right now?"

"It's perfect. We installed two supplemental power units with emergency cut-ins. Won't have that trouble again. By the time we're ready for our transorbital maneuver it'll have had a thirty-hour test."

He glanced at his watch. "Honeymoon's over," he said facetiously. "Tune for you to get busy running your checks on our propulsion system, Greg. I have a crew standing by in Command Central."

\* \* \*

Since he had to work constantly with his technical personnel throughout the remainder of the day, it wasn't until late in the evening that Gregson finally found a few minutes for himself.

Twice during the afternoon he had passed along the peripheral corridor by the storeroom in which Andelia was being held. And, since he had been accompanied by a crew each time, he had refrained from even glancing at the locked door.

In Central Park early in the evening, however, while directing a maintenance detail in draining the pool, preparatory to orbital maneuvers, he had managed to step behind the shrubbery and check on the intake louver. It was as he had zylphed it. The simple removal of four screws would unfasten the grating and provide access to the ventilation duct.

Afterward he supervised refueling of the fore-and-aft spin-control jets, then assigned two gangs to the task of securing loose gear aboard the station and equipping all bunks with full-wrap anti-inertial sheaths.

Finally, after instructing the eight o'clock shift, he sloughed off Radcliff's compliments on an "apparently good job so far" and reported that he was taking off for supper.

En route to the dining hall, however, he paused to make certain no one was in the

corridor watching, then stepped quickly into the now deserted park. 149

The louvered panel came off with little resistance and presently he was crawling through the ventilation duct, negotiating its occasional turns and remarking to himself on the accuracy with which he had retained his hyperimpressions of the tunnel system.

He located the storeroom's intake panel and called out softly to Andelia before kicking the screen from its moorings. Then he made his way through the maze of cleated crates and found the Valorian girl where he had last zylphed her the night before.

"I knew you would come through the air ducts," she said. "I sensed the plan in your mind."

"But I hadn't even thought of it then!"

"Not consciously, perhaps." She sat upon a crate by the door.

"We're supposed to start moving Vega Jumpoff towards its two thousand-mile orbit tomorrow," he disclosed.

"I know. They told me."

"I've been making preparations."

"Then you've decided to accommodate them?"

"I have to." He spread his hands helplessly. "Bucking Rad-cliff isn't a simple thing with a yes-no answer. You see, he has two hostages . . ."

She lowered her eyes. "One of whom means very much to you."

"Both do."

"But don't you realize that . . ." She cut herself short and looked away. "I was going to say that they're only *two* persons."

"I can count," he shot back angrily. "Are they here-on VJO?"

"I don't know. If they are, they must be in the hub. I don't suppose I can blame you if you decide to protect them."

"I haven't decided that yet-not finally. I know what the stakes are. And VJO isn't going to leave this orbit on schedule."

A smile of approval softened her sober features. "Then you're going to delay them?"

"I'll foul up something at the last minute-make it look authentic so I'll have a good excuse."

She paced in the small, cleared area near the door. "If you could only escape! Then they wouldn't be able to move the station."

"I couldn't leave-not while they have Helen and Bill\*\*

ISO

She turned anxiously toward him. "There's a shuttle berth in the hub! If there's a ship in dock, and if your friends are there too . . ."

Andelia started as a key grated in the door's lock.

Gregson lunged behind a crate.

The door opened and a Guardsman stepped hi and closed it behind him.

His back to Gregson, he confronted the Valorian girl. "Radcliff says you're excess gear and I'm to do something about it."

The crimson flash of his pencil-beam laser pistol stabbed into the dimly lit room and Andelia fell clutching the wound in her chest where the fatal ray had sliced through both of her hearts.

Enraged with himself because he had not expected the brutal slaying and had been unprepared to stop it, Gregson leaped out at the Guardsman and dropped him with a vicious chop across the nape.

\* \* \*

While the man writhed from the paralyzing effects of the blow, Gregson recovered the weapon and directed its beam back and forth across the guard's body. It wasn't until the lethal ray weakened considerably that he realized he was wasting its charge.

Then, pocketing the gun, he stepped into the corridor.

Time for accommodating the bureau was over. The issue had been forced. For there

would be no one to suspect except himself when the two bodies were eventually discovered. He *had* to act now. And his first move must be to determine whether Bill and Helen *were* in the hub, how closely they were being guarded, whether a shuttle craft *was* docked there.

He struck out for the nearest radial-shaft elevator.

Ascending along the spoke toward the nave, he checked the pistol's charge indicator and saw that the beam would no longer be of lethal intensity.

Slowly his weight decreased until it was only the calculated, gradual acceleration of the elevator that kept his feet on the floor. When the red light flashed, he gripped the horizontal changeover bar. The cage decelerated gently and his body pivoted around the bar in a half somersault until he was standing on the ceiling.

The elevator nestled against its stops and the door slid open. He shoved off into the hub's peripheral corridor and 151

floated toward the nearest nave entrance. Around the curve, however, he failed to bring himself to a halt before colliding with the floating body of a Guardsman who had evidently been broad-beamed to death.

Cautiously, he propelled himself from stanchion to stanchion until he reached the entrance. Inside, illumination was sparse. Structural girders cast broad shadows against cylindrical walls. In the axial bulkhead an air lock was irised open around the sleek nose of a coal-black shuttle craft whose hatch was ajar and whose hull was studded with radar impulse-deflection discs.

And then he spotted the station's rault suppressor—a huge concentration of electronic components anchored by guy wires and trailing off cables to a power box in the bulkhead.

But there were three men drifting around the stygumness generator, pads and inscribers hi hand. They paused occasionally, glanced at components and made either notations or sketches,

Gregson pulled himself along an I-beam, approaching for a closer look. But his shoulder came in contact with a floating laser pistol which he hadn't seen. The weapon rebounded and clanked against a structural member. Instantly the three men twisted around.

The closest was Wellford.

Reflexively, he loosed a laser discharge that was accurately aimed despite his awkward attitude.

152

*chapter xvii*

*Sirens squealed throughout Vega Jumpoff as thick-gasketed hatches thudded shut, sealing off the section whose major air leakage had tripped the alarm. Moments earlier a tremor had jarred the entire station. And spin control jets had labored to reestablish the centrifugal constant.*

*But it was half an hour before reports began filtering through. Meanwhile, RadclifJ scrutinized the screens. In orbit a mile from VJO, one of the telesensors was sending back pictures of a gaping hole in the outer ring.*

*Eventually the intercom squawked: "Damage restricted to Shuttle Traffic Control. The whole section's wiped out."*

*"Meteor?" the Security Bureau director asked.*

*"Hardly. The object's velocity was slow enough to leave a peelback in the outer skin at the points of entry and exit."*

*RadclifJ suspected it had been a missile—until another station reported: "Shuttle craft SC-142 missing from its mooring."*

*Then, shortly thereafter: "The suppressor sentry's been killed!"*

*"Locate Gregson," RadclifJ ordered all stations. "Bring him here."*

*But, in turn, each station acknowledged Gregson was nowhere to be found. By then, Karen had arrived to report he was not with her.*

*And the intercom rasped, "Twisted wreckage two thousand 153*

*miles planetward-in reentry trajectory. Looks like it might be the SC-142."*

*Radcliff was reasonably certain of what had happened: Gregson had found a spacesuit, slain a guard, propelled himself to the shuttle and sent it crashing through Vega Jumpoff in a suicidal plunge.*

\* \* \*

When Gregson regained consciousness, he raised an enfeebled hand to his throbbing head.

"Really, Greg, this is becoming rather tiresome-Abroad-beaming you and having to wait for you to come around."

Wellford was straddling a chair, his arms curved around its back rest.

Lying on the floor, Gregson surveyed walls of unfinished wood, with light seeping through slots where sheathing failed to meet.

"If you're trying to zylph . . ." Wellford began.

"I know," Gregson scoffed. "You've already zylphed *me*. But, since then, the area's been shielded by a rault suppressor."

"Quite true. Or rather, almost. We have individual suppressors for each person, each structure, each piece of equipment Yours is in your coat pocket."

Gregson stared out the window. There were trees everywhere, with but few clearings. Beyond, distant mountain spurs. A shack here and there. Camouflage netting was provided in spots where overhead foliage was thin. He could see three Space Division shuttles-two gleaming like silver, the other coal-black and profusely equipped with radar impulse-deflection antennae. "Where are we?" he asked.

"I don't suppose it would be too hazardous to answer that one. In the Austrian Alps."

Gregson stood up and swore. "I've been a damned fool. At the castle I thought you were conditioned by the Valerians and . . ."

"I can appreciate how you felt. And I'm quite sorry for all those ambiguous circumstances. I regret my oversight, of course. And I zylphed that you've realized *your* errors."

"Mine cost us Andelia."

"Yes, I know. But we were all responsible, in a sense."

Gregson went over to the window. "Andelia thought you were working on a major attack plan."

"Of course we are. And, by making it possible for us to pluck you off VJO, you've helped us along considerably."

154

"How so?"

"They were going to start bringing the station down tonight. That didn't give us enough time to act. But now that they don't have you to pull off then- orbital maneuver, they'll be delayed. And we shall have time for our move." "What move?"

The Englishman hunched his shoulders. "Sorry, but I can't divulge it. Andelia explained why not."

Gregson could understand his elimination from strategy planning. After all, he did seem to have a propensity for winding up first on one side, then on the other.

But Wellford placed a hand on his shoulder. "You shouldn't feel excluded. Let me say this: Now that we have you with us, you'll be expected to play a vital part in the execution of our plan."

A Valerian appeared in the doorway, motioning toward a peak. "Remanu has just zylphed that Space Division ship in low orbit."

"Very well," the Englishman said. "Tell him to keep his zylphing at a minimum. And make certain everything is fully shielded."

After the Valerian had gone, Gregson motioned toward the three space craft. "You're probably planning an attack on VJO. But don't you think RadcliffFU be prepared-after your raid last night?"

"I'd be most surprised if he even knew we were there. We did nothing to the suppressor except study it. And, as for your being spirited away, we managed excellent coverup work on that, seizing one of their moored ships and setting it to home in on Shuttle Control."

Wellford explained how it had been done and concluded with, "So you see, as far as Radcliff is concerned, you are both the murderer of two of his guards and a martyr to your own cause."

Gregson had to admire the other's ingenuity and thoroughness. "Did you get your message off at the castle?"

"We finished the transmitter and watched its subspace antenna sniff out the precise direction in terms of equinormal space orientation. Then the bureau hopper swooped down. We fed in the taped message and ruddy well got out of there. But there was time for the message to be dispatched before the castle was destroyed."

"Then there'll be an armed Valerian force here to help out?"

155

"Indeed not. They wouldn't step in and upset an established government-no matter how it had established itself. That's our own business, although they're not above giving us counsel."

"Then what *was* the purpose of the message?"

"If we, as humans, can smash the conspiracy, we may expect all the technical personnel and equipment we shall need for setting up clinics and ushering our people into rault sensitivity-painlessly."

After a moment Wellford added, "And, on that score, it appears you are still somewhat skeptical over the Valerians' ability to bring an average person through the Screemies in three weeks."

Gregson shook his head. "It isn't easy to believe-not after what you and I went through for two years in isolation. Besides, you said you hadn't heard of anyone who'd been successfully treated."

"I hadn't, at the time. But I'd been out of touch with our other bases for weeks."

"Then there *are* people who've come through the barrier in that short a period?"

"Quite a number."

\* \* \*

Its roar muffled by foliage, the long-range hopper verti-caled down through a break in the trees and came to rest less than a hundred yards from the window. The pilot and two passengers started down the ramp. One, stout and elderly, groped along the rail, a hand extended before him and resting upon the shoulder of a young woman who led the way.

Gregson strained forward. Helen and her uncle!

Wellford chuckled in amusement. "You see, Radcliff never had them. He knew you had no information on their whereabouts, so he could well afford to pretend they were his prisoners."

"But how . . . ?"

"The Valerians, too, have made a point of searching for anyone capable of orderly self-introduction to hyperpercep-tion. They rounded up Forsythe and his niece less than a month ago."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't know about it myself until after we left the castle."

Gregson shouted and waved to Helen, then bolted for the door.

156

But Wellford trapped his arm. "It occurs to me that you should welcome our general prohibition against zylphing."

"What do you mean?"

The other shrugged. "Really, your behavior was quite normal. Can't say I shouldn't have reacted in the same manner myself. But sometimes the male perspective isn't quite understood outside the sex."



"I still don't . . ."

"Night before last-on VJO-Karen. I shouldn't imagine Helen would appreciate zylphing what went on."

"Oh." Gregson started out again, but less enthusiastically.

Then he stopped in the doorway and spun around. "Helen -zylphing?"

"But of course. She's proof that Valerians can administer the treatment in three weeks. She's not nearly a perfect zylpher. But she can do as well as you or I."

Moments later Helen's arms were around Gregson's neck and he whirled her about in order to clasp Bill's blindly extended hand.

"We were so excited when we heard about you this morning!" she exclaimed, anxiously scanning his face.

"So you were a prisoner aboard Vega Jumpoff," Forsythe observed. "Must have had a rough time."

While Gregson muttered an inadequate reply, Wellford offered guardedly, "Greg endured-ah, experiences above and beyond the call of duty. To say more would contribute only to his embarrassment."

"Oh, Greg!" Helen sympathized. "It must have been awful!"

"But," Wellford continued, "I'm sure he bore up bravely, sustained by the misapprehension that you were hostages and that whatever he-ah, endured was in your interest."

They walked toward the shack while Helen clung to Gregson's arm. She had on synthetic slacks and her light hair seemed even softer than the cashmere pullover she now wore. *She* was attractive too, but in a different, more enduring and subtler manner than Karen.

Just then a Valerian came out of the shack, carrying a compact radio transceiver. "Remanu has just zylphed three Security Bureau hoppers high in the atmosphere. They seem to be combing the Alps."

\* \* \*

After supper, Gregson and Helen sat on the steps of the shack while Forsythe stood in the doorway smoking his pipe. 157

In the twilight there was much bustle around the carbon-black shuttle craft. Personnel swarmed over its hull, using sparking electrical instruments to restore the sootlike coating. Activity about the other two shuttles was swift-paced too. Recesses in their slender, shining hulls were being fitted with heavy laser weapons.

"What's going on out there now, Greg?" Forsythe asked.

Gregson described the scene. When he had finished, Helen laughed and admonished her uncle, "If you're thinking of turning off your suppressor again, I'll call Wellford right over."

"I won't," he said forlornly after a moment.

And Gregson understood then what zylphing meant to Forsythe. Being doomed to blindness was no particular inconvenience-not when hypersensitivity was like a super light. This new form of perception was a godsend to him. But what about everybody else?

Helen hooked her arm in his. "What are you thinking about?"

"Whether we *need* hyperperception. We got along all right without it."

"We got along, maybe," Forsythe rejoined, "but only if you consider an endless history of war and crime, hatred and oppression as being desirable."

"What do you mean?"

Helen explored his eyes. "Don't you see what rault sensitivity *really* means? No one will ever again be an island. Each mind will be open. No harmful thought can ever be assured privacy. There'll be no duplicity, no treachery, or lying, or secrets."

Gregson recalled that even an instructor at Versailles had philosophically explored "a society in which everyone zylphed," and had concluded there would be no sanctuary in private thought.

"It will be a different world, won't it," he said. "Well have to learn to accommodate one

another, be tolerant, understanding, helpful."

Wellford came over from the blackened shuttle craft and propped a foot on the bottom step. "I didn't notice when I zylphed you last night, Greg, but-tell me about Vega Jump-off's Earth Communications. Is it still in operating condition?"

Gregson nodded. "I checked it out last week."

"Then it's evidently a vital part of Radcliff's strategy."

158

"Very vital. First-the end of the Screemies. Second- world-wide military consolidation. Third-the conspiracy comes out into the open, using Earth Communications as its voice of authority."

Suddenly there was the distant sound of a long-range hopper cleaving low, dense atmosphere.

"One of ours?" Forsythe asked anxiously.

"No," Wellford said, listening. The roar trailed off into the murky silence of nightfall.

Later, because the evening was quiet and pleasant and because the air carried only a negligible chill, Gregson walked hand in hand with Helen toward a clearing south of the shuttle ships.

At the edge of the glade she sat upon a low, broad outcropping, leaning back on straightened arms and tilting her face upward. Crisp starlight seemed to sparkle in her hair, just as snowflakes had once done on a cold Pennsylvania day.

Gregson lighted a cigarette. To the southwest, halfway to the zenith, a pale point of light wheeled solemnly among the stars-VJO. He checked the illuminated dial of his watch. Within a few hours the station would be sweeping into Earth's umbra.

He thrust his hand into his pocket and encountered the metal casing of his rault suppressor, feeling the warmth of its glowing red bulb. Suddenly convinced that the night was too tranquil to conceal lurking peril, he turned the instrument's knob all the way off.

And at once he was conscious of the great flood of hyper-radiance that bathed everything in the vicinity. Only Helen was indiscernible. Even though he could still see her sitting upon the rock, she was nowhere to be zylphed. For her suppressor left an almost imperceptible vacuum in his area of glial perception.

All around, optical darkness persisted but, hypervisually, the emanations from Chandeen were undiminished in intensity. He zylphed the details of the forest. And he was aware of each individual tree and every leaf upon all the branches, the roosting birdlife and dormant insects, the larger animals that slept hidden in the underbrush.

He let his perception sweep outward to celestial range and took in, simultaneously, all the stars of the Galaxy and the great nebulae and clusters and immense suns that were gorging themselves on the free hydrogen of the regions through which they drifted.

159

And now he zylphed the edge of Chandeen-just below the visual horizon. There was a magnificence, an overwhelming splendor, a glial-oumbing hyperbrilliance about the well-spring of rault that forced him to turn his direct perception aside.

"Your suppressor's off, isn't it?" Helen asked.

But, preoccupied with the beauty and supreme order of the rault-limned cosmos, he was hardly aware she had spoken.

She drew closer. "We've never zylphed each other, have we?"

And suddenly the stygumness which enveloped her shrank in upon itself as she, too, turned off her suppressor.

His glial attention thus drawn back to his immediate surroundings, he zylphed the girl and realized at once that she was, in turn, zylphing his experience with Karen aboard Vega Jumpoff. It was all there in his *conscious* thoughts now, because he wanted her to know. Yet he couldn't hide his embarrassment.

But there had been no need for queasiness. Not only was she altogether tolerant, but she also understood that he would never have had the opportunity to escape VJO if he had

not earned Karen's and Radcliff's confidence.

He gripped her shoulder and her hair brushed across his hand and he sensed each of the thousands of silken strands as ...

Abruptly dismayed, he zylphed skyward. There was a hopper coming in low over the mountain crest to the east.

And suddenly, he realized the pilot had zylphed him and Helen long before they had become aware of him.

\* \* \*

Instantly Gregson turned up his suppressor to full output. But it was too late. The secrecy of the base had been compromised.

He caught the girl's hand and they raced toward the shack.

The hopper now was a roaring rumble in the sky as it headed directly for the glade. Then the darkness of the forest was cleaved by the lashing of heavy laser beams and Gregson imagined the craft had already unleashed its assault. But eventually he saw that the attacking beams had, rather, been directed from surface to air.

The drone of the hopper's impellers sputtered, then died, releasing the night back to ebon stillness. A moment later there was a jarring crash and the forest was bathed in a flickering, crimson glow.

160

Even as they reached the base site, scores of persons were running about in the darkness. Just then, however, floodlights came on, harshly illuminating the shacks and hoppers and shuttle craft.

"Greg!" Wellford called out. "Over here!"

The Englishman was poised on the ramp of the soot-black shuttle, signaling crews aboard the other two space craft.

Helen hung back while Gregson approached. "I'm afraid all this is my fault," he began. "You see . . ."

"Doesn't matter now. Perhaps it's just as well. By waiting any longer we might have been denied the chance of pulling the string."

He cupped his hands and shouted, "Everybody scatter! There may be a follow-up attack!"

Gregson turned to join the exodus.

But Wellford called down, "No, Greg! In here with me! You're needed on this mission!"

161

### *chapter xviii*

Halfway to rendezvous with Vega Jumpoff, Wellford made a final trajectory correction and checked the shuttle's rault suppressor to insure maximum output.

In the bucket seat beside him, Gregson said, "We don't need that thing now. We're within the station's stygumness field."

"But should they decide to turn off their suppressor, we must be certain that they'll zylph only our other two shuttles."

"You're using them to divert VJO's attention?"

"Exactly. While we go about more important tasks. Tend the shop a minute, will you? I've something to see to up forward."

Wellford squirmed out of the seat's harness and propelled himself into the cargo compartment.

Energizing the telescreen, Gregson directed its sensors rearward. But nowhere could he detect any Security Bureau craft. Eventually he understood why: With Shuttle Traffic Control out of commission, all docking would have to be done manually, visually. Thus, operations would be suspended while Vega Jumpoff was in Earth's umbra. Had the Englishman planned it that way? Had he purposely destroyed Traffic Control so that there would be no ships in the vicinity at this time?

Wellford returned and noticed the energized screen. "I

shouldn't imagine you'll find anything out here at the moment. We've arranged for the bureau to be much too busy Earthside."

"Doing what?"

Wellford glanced at his watch. "As of fifteen minutes ago, our ground forces began a massive assault on Space Division Command Central. The ultimate objective, of course, is to seize the base so that we may have use of it later. But if our attack merely manages to spread confusion and prevent shuttle craft operation for several hours, we shall be more than satisfied."

Through the forward port, Vega Jumpoff was still merely a point of light. Floating almost unnoticed against its stellar background, it hadn't yet entered Earth's shadow.

Wellford settled back in his seat and swung the telescreen on its axis so they could both look at it. He returned it until finally the other two shuttle craft swam like silvery slivers on the face of the tube. Sunlight glinted on their hulls as they arrogantly rejected concealment in Earth's umbra for an apparently fanatic attack on the station.

"Wouldn't you suppose," the Englishman asked, "that by now the satellite's radar and teleserisors have picked up our diversionary force?"

"I don't see how they could miss."

Wellford shoved the telescreen aside. "At this point things become a bit ticklish. Our success hinges entirely upon our other two shuttles. They must attract total attention and create enough commotion so that every eye, every sensor aboard the station will be upon them rather than us."

"Seems to me you have this ship pretty well insured against visual and radar detection."

"Only during free fall. When we decelerate, we're going to make a somewhat garish splash with our forward tubes, you know."

Gregson hadn't thought of that. But he reminded, "You got away with it last night when you made sketches of the station's suppressor."

"Indeed we did. And without employing diversionary tactics. But we can't hope for another serving of such good fortune. That's why we arranged the frontal attack concurrent with this mission."

\* \* \*

Ten minutes from the station, Wellford engaged the servo-mechanism that swung their seats a hundred and eighty de-163

degrees around. Then he injected fuel into the forward tubes and the crushing force of deceleration at maximum G-load subsequently dropped a veil of oblivion over their senses.

Timed circuits, however, cut off the fuel flow after a given interval and Gregson regained consciousness first. He turned the seats forward again and Vega Jumpoff, now eclipsed by Earth, drifted into the port—a huge, shadowy ring fitfully lighted by the laser beams that sliced out into the darkness from its peripheral gun stations.

Wellford came around and muttered: "That was somewhat rough, wasn't it?" But it was obvious he had referred to the minute-long glare of their forward tubes, rather than to the physical ordeal of compressed deceleration.

He hunched forward to stare at the satellite. "At least there are no laser gunners cutting loose in this direction, so I suppose we may assume we've thus far gone undetected."

Gregson could see the diversionary force now—one ship on either side of the wheel and within its plane of rotation. Forward and after tubes aboard both shuttles were firing frantically as they maneuvered to evade the whiplash of heavy laser artillery. But Gregson found it significant that the shuttles' beams were invariably wide of their mark. Apparently it was not intended that the satellite should receive any further damage.

Vega Jumpoff expanded perceptibly in the view port as Wellford allowed his craft, with its residue of momentum after deceleration, to drift in upon the station. Gingerly, he made a course correction, then another. Forward tubes belched once more, briefly, and Gregson strained against his harness. Finally they were aimed directly at the irismatic air lock in the

center of the station's nave.

Wellford grinned. "We now find ourselves down to the meat of the chestnut. After we picked you up in Paris, I zylphed an interesting experience you had had with Madame Carnot. Remember?"

Gregson shook his head.

"She played a despicable little trick on you. When you weren't expecting it, she turned up her personal rault caster to full output. What was it like?"

"Like a hundred flash bulbs going off in my brain."

In the corner of his vision Gregson watched one of the attacking ships take a pencil-thin laser beam broadside. It was sliced in half. The other, he noticed, began drawing farther away, while it fired even more furiously.

164

"Precisely," Wellford said in response to the other's simile. "Since then we've learned from the Valerians that an intense concentration of hyperradiance can be as injurious to the glial cells as a brilliant arc light is to the eyes—immensely more so, as a matter of fact."

When Gregson said nothing, the Englishman went on: "Such an exposure can completely and permanently destroy glial receptivity, to begin with. But we mustn't forget that the glial structure is everywhere within the brain, enveloping each neuron. Thus the damage is not confined to rault receptors alone. Injury spills over and stifles every habit pattern, every acquired function."

Gregson tried to reason ahead, but failed. "So?"

"So what do you suppose would happen if a rault suppressor, so powerful that it's generating a sphere of stygumness *thousands of miles* in diameter, should abruptly start putting out an equivalent amount of *hyperradiance* instead?"

Gregson instantly grasped the significance of the operation. "And with all the hierarchy of the conspiracy within a half mile of dead center!"

"You have the picture. The trick will be tapping into their suppressor and installing a parallel circuit that will transform it into a rault caster. Actually, we shall have only to hook hi the crystal modulators."

"And we're going to make the modifications now?"

Wellford nodded. "The parallel circuit will be activated by a time switch. We shall allow ourselves forty-five minutes to clear out before the generator shifts from one function to another. It'll be a very briefly sustained raultburst—just thirty seconds. Then the suppressor will come on again. Afterward it will be interesting to see what conditions prevail aboard Vega Jumpoff."

The Englishman handed him a schematic diagram. "This shows what we must do."

\* \* \*

Another minor burst of propulsion brought them exactly in line with the dock. The shuttle's nose engaged an actuating stud. Irismatic leaves folded open around the hull's forward section as the ship inched into the hub's air lock. Magnetic fasteners grabbed hold and the craft jarred lightly as it shuddered into coupled position.

They propelled themselves out through the cargo compartment and then into the interior of the hub, among the con-165

fusing framework of girders that glowed in the pale light of the super rault suppressor's tubes.

"Here." Wellford handed over a laser pistol. "Narrow-beam anything that moves—before it has the chance to sound an alarm."

Gregson anchored himself to a structural member and his alert stare leaped from one peripheral corridor entrance to the next, checking and rechecking each of the eight access hatchways.

Meanwhile, Wellford had reentered the shuttle. After a moment he drifted out again, the first of the compact crystal-modulator components clamped under his arm. He seized one of the guy wires and drew himself along toward the huge suppressor.

As he pulled away from the air lock, twin insulated leads, connecting the first component to the second, stretched taut and drew the latter from the shuttle's hold. After a moment he was towing an apparently endless chain of small, metal boxes, each equipped with a suction cup, toward the center of the nave compartment.

When he reached the rault suppressor, he selected the nearest radial I-beam and shoved the first of the crystal components into the girder's recess, attaching it by its cup.

Now he hauled the chain swiftly out of the shuttle, forcing each box into position along the beam as he progressed outward. When the last of the train was in place he went back to the ship and began with a second, then a third series of components.

He made a final trip into the shuttle and returned with a pouch of electrician's tools, a small switch box that trailed six leads, and the schematic of the suppressor. As he headed for the hulking generator, he motioned Gregson over.

"If you'll take the switch," he suggested, "I shall start hooking things up."

Gregson, attaching himself to a guy wire by the crook of an elbow, managed to hold on to both the switch and his laser pistol. Alternately, he watched Wellford and the eight hatchways.

"There!" the Englishman said, relieved. "We've located the two leads we have to shunt." He pointed them out between a pair of the suppressor's larger louvered boxes.

Then he skinned the insulation in two places on each cable. "By making our connections first," he explained, "sup-

166

pressor current will continue flowing through our timer when we interrupt the circuit."

He secured four of the switch box leads to the exposed cables. Then he began attaching the crystal-modulator chains to the remaining two wires dangling from the timer.

When he had finished, he fished his snips out of the kit. "Now we have only to cut the cables and set our timer."

But just then Gregson was blinded by a crimson laser beam that speared into the compartment. He ducked instinctively and thrashed about, firing as he turned.

An International Guardsman was holding on to a stanchion in the nearest hatchway. Gregson managed to narrow-beam the man before he could get off a second shot. Then he shoved himself toward the peripheral corridor, nudging the lifeless guard out of his way.

He made a quick circuit of the passageway, checking all the elevator indicators. But none of the cages was in motion.

Back in the hub compartment, however, he found Wellford drifting about in a semiconscious condition. Part of his scalp had apparently been beamed off.

Gregson tore strips off his shirt and fashioned a makeshift compress to stem the flow of blood.

"I ... I've set the switch," the Englishman muttered. "Cut the cables and let's get out of here."

Gregson left him there and went back to the suppressor. But the snips were nowhere to be found.

He readjusted his laser pistol and sliced through the twin leads with a slender beam. Then he hauled Wellford back into the shuttle.

\* \* \*

After an initial burst of reverse propulsion, he allowed the craft to drift perhaps a hundred yards. Then he gave the forward tubes a ten-second injection of fuel.

"Enough," Wellford cautioned, his features twisted with pain. "If they discover us, they'll inspect the hub compartment."

Ever so slowly, it seemed, they drifted away from Vega Jumpoff. The outer doughnut's laser batteries had quit firing and the second diversionary shuttle craft was nowhere in sight.

Some twenty minutes later, Wellford suggested, "Very well, let's turn about. At top acceleration we should be a few thousand miles away before raultburst."

While Gregson brought the ship's nose around, the other 167

added, "Let's make certain aD our rault suppressors are on full power. It might blunt some of the metabrilliance of that flash."

It was somewhat less than -fifteen minutes later when Greg-son jolted in the seat as his glial receptors were swamped by the most intense assault of hyperradiance he had ever zylphed.

The overwhelming sensation was a searing physical pain, as severe as any of the Screemie assaults he had suffered during isolation. He had tried desperately to lock out the rault-burst by doggedly remaining nonsensitive. But so overpowering was the scorching blast that his endocrinal defenses were instantly shattered. And when the flaring torture finally ended he was exhausted and xlimp in his harness as he watched Wellford regain consciousness.

After a moment, the Englishman mumbled, "Unmitigated hell, wasn't it? Let's decelerate and start back for Vega Jumpoff."

He paused, then added, "Incidentally, we were relatively close to that raultburst too, you know. *Our* glial receptors also took somewhat of a searing. I shouldn't expect to be able to zylph anything at all for a year or two, at least"

\* \* \*

Back at the station they found the Space Division director in Command Central. General Forrester was crawling across the deck, leaving a trail of drool in his wake. It was not an unusual sight aboard VJO. Some of the personnel lay on their backs, kicking and murmuring. Others slept with their arms and legs drawn up close to their bodies.

Wellford struck out for Earth Communications. "If our ground assault paid maximum dividends too, our shuttles will start bringing help shortly so that we may roll up our sleeves and begin cleaning up this mess."

Along the ring's peripheral corridor they found a pair of electric carts and mounted them, continuing on their way.

"Of course," the Englishman went on, "our first objective will be to drop the station to its two thousand-mile orbit and bring a halt to the Screemies. Then there'll be informational telecasts. Next will come crash construction of a tight-beam raultronic transmitter so that we may establish contact with the Valerians. And then . . ."

But Gregson wasn't listening. Rather, his attention was focused down the broad corridor on a forlorn figure crumpled

168

against the bulkhead and entangled in the wreckage of an electric cart.

It was Weldon Radcliff. The Security Bureau director's head lay at an awkward angle on his shoulders and his eyes, glazed over in death, stared *off*. into infinity.

169

*epilogue*

*Waiting for Helen and the children to finish dressing for church, Gregson was relaxing on a patio chair, hat drawn down over his eyes. Glially nonreceptive at the moment, he was lulled into near sleep by the subtle, remote sounds of a quiet Pennsylvania morning.*

*In the field, Forsythe was whiling away the Sunday hours at target practice. Each zip of the laser pistol brought startled silence to the chatter of birds bathing in the dust of the barnyard.*

*A slamming door jarred Gregson fully awake and he zylphed Ted racing across the lawn in his best suit. He was a boy of whom he and Helen, could indeed be proud. Five years old now (five and a half! he would quickly insist if you were zylphing him) and already reigning over the farm as though it were his personal province.*

*He studied the child hypervisually. But the hitter's glial attention was on his mother as he raced toward the pond. Swimming around in his mind were gleeful visions of himself tossing rocks into the water ami leaping nimbly away from the splashes.*

*Amused, Gregson sensed Helen's desperation as she tried to force a shoe onto little*

*William's thrashing foot. She directed a helpless appeal toward her husband. And, in the intimacy of mutual zylphing, she wondered whether he intended doing anything about Ted.*

170

*But Gregson perceived that Forsythe had become aware of the situation and was now admonishing the older boy. Nor was it difficult to catch Ted's unspoken "Gosh, can't a fellow have any fun?"*

*Lying there in his euphoria, Gregson zylphed without fully perceiving everything about him, enjoying the pleasant omniscience that extended to every element of his environment. His attention wandered and he found himself sensing the fiery, sluggish flow of magma deep beneath the surface. He had never ceased to be intrigued by the new impressions his glial receptors were continually gathering.*

*Halfway back to the surface, he detected the impatient, persistent pressures along a fault and recognized the direction and intensity of the shearing force. He traced the stresses to their origin and zylphed that there would eventually be an earthquake—a moderate one. But not within the next hundred years.*

*"Greg! Oh, Greg!" Helen's clear voice attracted his hyper-visual attention. Finally she had William ready and was putting the finishing touches on herself—not that there was any fault in her appearance as it was.*

*He intercepted her flattered acknowledgment of the compliment. But really, Greg—after six years? And . . . was he ready for church? Or did he intend to nap the morning away?*

*He rose and stretched and his eyes swept across the distant, blossom-blanketed ridge while his hyperperception focused reflexively in that direction. Beyond the ridge—far beyond and below the horizon—he sensed the direct approach of the long-range hopper. It was a while, though, before he could either hear or see the craft.*

*By then Helen and William were beside him and Forsythe, •with Ted in hand, was closing in across the lawn. Together they watched the hopper maneuver into position to vertical down beside the house. But long before the craft landed, Gregson was zylphing its pilot.*

*It's always a delightful experience, Wellford greeted, to come back to this scene of connubial bliss.*

*And, Gregson returned his banter, it's always a pleasure to welcome a partly scalped Englishman.*

*The results of the scalping are zylphable, but at least not visible, thanks to London's best toupee supplier.*

*By now, Wellford had landed and leaped out onto the 171*

*lawn. He kissed Helen, gripped Forsythe's extended hand and mussed the children's neatly-combed hair.*

*Gregson sensed the other was merely procrastinating. But before he could dig down to the primary motive for the visit, Wellford said:*

*"The Valorians have turned up another emergent race—farther out toward the rim of the Galaxy. It appears they are approaching the edge of the Stygumbra straightaway. It's felt that with our recent experience along those lines we ought to be able to lend a quite helpful hand."*

THE END