

The Invader 2

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THE SURVIVOR

Chapter ONE

Late-afternoon sunlight slanting through dusty leaves made a pattern across the tables of the sidewalk cafe. As David Vincent pulled out a chair, a waiter in a stained apron strolled over.

“*Si, Señor,*” he greeted him, offering a dog-eared Spanish-English menu.

“Just a couple of tacos and a cup of coffee,” David said, thinking of the few worn bills in his pocket. The waiter grunted and went away. From inside, a radio wailed a sad Latin tune. David sat with his back to the tree, scanning the diners scattered across the narrow terrace. They were nondescript, roughly clad South Texans. Like himself, they were here because the food was cheap, not because they expected it to be good. It had been a long time since David Vincent had eaten a satisfying meal. His clothes hung loosely on his lean, powerful frame. Sun and wind had bronzed his strong-lined face, bleached his blonde hair almost platinum. For many months now, since the shattering experiences that had proven to him that creatures *not* human, but seeming to *be* human, moved among men—accepted as men—he had lived like a nomad. His life was spent searching for any clue that might lead him to the Invaders. For only when he found them could he hope to expose the fact that Earth was under attack by aliens . . . *enemies from beyond*.

The music had stopped, replaced by the voice of an announcer. Suddenly the import of the glib words penetrated David’s thoughts:

“ . . . sinking of the freighter *Cornubia* in the Gulf of Mexico. Naval authorities declined comment on the statement of a seaman that the vessel had been the victim of unprovoked enemy attack. The lone survivor of the disaster, hospitalized by his injuries, declared that the vessel was destroyed by a weapon of unprecedented power, which he described as a giant disintegrator ray ..

The chair toppled as David came to his feet, strode toward the source of the voice. The waiter, emerging from the interior with a tray, called after him. David ignored him, listening as the report continued:

“ . . . the area was clear of shipping at the time of the sinking, and that enemy action was ruled out. A freak typhoon, a State Department spokesman suggested, was the most probable cause of the tragedy which sent the ship to the bottom with a loss of twenty-one lives ..

“Here, *Senor*, you can't come in here—” the waiter was at David's elbow. “This room is closed—”

“It's all right; I'm through now,” David said, turning away.

“*Senor*, your coffee is—”

“Never mind the coffee,” David handed the man a bill. “I've just remembered urgent business a few hundred miles south of here” The man stared after him as he crossed the terrace and went out into the twilight street.

2

It was twilight again when David paid off his cab in a narrow side street of an old port city, many hundreds of miles distant. He looked both ways along the unlit way, then set off toward the grim red brick building rising two blocks away behind a screen of royal palms and live oak, its castellated towers gaunt against the painted sky.

The wrought-iron gates stood open. Through the deep shadows, the windows of the wide building gleamed a wan and cheerless yellow. Letters incised in granite over the entrance doors of black-varnished oak spelled out mercy hospital. David pushed through, found himself in a low-ceilinged, brown painted hall, smelling of disinfectant. An elderly nurse in severe, starched whites occupied a desk at the far side of the room. In the silence, the only sound was the rasp of David's shoes as he crossed toward her.

“I understand you have Mr. Ladislaw here,” he said in reply to her raised-eyebrow expression. “I'd like to see him for a few minutes, if I may.”

The woman's eyes went to the clock on the wall; the hands stood at 8:05.

“Visitors' hours are from six to eight,” she said flatly.

“I've come a long way,” David said. “It's important that I see him.”

The woman's face tightened. “You may come back tomorrow at ten o'clock—”

“Tomorrow may be too late,” David said.

“It so happens that this hospital has certain rules,” the woman

snapped. "If you have the idea that you're above rules, you'd better speak to Dr. Anclote!" She pressed a button on her desk. A harsh buzzing sounded in the distance. A door opened down the hall, and a tall, round-shouldered man emerged. His feet whispered on the floor as he approached, narrow eyes in a lined face looking David over.

"What's the difficulty, Miss Wycherly?" he asked in an impatient voice.

"This man demands that he be allowed to see one of the patients, Doctor—at this hour! I told him—"

"I need to see Mr. Ladislaw on a matter of great importance," David said. "Time is of the essence, I'm afraid."

"Ladislaw? That's the chap from the ship, isn't it?" The doctor eyed David keenly. "The patient has undergone a very harrowing experience," he said. "You know that he was the only survivor of the disaster .. ?"

"I know."

"In addition, he's suffered concussion, multiple fractures, possible internal injuries—as well as burns covering almost sixty percent of his body. He's in very serious condition, Mr. ?"

"Vincent. David Vincent. I understand he's a very sick man. I only want a few minutes with him. I'm sorry to be after regular hours, but it couldn't be helped."

"You're, ah, with the government?" the doctor's expression was sly now.

David looked at him. "Would that make any difference in the patient's condition, doctor?"

The medical man clamped his jaw tight. "Very well, I shan't pry. You may have fifteen minutes. I needn't warn you that it's imperative you not excite the patient." He turned and led the way along the corridor to a bank of newly-installed elevators, their smooth doors contrasting strangely with the dark, old woodwork.

"I understand that you couldn't speak freely in front of Miss Wycherly," the doctor looked sideways at David after the doors had closed on them. "But as resident physician, I think I should be advised as to why all the official interest in this patient, Mr. Vincent."

"Is there official interest?" David asked, expressionlessly.

"Of course!" the doctor snapped. "The naval people, the State Police —" he broke off, fixing David with a suspicious look. "See here, perhaps I'd better have a look at your identification."

David looked him in the eye, coldly. "You know better than that," he

said softly.

“Oh,” the doctor clamped his jaw shut, rode in silence to the fifth floor. David followed him along to a pair of windowless doors barring further passage. A solidly built man in rumpled whites sat on a stool, reading a magazine. He rose at a nod from the doctor, unlocked the door. Anclote caught David’s surprised look, smiled a humorless smile.

“I assumed you knew,” he said, “that Mr. Ladislaw was in the psychiatric ward.”

3

It was a private room, stark and cheerless, with barred windows, a dark chest of drawers with a glass vase containing withered marigolds, and a narrow bed in which a thin-haired man lay on his back, his neck and chin swathed in bandages above which dark stubble showed. His eyes were open, watching David fixedly as he came to the bedside.

“Mr. Ladislaw, I’m David Vincent,” he said softly. “I heard of the accident, and I’ve come to talk to you about it, to ask you some questions.”

“They already ask,” Ladislaw’s voice was thick, husky, heavily accented. “I tell ‘em, stupid cops, they don’t listen, they say I lie—” He broke off, looked past David toward the door, standing ajar. David went to it, caught a glimpse of Dr. Anclote standing near it as he shut it carefully.

“I’m not a cop,” David said. “And I’ll listen to what you tell me. I read the newspaper account. It said the ship was apparently destroyed by a freak typhoon—”

“No typhoon, no!” Ladislaw paused to breathe hoarsely. “I saw! I saw whole thing! I know what I see!”

“You stated that the column of water came *up* from the surface, isn’t that correct?” David prompted. “That it burst through from below—”

“Was no water; live steam! I know live steam, Mister! Sixteen years below decks, I know live steam when I see! Listen!” Ladislaw’s bandaged hand groped out, caught David’s sleeve. “I was in lifeboat deck, see? My detail, check gear. I’m in number two boat, port side. I hear it; right through hull, one big bang, like depth charge, far away. Then I feel lifeboat rock in davits. Whole ship lift up. I stick my head out; men are on deck, yelling, lots of noise. Somebody point, and I look and see it off port bow, maybe half a mile away. Whole sea bulge up, like big dome pushing up through sea! Then it blows wide open! I hear it blow! The sound! And

steam shoot up in sky maybe five hundred yard! And then fire! I tell you, whole sky black in two seconds, black soot all around me, can't see! But feel ship list hard apart, broach to! I hear rushing sound, like big surf on rocky beach! And I know by wind she's moving awful fast toward fire, and I can see it through smoke, and now stuff, rocks, falling around me. We go into smoke cloud, and I choke and then we break through into clear! I see big column steam, dead ahead, so hot I feel it scald from hundred yards away! Prow of ship go in it—and I tell you, Mister, it shear steel away like acetylene torch! Deck-plates forward tear away like paper, I see men fall—then . . . he fell back against the pillow, gasping for breath. “I wake up in bed, aboard Coast Guard cutter. I tell the fools, but they all say tornado! But I know! I know what I see!”

“The newspapers say you called it a disintegrator ray.”

“Pah! Can't even say word! Was five steam, Mister! From bottom of sea!”

“They found you in the smashed lifeboat, decks awash,” David said. “You were a lucky man, Mr. Ladislav. Probably the boilers blew when the sea water hit them, and your lifeboat was thrown clear somehow—with you in it. Tell me, what do you think caused this . . . column of steam?”

“Who are you?” Ladislav whispered. “Why you ask me this? You doctor, too, think I'm crazy?”

“I believe every word of what you said,” David said steadily, looking the injured man in the eyes. Eyes, he saw, that were filled with a nameless emotion.

“Why you want to know?” the man persisted. “What you after?”

“You seem to think that what you saw—the thing that wrecked your ship—may not have been a natural phenomenon,” David said. “Did you see anything—anything at all—that might be evidence of intelligent manipulation?”

“Not natural?” Ladislav whispered. “I tell you, by damn, not natural, Mister! That fire from Devil, himself! Fire and brimstone! I smell it, and the sulphur stink out of the Pit!”

“You smelled sulphur? Anything else? Explosives?”

Ladislav sat up in bed, his eyes wide, red-rimmed. “No explosion, Mister! I tell you, Hell open up to swallow the *Cornubia*! I know! I don't care what doctors say! I'm not crazy man! I got proof—from the boat—”

Behind David, the door burst open. Dr. An-clote was there, the attendant behind him.

“Here, what in the world are you doing to my patient?” The doctor

headed for the bedside. Ladislaw recoiled, half fell from the bed, to be caught in the grip of the stocky attendant and lifted back against the pillows.

“Get away!” the seaman yelled. “You don’t give me no more drugs, make me sleep! I stay awake! I watch! I know what’s loose in the world now!”

“Mr. Vincent, you’ll leave immediately!” An-clote barked. “You’ve done this man immeasurable harm by upsetting him like this!”

“No!” Ladislaw shouted. “You, Mister, you don’t leave! You believe me, you stay, tell ‘em I’m not crazy!” He reached out to David, who stepped forward, took the man’s hand. As he did, a hard, angular object the size of a silver dollar passed from Ladislaw’s palm to his.

“Here—I ordered you to leave the room!” An-clote rushed in as the attendant rounded the bed. David stepped back, his eyes holding Ladislaw’s.

“I’m going,” he said. “I know you’re not crazy, Mr. Ladislaw. Don’t worry. You’ll be all right—”

“Out! Now!” Anclote’s face was dusky red with rage.

At the door, David looked back; his eyes caught those of the injured man, held them for a moment before the door was slammed in his face. He recognized the expression in them now. Terror. Stark, unrelieved terror.

Chapter TWO

Looking across the shabby hotel room at David Vincent, Paul Lieberman shook his head, frowning.

“David, I don’t understand all this. You call me, ask me to meet you here, in this place . . .” his eyes swept the dingy carpet, the stained walls, the sagging bed. “Why didn’t you come out to the house? And all this mystery—not saying what it’s about . . .”

“You’ve been sick, Paul,” David said. “It was an imposition, calling on you; but I wouldn’t have asked you if it hadn’t been of real importance.”

“I’d go anywhere, anytime, to help you out, Dave! It’s just that . . . I don’t understand!” The physicist rubbed a hand across his forehead, still bearing a livid scar as a reminder of the injuries that had kept him in the hospital for two wearying months.

David rose, paced the room restlessly. “I have no business dragging

you into this,” he said, half to himself. “It’s just that there’s no one else I can completely trust—and no one else with your knowledge and abilities!” He turned to face his friend. “All I want you to do is look at a mineral specimen, Paul. Look at it, and tell me what you can about it. Then I want you to go home and forget I ever asked you. Will you do that?”

“Let’s see this mineral.”

Vincent went to his suitcase, opened it, took out his shaving kit, went into the cramped bathroom. In the sink, he opened the bottom of a tube of toothpaste, dug out the object Ladislav had given him, rinsed it off. Back in the bedroom, he handed it to the physicist. Lieberman turned the flattened, faceted bit of rock in his fingers.

“Clear, with a yellowish color, specific gravity of around 2.5,” he said. “An allotropic form of sulphur, I’d say off-hand. Where did it come from?”

“That’s what I’d like you to tell me,” David said.

“I’d have to make laboratory tests, microscopic studies, before I could tell you anything worthwhile,” Lieberman said. “Can’t you tell me where you got it? It might help save time.”

David shook his head. “I don’t want to give you any preconceptions, Paul.”

The physicist studied David’s face. “Dave, you know that since my accident, I’ve had some trouble with my memory. Nothing serious—just a confusion about the last few weeks before—whatever happened. But now—somehow I get the feeling we’ve been over all this before—sometime, somewhere.”

“No, Paul. You’ve never seen this before. As for your accident—yes, you were helping me with something when it happened. That’s why I don’t want to involve you again—not any more than I have to. And I wouldn’t ask it of you at all if I thought there were any other way.”

“It must be something big,” Lieberman said quietly.

“As big as the end of the world,” David said, holding the other’s eyes.

Lieberman shook his head wonderingly. “You were never one for exaggeration, Dave,” he said. “The end of the world?”

“Please—don’t ask me any more. I won’t tell you, Paul. I could never justify it if you were hurt again, because of me. Just look at the mineral, give me your opinion, and let it go at that.”

“Dave, whatever it is, let me—”

“No. That’s final, Paul. Help me, or don’t help me—but don’t ask me to involve you again.”

Lieberman put his hand up, touched the scar on his forehead. "I'd like to know more about where and how I got this," he said. "If it wasn't an accident—"

"I didn't say that!"

"If it wasn't an accident," Lieberman repeated, "it seems to me I have unfinished business—with someone."

"Let me handle the business, Paul," David said. "I've got a hard head. You're more valuable alive—in your laboratory."

Paul nodded slowly. "All right, Dave—if that's the way you want it. Now . . ." He stood. "Let's go out to my place and see what it is we've got here."

2

"Let's get this over with," David said as he stepped from the car. "Every minute I'm here is a minute of danger to you."

Inside the house, Lieberman made drinks, then led the way to his elaborately equipped basement laboratory. As always, David stared in admiration at the fantastically equipped room, much of the apparatus in which was of Lieberman's own design, more advanced than anything commercially available.

"This is why I don't drive a late-model car, and have the house painted," Lieberman said with a smile. "But it's well worth it."

He placed the lump of material on a marble-topped table, began assembling apparatus, while David sat by, watching every move. For an hour and a half, the slight, grey-haired scientist tested the sample with various reagents, using tiny particles chipped away with great difficulty, using a miniature chisel. He wagged his head, muttering, as test after test gave ambiguous results. He prepared slides, set up a massive binocular microscope, pored over the instrument, jotting notes on a pad.

"This is fantastic stuff, David," he said. "I was correct in assuming it was a form of sulphur—a sulphur compounded with various other minerals, to be precise. But its crystalline structure and physical properties are like nothing I've seen before."

"What's so unusual about it?"

"Its strength, for one thing. It has a hardness of 9.8—second only to diamond. In fact, in a number of ways it reminds me of diamond. The gem-stone, of course, is merely a special form of carbon—the same material as coal and graphite—or soot. But its properties are completely

different, due to the conditions under which it was formed. This material, too, was formed under conditions of extreme heat and pressure—a pressure suddenly released, with a simultaneous quenching to low temperature. Tell me, Dave—is this an artificial material, or was it found in nature?”

“I’m not certain,” Vincent said somberly. “But the indications are that it was formed naturally.”

Lieberman wagged his head. “In that case, I find it difficult to imagine under what circumstances it came to exist.”

“Difficult—or impossible?” David asked intently.

Lieberman’s expression was mildly surprised. “Why, as to that, I could postulate the circumstances required. A pressure on the order of a million tons per square inch, a temperature above 600 degrees Centigrade; of course the material would be in a fluid state—”

“Do such conditions occur naturally, anywhere on Earth?”

“No—not on the surface. But under the surface, deep in the planet, yes.”

“How deep?”

“I should say about twenty to twenty-five miles, depending on the precise point on the globe. Crustal conditions differ widely over the surface of the planet.”

“Could it have been produced by a volcano?”

“No.” Lieberman shook his head doubtfully. “The release of pressure and the subsequent cooling would be much too slow. Now, perhaps if it were a marine eruption,” he added thoughtfully. “But . . . still no,” he concluded. “The mechanics of tectonic activity are such as to preclude the precise conditions, even there. It could only have been produced by the sinking of a shaft from above, rather than an eruption from below, tapping the plasma stratum suddenly, and admitting ambient air and water. Which is, of course, impossible.”

“Why do you say that?”

“The conditions I described exist only below the Mohorovicic Discontinuity,” Lieberman said. “The level at which the lithosphere gives way to the fluid inner core, at a depth of at least ten miles, even at the point where the crust is thinnest.”

“Where would that be?”

“Under the sea.”

“The sea again. Suppose someone had drilled a hole through this Discontinuity into the liquid core—could this be a sample of what came

blasting out?”

Lieberman took off his glasses, began absent-mindedly polishing them, staring at David speculatively. “You’re jumping ahead a bit too fast for me—making a lot of assumptions—but yes—if it were possible to sink such a shaft—material like this might be produced—assuming that cold sea water were allowed to pour in directly in contact with the exposed magma; all of which is completely beyond the scope of present technology, of course.”

“Thanks,” David said, rising from his chair. “That tells me what I need to know.”

“Just a minute, Dave,” Lieberman protested. “You’re not going now—walk off in the middle of the night without an explanation—”

“Sorry, Paul,” David said. “That’s the way it has to be.”

Lieberman nodded slowly. “Very well, Dave—if you say so. I hope—I hope you know what you’re doing—what you’re up against.”

“Meaning?”

“If there *is* some group capable of drilling such a shaft, they’re obviously possessed of a formidable technology. I hope you don’t intend single-handedly to attract their hostile attentions—whoever they might be.”

“It won’t be single-handed—not if I can interest certain authorities,” David said grimly. “That is—assuming there is any such group,” he added with a smile.

“Remember—if you need me—call me, day or night.”

“Thanks, Paul,” David Vincent said. “I’ll do that—if I need you.”

Chapter THREE

Hot South Florida sunshine beat down on the hibiscus-and palm-lined street. David crossed a pleasantly landscaped courtyard ablaze with flowers where a fountain splashed in the center of a free-form swimming pool, went along an arcaded walk, following the numbers on the pastel-colored doors. He found the one he was looking for, used the shiny brass knocker. Leisurely footsteps sounded beyond the panel; it opened, and a tall, broad-shouldered man blinked at David, then grinned widely and clapped him on the shoulder.

“Dave Vincent! Where in the world—when—how—” he broke off, pulling David inside. “How did you know I was here?” the smile on his

face was mingled with curiosity now. “Ye gods, man, that’s supposed to be classified information!”

“I still have a couple of informal contacts,” David said. “It’s good to see you again, Tom. You haven’t changed much in eight years. Except for the silver leaf, of course.”

“A merit badge for sixteen years with the Navy,” Tom said off-handedly, his eyes flicking over David’s lean, weather-burned face, his gaunt frame, the less-than-new suit he wore. “Uh—how’s everything been with you, boy? I understand you’ve got yourself a soft spot with a big engineering consultant firm.”

“I left MID-20th some months ago,” David said shortly. “Tom, I won’t waste words. I need a favor from you.”

“Sure, Dave,” the Naval officer said. “Ah . . . financial problems . . . ?”

“Nothing like that. It’s a matter that’s important enough for me to have broached half a dozen minor security regulations and a couple of major ones to get to you. I think you know I wouldn’t do that lightly.” *

Tom nodded. “You were a pretty sharp officer when I met you,” he said soberly. “I won’t dig into just how you discovered my whereabouts. But what’s it all about?”

“I’m going to ask you to take me on trust, Tom,” David said grimly. “I can’t tell you much. But it involves your ship.”

Tom’s face went stiff. “What do you know about my ship?” he said tightly.

“She’s the newest addition to our nuclear fleet,” David said softly. “Pocket-sized, twenty-man crew, greater speed, range, and deep-dive capability than anything in the world’s arsenals.”

Tom stared at David. He turned, went to a small bar in the corner of the well-furnished room, silently mixed two stiff scotch-and-waters. He came back, waved David to a chair and handed him a glass, seated himself.

“All right,” he said flatly. “You’ve got my attention, as the saying goes. Now tell me the rest of it.”

David took a sip of the drink, meeting the other’s eyes. “It’s quite simple,” he said. “I want a ride in your sub.”

2

“You’re out of your mind, Vincent!” Commander Tom Dwight said for the fifth time, taking still another turn up and down the apricot colored wall-to-wall carpet. “You walk in here—breaching a very carefully

prepared cover—talk about one of the Navy’s best-kept secrets—and then ask me to throw overboard what’s left of the regs and take you joy-riding!”

“Not quite,” David said. “You make regular training cruises. I just want to go along on the next one.”

“You know I can’t take civilian personnel aboard my ship—even if it weren’t a classified mission!”

“I still hold a reserve commission. Suppose I pull a day of active duty. You could manage orders for me—in the interest of inter-service liaison, for example.”

“That’s preposterous—what possible justification—”

“I’ll leave that part to you, Tom,” David said. “You rate pretty high with the Pentagon.”

Dwight halted in his pacing to fix his visitor with a hard gaze.

“I owe you a favor, Dave,” he said. “I won’t deny that. But you’d make it a lot easier if you’d tell me a little bit about why you’re here—who you’re working for.”

David shook his head. “Consider it strictly unofficial, Tom.”

The naval officer snorted. “Don’t kid me,” he said. “That line about a friend of a friend, and all the rest of it. All right, I won’t meddle; if this is the way somebody topside wants to play it, who am I to fight it? But they could have tipped me off! I’ll ask for your orders. Anything else?”

“Just one thing,” David said. “I’d like to cruise past a specific spot. About 87 degrees West, 26 North.”

Dwight rounded on him. “Oh—you’re planning the course, too, eh! Damn it, Dave, I’ve got a good mind to tell you to go jump in the Gulf and swim out—” he broke off. “Eighty-seven and twenty-six; that’s the spot where that tramp went down a couple of weeks ago . . . “ He frowned. “Dave, what’s it all about? They figuring the Reds had a hand in that? I know there was a survivor with a wild story about some kind of super-weapon . . . “

“Just call it a coincidence, Tom.”

Dwight waved a hand in disgust. “Coincidence! Sure! All right, Dave. You might as well stay here with me until your orders come through. I’ll route it through the Senator to save time. And by the way . . . “ He grinned. “I hope you’re a good sailor. My little tub is a fish underwater, but she’s a bucking bronco on the surface—and I hear there’ll be squalls in the gulf tomorrow.”

“The Senator’s office gave me a little static,” Commander Dwight said as he and David Vincent, both in uniform now, returned the salutes of the sentry at the gate to the closely guarded Naval installation on the small off-shore island. “But I hinted you had every alphabet agency in Washington behind you. And the idea of an inter-service peace gesture fitted in with a presentation he’s planned for the Armed Services Committee. I suppose your bosses greased the rails, too.” He looked sideways at David Vincent, but the latter merely nodded.

“There she is.” Dwight indicated the squat, featureless shape riding low in the water at the wharf as they passed through the shed door into the bright sunshine. “Not much to look at—but she’s a hundred million dollars worth of the most sophisticated gear on the planet. What she can’t do isn’t worth doing!”

Aboard the small vessel, Dwight proudly showed David through the spotlessly clean COC, the engine room, the shielded reactor compartment, the stores, the crew quarters, the galley, the recreational facilities.

“Movies, television, everything but a full-scale ball diamond,” the officer said cheerfully. “Nothing but the best for this bucket. Our chef—and I do mean chef—used to cook for the Vice President. Every man in the crew is a picked specialist. Needless to say, I take a certain pride in being her skipper.” His smile hardened as he looked at Vincent. “I’d hate to have anything happen to her—to take her out without full available information on the conditions I might be getting into.”

“All I want is a regulation cruise, Tom,” David said. “A look-see, nothing more.”

Tom nodded. “You’ll get your look.” He turned to his second-in-command, standing by alertly.

“All right, Jack. Let’s get under way. And don’t spare the horses. Captain Vincent’s eager to see what she’ll do.”

On the *Anemone*’s bridge—a small, instrument packed compartment as complex as the front office of a jet airliner—David Vincent sat in the Mate’s contoured seat before a wide, curved, closed—circuit TV screen which afforded a crystal-clear full color view of the stretch of choppy sea spreading before the fast-moving vessel. The muted whine of the

powerful nuclear turbines seemed to penetrate to David's bones; the pounding as the sleek hull slammed ahead at forty knots through the rising swells was like the shock of depth charges exploding in endless sequence.

"Well, how do you like her?" Commander Dwight sang out exultantly. "A sweet boat if there ever was one, eh Dave?"

"I almost understand what it is you see in subs, Tom," David agreed, returning the other's smile.

"This is nothing," Dwight dismissed the view of sparkling white-capped water ahead with an airy wave of his hand. "Wait until I take her down! Then you'll see some running!"

For another half hour the swift vessel raced ahead, outstripping even the porpoises that briefly paced her, curvetting and leaping in the glittering bowwave. Then Dwight gave terse orders. David felt the seat shift under him. On the screen, the sea seemed to tilt; an oncoming wave rushed at them, broke across the screen in a smother of white—

Then they were under, the transparent green of the sea deepening to turquoise, then indigo as the vessel plunged downward at a steep angle, a stream of bubbles boiling upward from her prow. With a surge like a fast elevator braking to a stop, the submarine levelled off, hurtling ahead through deep gloom now, where darting fish-shapes flashed past and were gone before the eye could focus on them.

"Twenty fathoms in eleven seconds," Dwight announced in tones of satisfaction. He pointed to an indicator where a slim needle wavered from forty-five to fifty knots, still climbing. "She's in her element now," he said. "No noise, no buffeting. Just smooth, swift power! And she could keep it up for ten years without coming up to breathe, if she had to!"

For the next hour, the sub commander demonstrated the abilities of his magnificent vessel, performing complex maneuvers, surfacing, diving, all at break-neck speed, all with perfect, noiseless ease. At length he slowed the pace, turned to David.

"We're within a few miles of your spot now," he said. "Any preferences as to depth, speed, direction of approach, and so on?"

"Make it look casual," David said. "Make your first pass at about fifty feet off the bottom, as slow as would fit in with the picture of a routine maneuver."

Dwight gave him a searching look. "You talk as if someone might be observing us down here," he said softly.

David didn't answer. He was watching the view screen, peering

through the depths, a murky deep-purple here, over one hundred and eighty feet below the surface. The vessel slowed still more, cruising along now at no more than ten miles per hour, the sound of its churning rotors susurrating in the near-stillness, stirring up a cloud of mud, which drifted forward to half obscure visibility. With a delicate hand, Dwight steered the craft toward the precise fix, which David had given him, watching the superbly accurate gyro-navigator as the position-indicating needles moved toward the 0-0 reading.

“We ought to be seeing something of the wreck any moment now,” the sub commander said, watching tensely beside David. “We’re within yards of the spot where she went down—look!” he interrupted himself. “There’s some wreckage! A section of hull . . .” He leaned forward to stare fixedly at the dim bulk resting on the bottom amid waving fronds of weed. “Look at that!” he said excitedly. “That metal looks as if it had been sheared off with a torch! What kind of storm could have done that—”

Without warning, the submarine lurched, its prow dipping sharply downward to strike the bottom with an impact that threw both Dwight and David violently against their seat harnesses.

“Take her up!” Dwight barked the order instantly into the panel-mounted command microphone. A second shock struck the vessel, tossing it up and hurling it sideways, like a toy boat in a bathtub. Alarm bells clanged stridently. On the screen, nothing was visible but churning blackness, inky muck stirred up by the same force that had struck the vessel. David Vincent clung to his chair, watching the shifting pattern of darkness. A sudden freak of the turbulent currents opened a clear channel through the obscuring cloud—and through it, something glimmered for an instant: a fleeting glimpse of a spidery framework rising from the ocean bottom, a massive, tank-like structure, an immense, round duct leading away into obscure distance. Then the darkness closed in again.

“Tom—hold her here!” David caught the officer’s arm. “Don’t surface yet!”

“Silence on the bridge, Mister!” Dwight roared. “Unstrap and get aft! Donaldson! Report in here on the double!” Swearing, the harassed commander fought the controls of the powerful vessel, swinging her around to oppose the direction in which the swift current was bearing her, trimming her to a level position, then ordering full speed ahead to take her clear of the trouble area.

A quarter of an hour later, he called David back to the cramped bridge.

“All right, Vincent, I carried out my end of it,” he growled. “You can tell your bosses I cooperated—and strained every seam in my command in the process! I don’t know what in the name of the devil we got into back there—and I don’t care! Nothing short of a direct order from the admiral commanding will make me take *Anemone* back there! A few more yards into that—whatever it was—and she’d have broken in two!”

“I’m sorry about any damage to your ship, Tom,” David said. “But believe me—it’s in a cause that justifies any risk. I need to have a closer look—”

“Not a chance,” Dwight said in a tone as unyielding as cast iron. “This vessel is my responsibility. If some super-secret government agency wants to snoop around the floor of the Gulf they can damn well get their own sub! I’m taking mine into Key West and dry-docking her for a stem to stern check-out!” He fixed David with a baleful glare. “And if you need any more favors, you’d better have orders signed by the Secretary of Defense, in person!”

Chapter FOUR

It was dark when the motor launch deposited David Vincent on the pier at Key West. He spent a restless night in an inexpensive motel three blocks from the beach, listening to the pounding of the surf mingled with the whine of mosquitos, wondering whether he had actually seen what he thought he had glimpsed through the murky water—or whether in the stress of the moment he might have mistaken the wreckage of the sunken freighter for something more cryptic. But, regardless of what he had seen, the maelstrom that had tossed the submarine about had been real enough. Whatever it had been, he needed a closer look.

The following morning, as he ate a meagre breakfast of eggs and coffee in the motel dining room, a grey-painted car pulled up outside the window beside which he sat. Four grim-faced Shore Patrolmen climbed out, headed for the office next door. David dropped a dollar at the cashier’s desk, left by a side exit, walked swiftly away.

An hour later, in a run-down waterfront section of fish-and-bait-stands, sagging docks, down-at-heels marine supply houses, he turned in at a weather-bleached door under a peeling sign reading MARPOLIS BROS—SALVAGE. A squat, swarthy man in a knitted diver’s cap and with the rolling gait that reflects a life at sea in small boats came from the

shadowy recesses at the rear of the long room. He looked David over, spat a toothpick on the floor.

“Yeah?” he muttered.

David told him what he wanted. The man was shaking his head before he had finished.

“Not me, friend. Eight-seven, twenty six, hah? Nix. I don’t go no place near that spot.”

“I said I’d pay well—and the salvage goes to you.”

“I said no, and no is what I mean. Look, friend,” the man leaned closer. “Some places, a man just don’t go, you understand? And the Devil’s Graveyard is one of ‘em. Call it superstition, call it what you like. When that ship went down out there last month, it was no surprise to us. We knew about that spot. It’s jinxed. Last year, Joe Skou-ras—a diver with twenty years in the profession—he went after a tow job out that way—a yacht, easy money, he said. Joe never came back. And another thing . . .” He lowered his voice. “Not two weeks ago, an outfit out of Tarpon Springs came down—a little moonlight job, get me? *Cornubia* was carrying some valuable cargo, nice money in it for the man that found her. None of the boys here wanted the job. We warned them off. They wouldn’t listen. Two weeks ago tomorrow, they upped anchor. And that’s the last anybody seen of ‘em!” The man straightened, gave David a sharp look from coal-black eyes. “You won’t find nobody here will take you there, friend. And if you’re smart, you’ll stay away, too.” He turned and walked away.

David spent the rest of the day along the waterfront, alternately dodging uniformed military policemen, and broaching the subject of a charter trip to one after another of the local salvage operators. Everywhere, he met the same response. It was almost sunset when a grizzled man seated in a cane-bottom chair before an ancient store window crowded with dusty sponges and coral, with a decayed diving suit posed clumsily on a stand beside him told him in a tone of dire warning: “It’s a curse, is what it is, young feller. I know, nowadays nobody takes much stock in curses. But they’re real. Oh, they’re real. That’s the spot where the *Agapo* went down, sixty years ago come spring. Or is it sixty-one? Let me see; “my sister Marie, she came over from the old country in ought-two . . .”

“Never mind,” David said. “I get the idea. Nobody will take me out. It looks like I’ll have to look elsewhere for a salvage man—”

“If you’re half as smart a young feller as you look, you’ll heed me,” the

oldster persisted. “I got a bad feeling about you going out there—even if it wasn’t for the curse. You see, *Agapo* carried a priest aboard—or he had been. He’d been in political trouble, back in the old country; had to run for it. And people said there was maybe more to it than that; that he’d been unfrocked—”

“Thanks,” David said. “I appreciate the warning . . .” he broke off as the old man motioned with his head. He caught the man’s eye, bright as black opal under shaggy white brows; he leaned closer at the unspoken message he saw there.

“It’s none of my business,” the ancient whispered without moving his lips. “But you were followed here. He’s sitting at the cafe across the street, watching you.”

2

David nodded casually and turned as if to stroll on his way, letting his eye sweep the dingy shop-fronts across the way. Beyond a smeared window lettered ATHENS CAFE, a dark-jawed man sat alone at a table under a dangling light-bulb, smoking a cigaret. David walked briskly along to the corner, rounded, it, then sprinted half a block, gathering curious stares from the few people on the street. He slowed, glanced back. The unshaven man appeared at the corner, looked sharply around, failed to see David, standing with his back to the wall in the shadow of a warped awning; he came half a block before he caught sight of him, then halted abruptly, stared into a window. David moved off, walking at a normal pace. He crossed the street, turned down a side way. Fifty feet along, a narrow alley mouth cut back into a block of stuccoed warehouses. He turned in, followed it back—into a *cul-de-sac*. Quickly, he retraced his steps to the alley mouth. Hurried footsteps sounded. The face of the man from the cafe appeared, peering back into the shadows. He took a step—and David reached, caught him by the wrist, took the arm up behind the man in a swift motion. Holding the hammerlock, he propelled the man back into the alley. The latter made no sound other than a grunt of pain. He was a husky, sunburned man with a sweat-stained blue denim shirt, white duck trousers, not clean, tattered sneakers. An odor of cheap whiskey floated around him.

“All right, what do you want?” David hissed in his ear. “Why are you following me?”

“You’re asking questions,” the man said in a throaty croak. “You’re

trying to talk somebody into taking you out to Devil's Graveyard."

"So?"

"Why do you want to go out there?"

"What makes it your business?"

"Maybe you think it was no accident, *Cornubia* going down like she did . . ."

"What if I don't?"

"Maybe I'm curious, too."

"Why?"

"I had a brother in the crew," the man grunted. "Leggo my arm, pal. Grats Dolan's the name. I'll take you out."

3

Half an hour later, in deep twilight, David stood on a rickety wharf with Dolan, surveying the low, rakish-lined boat looming in the darkness.

"That's her: the *Lucinda*," Dolan said proudly. "My tub—paid for, in full!"

"A PT boat, isn't she?"

Dolan nodded. "She's a lot of boat, pal. I picked her up for peanuts, but she's kept me broke ever since. But it's worth it. When I open her up, she cuts a trail, I'll tell you. Even if she does burn twenty-five bucks an hour in gas."

"And she's fitted out for salvage work?"

"Naw." Dolan spat from the pier where the boat was tied up, a queen among the nondescript craft beside her. "But I done some salvage in my time, I know where to get what we need. You're bankrolled, I guess?" He eyed David sardonically.

"Within limits. All I want to do is take a look, remember."

"We'll need scuba gear," Dolan said. "Spare tanks, a compressor, cameras, lights, cable. Fifteen hundred ought to do it. Plus the hire of the boat—and my time—"

"Don't get carried away," David interrupted. "A thousand dollars, total. That's all there is. Can we do it for that?"

"Hell, that won't hardly cover gas and oil and time on the engines!"

"Then we'd better forget it," David said, turning away. Dolan's hand shot out, caught his arm.

"Don't get huffy, pal," he grated. "I said I was curious, didn't I? Ok, a grand it is. But don't expect no luxury rations."

“You’re pretty eager to go out, aren’t you?” David tried to see the man’s expression through the gloom. “Why haven’t you already gone?”

“Same reason as you. No crew.” Dolan was grinning now. “You come along at a good time, pal.”

“What do you expect to see out there?”

“What do you think?” Dolan grunted. “Proof the sinking was no accident. Typhoon, hah? that’s a laugh. *Cornubia* was torpedoed, pal. By the Reds, if you ask me. I want a good clear underwater shot of the wreck to prove it.”

“Then what?”

“Torpedoes don’t come from no place,” Dolan said grimly. “There’s no surface vessel out there; it would of been spotted. But a sub’s a different story. You heard about the salvage boat they knocked off? That Red U-boat is still out there, hanging around, picking off anything that comes near. Maybe, with what we get, the Navy’ll get interested. Then—goodby Russkis!”

He led the way down on deck; David went aft, his attention caught by the massive davits mounted along both sides.

“Torpedo launch gear,” he said. “Is it in working order?”

“Sure, pal. Everything works aboard *Lucy*. So what?”

“Nothing. I was just curious.”

“Hey—I see which way you’re thinking,” Dolan said. “Yeah—why not?”

“Forget it,” David said. “You don’t pick up live torpedoes at a salvage sale.”

“Better than that,” Dolan said. “I know where there’s a tin fish, ready and waiting. A chum of mine fetched her up in his trawling net. She’s stashed a few miles from here, in the keys.”

“It will be corroded out, after twenty odd years in salt water—”

Dolan was shaking his head, grinning. “It’s no World War Two job, pal. The Navy’s latest model. Jet powered, remote microwave controlled. My chum put her in shape with the idea of selling her to the Cubans, but he changed his mind. There’s no warhead, but I can fix that with a nice charge of nitro, no sweat.” He smacked his fist into his palm. “We’ll be loaded for bear,” he said fiercely. “Just let that sub make a pass at *Lucy*, and they’ll get the surprise of their lousy lives!”

Chapter FIVE

“That does it.” David finished sealing the small plastic-cased apparatus and rubbed his eyes, tired from the hours of delicate electronic work. “There’s your control unit for the torpedo.”

Dolan picked up the compact device. “Neat,” he said. “The dials show you her location, hah? All you do is push the buttons and the fish goes where you want, hey?”

“That’s the theory,” David said. “If the circuits in the torpedo are still good.” They were sitting at the packing case that served as a table in the tumble-down shack that was the seaman’s residence—like its owner, dirty, unkempt, and battered by hard use. For the past two days, while David stayed out of sight of Shore Patrols that still roved the town, Dolan had been busy assembling the equipment needed for the trip. Now, just before midnight of the third day, they were ready.

Dolan replaced the remote control unit on the table. “OK, pal, I leave the fancy part to you. I’ll stick to my steering. Let’s go.”

The two men left the shack, laden with that part of the gear which had not already been loaded aboard the *Lucinda* by Dolan. They made their way quietly, by a devious back-alley route, to the pier where the powerful boat lay in the water, dark and ominous in her grey paint. Aboard, they cast off silently, allowed the outgoing tide to carry them out the mouth of the bayou. Two hundred yards offshore, Dolan started up the engines. Their muted rumble hinted at the immense power leashed there.

He steered the boat parallel to the shore for a mile, then angled outward, passing over a submerged bar where the waves broke in long white lines. He navigated between a pair of small islets, skirted a larger patch of sandy, tree-covered ground, then swung into the shelter of a tangled growth of mangrove.

“The torp is here, slung above high water,” he said. “We’ll have to winch her aboard.”

It took most of an hour to maneuver the awkward, twenty-two foot missile into position, and make the necessary mechanical and electrical connections, another half hour to install and wire the chalky yellow bricks of TNT which Dolan had procured from an unmentioned source, while David checked over the command receiver, turning his control unit to it.

“The detonator is OK,” Gratt assured David. “She’ll blow all right, if your gadget steers her straight.”

“It will work,” David said. “Now let’s get moving before somebody notices you’ve slipped your moorings and gets curious.”

With a touch of the throttle, Dolan swung the war boat out, heading for deep water, running without lights. In half an hour, the last glimmer of the shore was lost astern.

“Now we can let her out,” Dolan called, his piratical face satanic in the binnacle light. “If any of them slobbs want to chase us now, let ‘em!” He looked sideways at David and grinned. “Yeah, I know the SP’s are looking for you, pal. But don’t worry: I don’t ask no questions. Any guy with cops on his tail is OK with me.”

An hour later, the lights of an airplane appeared to the east. Dolan cursed and throttled back. The plane passed overhead, continued on out to sea.

“They must want you pretty bad, pal,” he muttered. “But they’ll have to wait. And if tonight works out, they may want to hang a medal on you!”

2

For the next two hours the boat skimmed steadily westward over a choppy sea stirred by a gusty breeze, while the late-rising moon shone down sulkily from a sky of broken clouds.

“If this wind keeps rising, we’re in trouble,” Dolan said. “That’s forty fathoms out where we’re headed. Her cables might not hold her.”

“We’ll worry about that when we get there,” David replied tersely. “How good is your navigation?”

“Don’t worry about my navigation, pal. I’ll lay her right on top of the wreck—if the plot you gave me was right.”

“I’ll guarantee it,” David said.

Ten minutes later, Dolan throttled back, frowning. “Some funny currents running out here,” he muttered. “They’re trying to swing us north. A minute ago I was having to correct for a drift to the south.”

“How much farther?”

“We’re just about on target now—if I can hold her . . .”

As the puzzled skipper maneuvered, David stripped, pulled on the wet-suit and weight belt, checked over his tanks and mask, shrugged into the harness.

“OK—this is it—as near as I can hold her,” Dolan called. “I’m dropping anchor—and she’ll take every foot of cable I’ve got, in these swells!”

David nodded, watching the restless surface of the water, ink-black in

the wan moonlight. "All right. We'll make it a half-hour dive. Watch my line and stand by to haul me in fast." He held the other's eyes. "But if things go wrong—be ready to cut the cable and head for shore with everything you've got."

"What about you?" Dolan looked nonplussed.

"Somebody's got to get the word back—" David broke off at a droning sound coming from overhead.

"That damned plane," Dolan barked. "He's back again." He stepped to the control panel, cut the binnacle light. The sound of the approaching engine grew louder.

"Where is the slob?" Dolan grunted. "I hear him—but I don't see him . . ."

"There!" David pointed as moonlight glinted from a point astern. "He's coming this way . . ." His voice was drowned as the plane swept directly toward them, so close now that the pale flames spurting from the exhaust stacks behind the engine cowlings were clearly visible.

"Hey! That's no Navy ship!" Dolan yelled in David's ear. "It's a civilian model, on floats—" Sparkling light winked and flared from the plane's wings; over the bellow of the engines, a stuttering roar sounded. David saw water fountain astern, tall columns that spurted in a row that marched swiftly forward, angled across the stern of the boat—

He hit the deck as splinters of wood and steel screamed past him; the radio mast fell with a screech of tortured metal. Then the dark shadow of the attacker was past in a howl and rush of wind, banking away against the sky, turning for a second run.

"The dirty dogs!" Dolan screamed. Shouting, he ran aft, ripped away the tarp shrouding the torpedo; the wind caught the tough cloth, belling it out. He cursed, fighting it.

"Down!" David yelled as the thunder of the oncoming engines swelled again. Again, yellow fire spurted and twinkled; metal screamed as ricochet-ting fragments filled the air. Dolan seemed to leap backward, spun, slammed against the gunwale, went down in a heap by the rail. Forward, glass smashed as the windshield burst outward; red flames boiled up from the cockpit. The strafing plane hurtled past, pulling up sharply, its unmarked wings clearly visible now as the baleful moon broke through the ragged clouds.

Burdened by the heavy tanks, David reached Dolan's side, rolled him on his back. Blood welled from the sailor's mouth in a bubbling sigh. He was dead, his chest torn open by the explosive slugs. David came to his

feet as the plane banked steeply, gaining altitude for another run. He ran forward, but was driven back by the intense heat. There was a muffled detonation from behind the panel; electric wiring sputtered and arced vivid blue as circuits shorted—

With a surge that rocked the stricken boat, the sleek torpedo leaped from its cradle, launched by the accidental crossing of burned wires. It struck the water astern, sending up a sheet of silver spray and was gone beneath the surface, a trail of bubbles phosphorescing behind it. David whirled; the airplane was again diving to the attack. He grabbed up a spear gun, and, as the bullets ripped up the deck behind him, leaped over the rail and plunged into the wind-whipped sea.

Icy water closed over David, as bullets *wop-wop-wop!*ed into the water above him. He plunged down, down, breathing through the fitted mouth-piece which metered the precious air to him.

When the luminous depth meter on his wrist read fifty feet, he rolled on his back, looked up. Against the shifting pattern of the dimly glowing surface, the shattered boat was a vague shadow. As he watched it, flecks of orange light appeared: reflections of the fire now raging aboard. David swam a hundred feet directly away from the derelict, then surfaced silently. Tossed by the waves, he looked around, saw the burning boat, listing to starboard, down by the stern, sinking rapidly. Half a mile away, the airplane was gliding in low, approaching for a landing in the choppy sea. It settled, touched down in a fountain of spray—then abruptly veered as one wing struck the crest of a breaker. The craft spun, its tail lifting high in the air; there was a deep-toned *boom!*, and a sheet of flame shot out across the water. Fuel spread by the explosion flamed up, and in seconds a roaring inferno had engulfed the plane. Suddenly the door in the up-rearing tail section opened. Three dark figures emerged one by one, plunged downward through the fire; David saw them strike, sending up fiery splashes. Then, as though unaffected by the blaze, all three began stroking strongly in his direction. Somehow, they were protected from the fire—and somehow, they were tracking him . . .

He ducked under, with a kick descended to a depth of twenty feet, then headed back in the direction of the burning boat. As he approached the stricken craft from below, it slid down beneath the surface, the red-hot metal parts still glowing through the water for a moment or two after the flames were quenched. As the dark bulk sank downward, David swam in close, caught at a trailing line, pulled himself up against the hull and clung there, riding the wreck down into the black depths.

David scanned the water above for signs of immediate attack, seeing nothing. Then, without warning, a ray of cloudy green light speared out, reflected murkily from the grey curve of hull above him. He slid sideways, maneuvered into the shelter of an outward-angled slab of shattered hull planking. The light swept closer, passed him by. A moment later, a dark shape appeared, swimming with curiously awkward motions. It was a man, fantastically garbed in street clothes: a dark suit, marred by scorched holes, the sodden cloth wavering about his limbs, his tie streaming back across his shoulder, shiny shoes on his feet. He wore no mask, no breathing apparatus—and yet here he swam, a hundred feet below the surface. He turned, treading water vigorously, swung the beam of his hand torch around; David had a glimpse of the pale, high-cheekboned face, the curiously gleaming yellow eyes that glared at him; then he raised the spear gun in his hands and fired, at point-blank range.

The kick of the recoil was violent. Abruptly the man was sinking away. As he struggled, he turned over slowly and David saw the six inch length of spear that projected from his back—then an eerie glow spread over the body as it sank away. He watched as the body tumbled from sight below, followed by the fading hand-torch. For a few seconds it was luminous, then winked out. As David knew, when mortally wounded, the Invaders seemed to disintegrate—with the fading of the effort of will that enabled them to feign human shape in this alien atmosphere. At that moment, a second man swam into view, like the first without mask or air tanks. He was dressed in workman's dungarees, heavy work boots. He swam strongly, flashing his light ahead. Twenty feet from David, he paused, then approached the wreck at deck level, passed out of sight above David.

For half a minute, nothing happened. David held on, aware of a powerful current that tugged at him; turbulent water boiled up around his legs, almost breaking his grip. Then a beam of light glowed, outlining a figure which sprawled lazily in the water, sinking down past David, arms and legs asprawl, a dark cloud spreading from a terrible wound in the chest. As he drifted past, Grat Dolan's blind eyes seemed to stare directly into David's.

At a hint of motion above, David spun. Ten feet from him, the last of the three men who had escaped from the burning seaplane was lunging for him, a long knife bare in his hand, an expression of utter malevolence in his yellow eyes.

Chapter SIX

Instantly, David Vincent pushed away from the hull, bringing the spear gun around to bear on his attacker. With the speed of a snake, the swimmer dodged sideways, swung a vicious, slashing blow with the bared blade. David arched his body aside barely in time, and pulled the trigger. The steel missile struck the swimmer on the side, and glanced off, as the knife, missing its target, slammed home against the plywood hull, buried to the hilt in the tough wood by the impact of the blow. The knifewielder struggled to withdraw the blade. David reloaded swiftly, but as he raised the gun, the other turned, with a savage blow knocked the weapon spinning away. Then, with a final twist, he tore the knife free and kicked toward David, who threw himself back—and was immediately entangled in a snarl of rope dangling from above. He reached up, grasped the entailing cable, with a tremendous heave hauled himself upward as the knife cleaved the water where he had been an instant before. He hauled again—and felt the support give way. A massive section of the blasted deck house, dislodged from precarious balance by the tug at the rope, tilted, sliding down. David twisted frantically as his assailant shot up before him, drawing back his arm for the final stroke—and as he did, the blade touched a rope strained tight by the weight of the shifting deck-house wreckage. The keen blade sliced through only a few of the tough fibres—but it was sufficient. The cable parted; the lower end, recoiling from its sudden release, wrapped itself about the attacker's arm as it swept forward, checked the death-blow an inch from David's chest. The yellow-eyed man raked at the confining cable; the ponderous mass of the deck-house continued to move down, pivoting on its upper edge. At the last instant, he saw his danger, turned to flee—too late. The jagged end of a broken steel angle caught him, pinned him.

He fought, knocking great fragments of wood loose with crushing blows of his hands—but inexorably, the wreckage settled, driving the impaling member against and through him, crushing his pulped body against the shattered hull. As David fought clear, the cut rope still trailing after him, he saw the Invader's brief death-glow flare out beneath the crushing mass.

Drifting free, breathing hard from the violent encounter, David became aware of a sibilant rustling sound, carried through the water—the sound of the torpedo's high-speed propellers. Ignoring the snarled ropes

for the moment, he ripped open the cover of the web pouch at his belt, snatched out the water-proof controlling device. The indicator on the instrument's face indicated that the armed weapon was at a range of less than two hundred yards, running ninety feet below the surface, on a heading of 060—a collision course.

2

David pressed the control button down, holding left rudder. The torpedo's indicated course shifted with agonizing slowness, as it fought the same turbulence that had gripped David moments earlier.

Abruptly, the reading on the tiny dials altered. The torpedo swerved, caught up in a new vortex. An instant later, it swerved back, as David over-corrected for the sudden veering. Now a new surge of swirling water caught him up, tumbled him head over heels away from the still-settling wreck. At once, he was utterly lost in the trackless black as the titanic forces of the sea rolled him, sucked him down, only to send him spinning upward again.

Fighting to orient himself, David put his head into the main current, stroked strongly with his finned feet, attempting to rise above the rushing down-tow that was now forcing him deeper and ever deeper. He managed a glance at his depth gauge, saw that he had passed the twenty fathom mark.

Out of the darkness, a dull gleam of light appeared, sweeping toward him, resolving itself into a probing beam—one of the incredibly powerful hand-held lights used by the swimmers who had attacked him. Unarmed, David attempted to retreat, but entailed as he was, it was impossible. He turned to face the dark shape angling toward him, swimming clumsily but powerfully in the bundlesome work clothes and heavy shoes. It was the one who had investigated the wreck, callously sending Dolan's body over the side. Now he closed on David, clutching hands outstretched, his face contorted in a mask of ferocity, his strange, ochre eyes reflecting the beam of his lamp. David was suddenly aware that the hissing churn of propellers had grown louder and ever louder. Fifteen feet from him, the man broke his stroke, twisting to look back—and as he did, a sleek, dark shape shot from nowhere, swelled in an instant to the yard-wide, needle-prow of the speeding torpedo. Frantically, the swimmer attempted to back-pedal—but his efforts merely swept him directly into the path of the oncoming projectile. With stunning, irresistible force, it struck him full in the back,

and hurled him aside. A split second later, before David had time to so much as comprehend his sudden salvation, the torpedo hurtled past him, so close that the smooth metal almost scored his arm. There was a moment of tumbling confusion as the boiling wake caught him up, the bright, whirling blades chopping through the water inches from his vulnerable body—and then a terrific blow that almost ripped the breathing apparatus from his mouth.

Water churned past David like a mill-race. Fighting to avoid strangulation, he righted himself, saw that the ropes still twisted around his body were fouled now around the torpedo, which hauled him along behind it like a hapless rider behind a runaway horse.

3

The handlight dropped by the torpedo's victim had lodged in the ropes just out of David's reach, casting its green beam offside at an angle. Fighting the pressure of the streaming water, David brought his arm up, saw by the instrument at his wrist that he was now at a depth of twenty-seven fathoms—only a few yards from the muck of the bottom—and still the torpedo bore steadily downward. Twenty-eight fathoms; twenty-nine; if it touched, with its detonator armed . . .

David was still holding the control device in his hand. He thumbed the depth control; at once, the torpedo flattened its trajectory. He twisted the speed control, but detected no change; the torpedo continued to blast through the deep water at full speed—some thirty knots, David guessed—a pace it could continue for three hours on the fuel in its tanks. But for the last two hours and more, it would be a dead body that it towed: his air tanks would run dry in less than forty minutes. Surfacing would be of no help; the buffeting of being dragged across the swells behind the racing torpedo would kill him more swiftly than drowning.

Quickly, David checked out the other controls, found that only right rudder and 'up' elevator responded. He set the controls to begin a gradual, circling climb toward the surface and set about attempting to free himself from the ropes. There were loops wound tight around his chest, his left arm, his legs, knotted hard by his struggles.

In half a minute, his fingernails were torn and bloody—but he had succeeded in loosening one knot. As he reached to attack the next, a faint glimmer ahead caught his eye. A moment later, a second pale, greenish glow swam into view, and a third and fourth. Passing close to the last,

David saw that it was a luminous globe, perched incongruously on a six-foot pole projecting from the ooze and sea-weed below. Other lights stretched ahead in a straight row that marched across the torpedo's line of travel, like lamps along a submerged street.

He signalled hard right. The torpedo bucked, curvetted, fighting powerful currents. David was lifted, thrown from side to side with bone-wrenching force. The line of lights receded and disappeared—and reappeared half a minute later as the torpedo completed a circle. David neutralized the heading, and the machine shot forward along the marked lane.

The seconds ticked past—and still the lights continued to appear ahead, in apparently endless series. Abruptly, another pattern of lights materialized out of the murk, this one running at right angles to the other. As he shot over the intersection, David saw that the new line curved away to right and left, like encircling arms—and then he slammed the control to full right as a looming shape swelled upward from the sea-bottom, directly ahead.

For heart-stopping seconds, David thought that the torpedo would inevitably plunge full tilt against the rising grey wall of the dome; then, at the last possible instant, it veered aside, swerving crazily in the turbulence that boiled up around the great dome. Seconds later the lights reappeared, dead ahead—and not only the lights. From a cloud of roiling mud, dark shapes were rising; shapes which David saw at once were identically black-clad swimmers. He counted half a dozen before the torpedo shot through the group, sending them tumbling. Looking down, David saw a circular lock, standing open, light streaming out from it into the muddy water. Against the light, more swimmers appeared, swarming from the dome, summoned, no doubt, by the sound of the torpedo's careening passage. Then he was past, plunging on into darkness. But in his mind, the image lingered: the image of a hidden nest of incredible, inhuman creatures, who worked and breathed in the depths without masks—creatures who had sunk every ship that had passed close enough to threaten their secret. And at once, without conscious thought, he knew what it was that he had to do. With a twist of the control, he turned the torpedo, bringing it around to send it driving back—and downward—toward the sanctuary of the invaders. And even as he did, four black-clad swimmers shot toward him out of the murk.

All four lunged for the torpedo as it blasted toward them. Three missed, were tossed up and away. But the last caught a flying end of rope—and clung effortlessly with one hand, his baleful expression never changing as the force of the churning water slammed him repeatedly against the steel hull. Hand over hand he pulled himself in, secured a grip on the torpedo's stabilizing fin. Then, clinging alongside the sleek projectile, he seized the trailing ropes, began hauling them in. Helplessly, David felt himself being drawn forward into the grip of his implacable enemy. In thirty seconds or less, if his aim were good, the torpedo would impact against the dome. But before that, those steel fingers would have fastened on his throat.

Unless

David's eyes fixed on the whirling blades of the propellers, now only a scant ten feet from his face. The ropes, straining back along the curved hull, passed within inches of them. As the alien being heaved again on the lines, David angled his body, struck out with all the power of his arms and legs. There was a sharp shock, a moment of released pressure, a vicious jerk that snapped him over; and instantaneously the raking of the binding cable was gone. Still tumbling in the boiling turbulence, David caught a glimpse of the torpedo, flashing away into the darkness. Then the mask was torn from his face, the mouthpiece ripped from between his teeth by the force of the swirling water. He was dimly aware of being hurled end-over-end, twisted and pummelled as if by merciless fists. He held his breath, strained frantically against the ropes—and felt them yield, falling away, now that the pressure was gone.

Sixteen seconds, he counted automatically. Free—but the thought raced through his mind: *there's almost two hundred feet of water above me. Too far, too far . . . and less than fifteen seconds before it blows—if it blows*

And then, incredibly, he shot through the surface, fell back amid a roil of swirling water.

The updraft, he realized wonderingly. *It carried me to the top in less than ten seconds* But there was no time for the full wonder of his escape to penetrate. A breaking wave smashed down on him, driving him under. As he struck out, choking, the sea rose under him, and the world exploded into thunderous darkness.

There was a face bending over him—a man's face, with worried blue

eyes, grey hair, a scar across the lined forehead.

“Dave!” Paul Lieberman said. “You’re awake! You’re going to be all right . . . !”

David tried to speak, managed a faint whisper. “Paul . . . what . . . how .. ?”

“You were a long way from shore, for a pleasure swim,” a deep voice said from the other side. “It’s lucky the USS *Anemone* happened to be out that way on, ah, a routine training cruise.” Commander Tom Dwight smiled down grimly at David. “It’s a sad day when the most powerful fighting ship ever built has to play second fiddle to a lone man in a set of diving fins.” He looked in mock sourness at Lieberman. “If Paul hadn’t been so persuasive, I might have just let you swim. And with your connections you’d probably have beat me to shore.”

“How . . . did you find me .. ?” David asked.

“You should have let me come with you,” Lieberman said. “I put two and two together and realized where the mysterious mineral had come from. I talked to Mr. Ladislaw—and I had a word with his doctor. He’ll be released in a few days, as good as new. It took me a day or so to trace you, at which point I ran into Tom, chasing the same rabbit.”

“After you left, I realized I was wrong,” the Navy man said somberly. “I should have realized your agency wouldn’t have sent you to me if it weren’t important.”

“Agency?” Lieberman frowned at David, who shook his head. Dwight caught the gesture, smiled grimly.

“You don’t need to kid me along,” he said. “I realize why it had to be handled as it was. Once Washington knew the Russians had built a secret installation on the bottom of the Gulf, it had to be eliminated, of course—but without precipitating an international crisis. The simplest way was to say nothing, and quietly blast it. The Reds were hardly in a position to complain. And the warning won’t be lost on them. But don’t worry. I won’t say a word.”

“Was it . . . completely destroyed?” David asked.

Dwight nodded. “I took *Anemone* down and looked at what was left. There wasn’t much. The burned wreckage of a PT boat and an airplane sticking up out of the bottom muck, some pieces of what I suppose was *Cornubia*, the remains of what looked like a salvage tug. And a whacking big hole in the ocean floor.”

“Nothing else?” David persisted. “No artifacts, no equipment?”

Dwight shook his head. “It’s a little hard to understand how all that

damage could have been done by a few pounds of black-market TNT,” he said softly, looking at David quizzically. “But I guess that’s also highly classified.”

“The dome must have been wired . . . to destruct if attacked,” David said. He lay back, a feeling of defeat welling up inside him. Nothing was left—no shred of proof to convince the Navy that something far more sinister than a Russian undersea station had been destroyed; that a threat had existed—still existed, beside which the fear of nuclear war dwindled to insignificance.

“One thing I can’t understand,” Dwight was saying. “My shipboard seismograph gave me some strange readings down there. Paul studied them; it seems the Russkis had succeeded in drilling a Mo-hole—a shaft right down through the rock to the fluid inner core of the planet—probably as a power source—something our side isn’t capable of accomplishing at the present time. The explosion didn’t hurt it. He tells me that we can put a crew down in caissons and clear it in a matter of days, giving us a magnificent new research tool, free for the taking. What I’m wondering is—why did they drill it there—just a few miles from the US? Why not off their own coast?”

“That’s just one of many questions,” Lieberman said. “Come along, Tom. We’d better let Dave get his rest now.”

After the two men left, David lay, staring at the ceiling, haunted by the memory of the yellow eyes that had glared into his—eyes that promised war without quarter, so long as one of the strange tribe of superhuman Invaders survived. How many, David wondered, still lived? When and where would he next find a trace of them—and would he be in time .. ?

But he would think about that later, he told himself firmly. Turning on his back, he sank into troubled sleep.

THE ALLIES

Chapter ONE

“All right—stand back there!” the perspiring policeman bawled at a group of tousle-haired youths who had forced their way through the crowd that thronged the beach, growing minute by minute as more and more cars halted on the highway above, attracted by the excitement. While the patrolman was thus occupied, David Vincent eased inobtrusively past him, reached the front rank. Ten feet away, on the wet sand, an incredible creature lay. It was the size of a half-grown calf, dull red in color, with a lumpy, translucent hide. Eight short legs sprang from the heavy body, ending in paddles set with hooked talons. The tail was long, thick, fringed with feathery scales. But it was the head which held David’s eyes. Long alligator jaws sagged open, revealing two rows of polished black fangs. One huge compound eye, like that of a giant insect, reflected the late sun’s rays, where another had been, a gaping wound oozed ochre fluid.

“Here—that means you, too!” the cop’s angry voice sounded close beside David. He turned, gave the man a steady glance.

“Are you the officer who killed this thing?” he inquired in an authoritative voice.

“Yes—I shot it. Why? Who are you? Say—” the cop broke off, a new expression replacing the irate look. “You’re not from the FBI . . . ?”

“How long ago?” David asked, ignoring—the question.

“About half an hour,” the trooper said.

“I’d like to hear exactly how it happened, all the circumstances,” David rapped the question.

“Well, sir, I was patrolling along the beach highway, on account of the reports about unidentified lights off the coast, and I, ah, well, I pulled over, you know—”

“I understand. So you pulled over; and then what?”

“I had a smoke, just, you know, relaxing a few minutes, and I was looking out to sea, and I saw this kind of lump, this body, way out. And I wondered, maybe it’s a swimmer. Then it lifted its head, and I saw right

away, it was no swimmer!” The cop shook his head, his eyes dismayed. “I watched it come in. The surf took it and rolled it, and I saw it was big—too big to be anything I knew of, to be a native in these waters. I was born and raised right up at Pine Beach, I—”

“Was it already dead?”

“Dead? No, sir! It hit the beach running, come up on the sand and just kind of crouched there, those big jaws open, swinging its head around like maybe it was looking for something. I got out of the car and started down, and it swung around to face me; and when I got fifty yards from it, it started for me!”

“What did you do?”

“I had my revolver in my hand. I took a shot at it. And if you’d have been here, sir, you’d have done the same, nobody could blame me—”

“Your first shot killed it?”

“Well, no, actually I missed. It kept on coming, and I fired again. I heard the slug hit, but it just seemed to glance off, as if the thing was armor-plated. I fired a couple more times, but it kept coming. I had just two rounds left—and I knew I’d never make it back to the car before it hit me. I went down on one knee and took a two-handed grip and put both shots right in the eye, at close range—too close! I tell you, when I squeezed off that last one, I thought my time had come—but I dropped him. I went sideways and he rolled past where I’d been, and got up and went into a fit. See where the sand is all chewed up?” The cop pointed. “I reloaded, and got around and watched my chance and put two more in the same hole. That finished it.” He took out a large handkerchief, wiped his face and the back of his neck. “I tell you, sir—that’s the weirdest thing I ever ran into in twelve years on the force!”

“You did the right thing, corporal,” David said. “I’d like to take a closer look at it now.” The policeman followed as David went forward, knelt beside the strange beast. An acrid, penetrating odor rose from it. David put a hand against the glistening, rubbery hide; it was hot to the touch—hotter even than exposure to the afternoon sun could explain. He gripped one of the stubby legs; it was as hard and unyielding as carven oak. With an effort, he raised it a few inches. It seemed incredibly heavy. He examined the curved, needle-sharp claws. There were small holes on the inward curve of each talon, from which drops of amber fluid welled.

“Careful,” the cop said. “They’re just like a rattlesnake’s fangs; poison, or I’ll eat your hat.”

David nodded. “Who have you called?”

“My HQ, is all. The lieutenant said he’d get in touch with the State university . . . “ The cop broke off frowning. “Say, it’s only been ten minutes since I called. How did you get here so quick?”

The question was interrupted by a shrill scream from somewhere off to the left, along the beach. A stir went through the crowd. The scream was repeated, this time with an even more strident note of panic. The mob surged, half attempting to move toward the cries, the other half retreating. David came to his feet, fought his way through the press, the policeman at his side. People were running now, streaming down from the highway above, only to meet an equally aroused mass of humanity fleeing up from the water’s edge. In seconds, the entire stretch of beach was a surging, fighting mob-scene. And over the cacophony of yells, a third scream sounded, a shrill cry of pure terror.

“Clear the way there!” the cop yelled, and a deafening *boom!* sounded inches from David’s ear. The crowd broke before the warning shot. Across a stretch of open sand, David saw the twin to the dead monster, advancing across the shallows toward a lone girl who stood, her hands to her face, as if paralyzed by fright. David whirled to the trooper. “Your gun!” he snapped, and grabbed the weapon from the man’s hand. Planting his feet apart, he took aim, pulled the trigger. There was a flat report and the gun bucked in his hand. The sea beast broke clear of the surf’s edge, shook water from its head, then headed across the flat toward the transfixed girl, its multiple legs throwing up a flurry of sand. David’s second shot rang out; the creature veered toward him, snapping its great jaws.

David fired again, this time saw the vulnerable eye explode in a spatter of dark fluid. As the creature whirled, snapping at itself, David sprinted forward, caught the girl’s arm. She screamed, whirled on him, fingernails raking, her eyes wide and empty in her white face. Caught by surprise, David stumbled back; the gun dropped to the sand.

“Run!” the trooper’s voice bellowed. The wounded animal, back on its feet, was charging directly at him. David caught up the girl, ran for a small concrete block shed perched on the sand thirty feet distant. Reaching it, he lifted the girl, tossed her to the slanted roof, then caught its edge, swung himself up as a terrific blow struck the wall below him.

Lying flat, he looked down. The rust-red predator had skidded to a halt after missing its strike; now it rounded with the agility of a grotesque cat, and leaped. The building shook as the massive body slammed against it, its claws raking concrete inches below roof level. It gathered itself, leaped again—and this time its talons found purchase. The hideous head

thrust over the edge, jaws snapping like a dagger-lined bear trap. David took a step back, felt something roll under his foot. He stooped, came up with a six foot length of rusted steel pipe. He swung it up, brought it down in a terrific blow to the beast's snout.

The shock almost knocked the weapon from David's hand—but the creature came on, undeterred. David struck again, this time at an outstretched limb. One curved talon snapped off short; the beast emitted a yowl of pain and bit at the air—but continued its advance, only its own tremendous weight restraining it.

The girl lay where David had tossed her, still covering her face. She was slender, tanned, clad in a brief bikini. Blood seeped from scratches on her skin where the gravel roofing had raked her.

"Jump down and run for it," David snapped,—and turned as a gun boomed.

Below, the policeman was running forward, gun raised to fire again. David looked in the direction of the shots, saw a third sea-creature overtake a fleeing group of people, felling two with a single blow. Then his attention was brought back to the wounded beast before him as, with a surge, it brought its fifth set of legs up. David backed another step toward the girl who still crouched at the roof edge.

"Jump, or I'll have to push you," David shouted to make himself overheard over the screams of panic-stricken men, women and children who fled madly in every direction, only to check and dash away on a new course as another and another of the ravening creatures appeared. In a glance, he counted six of them now—and more were visible, wallowing in the surf, shoreward bound.

The girl came to her knees, staring past him at the gaping jaws, befouled by the brown ichor spilling from the blasted eye. He seized her, propelled her over the edge, saw her roll and come to her feet, staring up at him.

"Run!" he shouted, then turned, aimed a mighty cut at the attacking monster's remaining eye. Quick as a striking cobra, the great jaws snapped on the bar, ripped it from his grip, sent it flying. His last defense gone, David backed to the roof's edge, turned and jumped. He struck loose sand, went to his knees—and his hand fell on the iron bar, lying where the creature had tossed it. He grabbed it up, turned in time to see the beast, poised on the roof's edge, its mouth gaping, its lone eye ablaze, fixed on him. Then it sprang. In instant reflex, David had braced the end of the pipe in the sand, aimed the other, jagged end toward the beast, as a Masai

warrior braces his spear against an attacking lion. The sea-thing struck full on the ragged metal, driving the heavy shaft into his pale, scaly chest. David rolled aside as the massive creature, impaled on the crude weapon, threw itself into a frenzy of whipping, clawing, biting at nothing. Then, as the baleful, three-inch eye fell on him, the stricken monster reared, hardly impeded by the dragging barb planted deep in its body, and hurled itself at him. He jumped back, tripped, went down—and the thing was on him. It lunged, missed by inches as the protruding pipe deflected its strike—and then David was aware of the girl, standing before him, feet apart, a rusted fish-spear in her hands. As he watched, she raised the broken shaft, plunged the barbed tines deep into the animal's remaining eye. With a howl like tearing metal the creature coiled on itself, its great jaws snapping and tearing at its own flesh.

“This way—I have a car!” the girl cried as David staggered to his feet. She caught his hand, and together they ran for it.

Chapter TWO

“What are they?” the girl turned wide blue eyes on David as the small, open convertible raced south along the winding beach road.

“I don't know—but the important thing is to get word to the State Police, the army, somebody who has weapons that can handle them,” David called over the buffeting of the wind. “How far is it to the next town?”

“I don't know—I'm just a tourist,” the girl replied. Her fine-featured face was calm now, though pale under her tan. The wind whipped her dark hair. “I'm . . . sorry about the way I acted,” she said. “I was . . . terrified.”

“You saved my life,” David said. “You're a brave girl—and you think on your feet.”

“I'd be dead now—if it weren't for you,” she said. “Maybe I should introduce myself. I'm Doria Winters—” Abruptly, she slammed on the brakes, swerved with a squeal of tortured tires as a rust-hued monster identical with the one they had fought burst from the brush beside the road ahead. For an instant, as the car skidded in the loose gravel of the shoulder, it seemed as if they might shoot past the fearsome beast. Then, with a bound, the thing plunged directly into their path. At the last instant, the girl cut the wheel hard to the right. The speeding vehicle

struck the creature with its left front fender with an impact like slamming into a stone wall. As the car went up and over, David felt himself thrown through the air to slam with stunning force against the steep slant of rock beside the road. He staggered to his feet, bruised and scratched, but with no broken bones. The girl was lying a few feet from him, blood trickling down her face. The convertible lay upside down across the road, the wheels turning lazily, its front quarter crumpled and smashed. Suddenly the car trembled, tilted, then fell back. The sea-creature, struck down by the car, was pinned under the wreck; and still it lived and fought.

David caught the girl up in his arms. Acutely aware of his helplessness in the event of a new attack he started off along the road. He had gone no more than a hundred yards before she stirred, moaned, opened her eyes. "It's all right, Doria," he soothed her. "The car was wrecked, but we came out of it better than it did. How do you feel?"

"Terrible—but I can stand—I think." He put her on her feet. She stood, clinging to his arm.

"What will we do, if another one—" she started, but David cut in gently: "Never mind that; someone will spread the word. The army will be here soon with machine guns and grenades and clean these things out. In the meantime, we need to get in out of the open."

"But—there's nothing here ..

"Maybe just beyond the next turn," David said. "Try to walk now."

Their progress was painfully slow. No cars came along the road. No lights gleamed ahead through the gathering dusk.

"I . . . I must have picked the wrong direction," the girl said. "The nearest town is Pine Beach; it's the other way, to the north. There's nothing in this direction ..

"We'll find something," David said with more assurance than he felt. "How's your head now?"

"It aches—but that doesn't matter! What are we going to do? If one of those . . . *things*—"

"Stop it!" David commanded. "You're the girl who stood up to a wounded monster's charge with nothing but a broken fish-spear, remember?"

"I'm sorry," the girl said, and suddenly caught at David's arm, pointing. "Look—there, through the trees. Isn't that a building?"

A minute later, rounding the curve, they saw a faded sign, sagging from wooden posts. Peeling letters spelled out *SEAVIEW HOTEL—1/4 Mile*.

They walked on, faster now, with a definite goal in sight. To the right of the road, the ground fell away steeply to the beach below. The surf boomed monotonously. Far out at sea, a light glowed.

“It’s almost dark,” the girl said. “Why aren’t there any lights on?”

The dark bulk of the hotel rose up against a backdrop of towering pines. There were no signs of life as they came abreast of the wall, topped by an untrimmed hedge.

“It must have been quite a place fifty years ago,” David said, “but it looks as if there’s nobody home now.”

“Look—there’s a car!” Doria pointed toward a glint of light reflected from bright chrome, almost hidden under an overhanging mass of flowering shrub. They approached cautiously; there was no movement. The car, a late model hardtop, rested at an angle off the side of the road, one door hanging open. David rounded the side of the car, halted suddenly, waved the girl back. Wan twilight gleamed on the horribly mutilated body of a man, lying half in, half out of the car. A trail of blood led away into the underbrush. At close range, David saw the torn and twisted metal where the door had been half torn from its hinges by raking talons.

At that moment, a sound broke the stillness; a scrabbling, slithering noise, as of a heavy body clawing its way up the steep sand slope.

“Run for it!” David snapped, and, holding the girl’s hand, sprinted for the abandoned hotel.

2

The brick wall was high, overhung with dark masses of wild vine. A rusted wrought iron gate barred it. David skidded to a halt, seized the scaled bars, threw his weight against them. They creaked, but held. Exploring with his hands, he found a corroded length of chain secured by a massive padlock, looped around the brick post.

“No good,” he snapped. “We’ll have to go over! Quick, on my shoulders!” He stooped, lifted her; she placed her feet on his back, was swiftly lifted up. A moment later her weight went off him. He heard a gasp, the scrape of bare hide against stone—and another sound: the rasp of taloned limbs against the road behind him.

“Careful,” her voice came tensely from above. “There’s broken glass . . . “

David found a grip among the leaves of the old hedge, pulled up,

found the top of the wall. There was a rush from the darkness below; a massive body hurled itself against the bricks, inches from his feet. As the creature yowled and fell back, Doria jumped down into darkness. David followed her, slammed down among knee-high weeds. He helped the girl to her feet, as a second crashing impact sounded. Bricks rattled down from the top of the wall.

“No time to waste,” David snapped. They ran, saw a chain and post barrier lining the drive barely in time to avoid a bad fall, crossed a wide paved court, leaped up the chipped brick steps. As they did, there was a shattering clash of metal behind them.

“The gate’s down!” David jumped to the high, fanlighted door, wrenched at the knob.

“It’s solid! I’ll have to try a window!” From the darkness came the sound of a heavy body rapidly advancing across the rugged lawn. David jumped up on a decorative pot beside the locked double door, reached up and caught the bars protecting the lowest windows. He pulled up, found purchase for his feet in the rough brickwork, grasped the sill of the window above. With a blow of his fist, he knocked the glass in.

“Come on!” he reached down to grasp Doria’s hand. As he pulled her up beside him, there was a rush of taloned feet, and a smashing blow against the wall. David looked down, saw the great jaws snap inches from their feet. The monstrous sea-thing fell back, gathered itself instantly, leaped again, this time caught the bars of the lower window. For a moment it clung there, its free limbs raking the bricks, scoring deep grooves in the hard material. Then, with a shriek of torn metal, the grill ripped loose, and the great body fell, whipping, to the ground below.

Working deftly, the girl had cleared the broken pane from the window frame. Now she slipped through, and David followed. They were in a big, high-ceilinged bedroom, bare-floored, with stained wallpaper, a brass bed without a mattress, a broken chair.

“Not luxury accommodations,” David said. “But any port in a storm. Let’s find the stairs.” He led the way into a narrow corridor with a strip of worn carpet. They passed door after door, reached a dead end.

“Back the other way.”

As they passed the room through which they had entered, a sound of ripping wood came to their ears. Through the open door, David caught a glimpse of open alligator jaws, a gleam of starlight in two saucer-sized eyes. Dust flew as the short, incredibly powerful limbs tore away wood and stonework.

“Here it is,” the girl gasped, pulling open a metal-clad door under a lightless globe. David slammed and barred the door behind them. Together, they ran up the steps, passed a landing littered with empty beer bottles and sardine cans, the traces of some tramp’s sojourn. Three floors higher, they emerged in a corridor identical with the one below, except that here the dingy carpet was littered with bird droppings and wind-blown trash. A cold draft blew from a broken window at the near end of the hall.

“We’ve got to find a position we can defend,” David said. “I’m afraid those doors won’t stop the thing for long.” They went along the passage, looking into empty rooms. The corridor right-angled, led another twenty feet to the double doors of an elevator.

David tried the doors; they slid back easily—on an empty shaft. Leaning in, he looked down along the greasy cables, saw the car far below.

“No good,” he said. “It’s in the basement. Too bad we didn’t go down instead of up.”

“David—what will we do?” Doria shivered, turned to look back along the hall. From the direction of the stair, crashing sounds came. David tried the narrow door beside the empty shaft. It opened, revealing a narrow flight of service stairs.

“This must lead to the roof,” David said. “I guess we go up.” As he moved to step through, a rasping scrape from below warned him back. Doria shrieked.

“It’s another one! We’re trapped between them!”

“We’ll have to try for the other stairs!”

They ran back along the corridor—and skidded to a halt as the door through which they had come two minutes earlier burst from its hinges. The huge, dusky-red form of a sea-creature crashed out, sending pulverized plaster flying, ripping up the carpet with its claws as it rounded, paused for an instant to eye its prospective victims, cocking its grotesque head first on one side and then on the other like a curious bird. Then it charged.

“Stand fast!” David snapped, and caught Doria’s arm as she turned to flee. With unbelievable speed, the monster rushed at them—while behind them, the sound of rending wood told of the approach of its fellow. David glanced back; the second beast, only a trifle smaller than the first, rounded the corner, its eight legs rippling like a centipede’s. At sight of the prey waiting only yards away, it reared, clashed its great jaws, and threw itself at them. At the last possible instant, David wrenched open the door beside

them, thrust Doria in, and dived after her. Behind him, the two killers came together with a smash like switch engines colliding. A chance flick of the tail sent the door to the room flying in splinters. Great pieces of the corridor plaster fell, exposing lath and studs which were splintered in turn an instant later by the fantastic force of the embattled monsters' blows. Locked together, their talons raking great wounds in almost impermeable hides, giant jaws ripping at frantically clawing limbs, the combatants fought their way along the passage, leaving ruin behind them.

David caught Doria's shoulders as she clung against him, whimpering.

"We've got to get past them—now!" he shouted over the din of the struggle. "We'll try for the roof!" Half carrying the terrified girl, he climbed over the wreckage of the doorway, picked a path along the devastated hall. As they reached the intersection, he glanced back, saw one monstrosity seize the other by the neck, and with one mighty surge, tear the head from the still-lashing body. At the same instant, the victor's eyes fell on David. At once, abandoning the body of its victim, the beast rushed toward him, sending debris flying with each prodigious leap.

Holding Doria's hand, David ran the last few yards to the service stair. Before he reached it, he saw that the door was gone, smashed to kindling by the sea-thing. He thrust Doria ahead of him into the dark opening.

"Run for the roof!" he called as the charging monster rounded the corner, sending a rain of smashed plaster flying as it careered against the wall. Then he turned, faced the oncoming behemoth. The gaping jaws, the glistening black teeth the great, blank eyes grew as the thing rushed toward him. And as it seemed that in the next instant it would be on him, he leaped aside. Almost, the furnace-hot, red-gleaming flank of the creature brushed him as it hurtled past—and into the open elevator shaft. Brick fragments flew as the living projectile thundered against them. Hooked talons scrabbled for purchase, found none. With an ear-splitting bellow, the monster fell away out of sight, struck far below with an impact that shook the building. In the terrible silence that followed, Doria's sobbing was the only sound.

Chapter THREE

On the roof, David and the girl made a circuit of the edge, scanning the weed-grown grounds five stories below.

"There's another one!" Doria pointed. "And another!"

"I count six," David said. "Seven. And there are more arriving all the time."

"If they follow us here—" Doria started. "Maybe they won't," David said. "That first fellow was hot on our trail; he saw us climb up and come in the window. I suppose his little friend trailed him. But these others don't seem interested. They're just roaming around, looking."

"Maybe they'll fight each other, kill each other off . . ."

"They seem to be giving each other a wide berth," David said. "I suppose they only tackle their own kind when there's a meal in sight."

"What . . . what will we do now, David?" Doria pressed herself against him, looking up into his face. "There's no way to call for help—and no food, no water . . ."

"Let's see what we've got to work with." They spent another fifteen minutes inspecting the roof, poking into the three small sheds. The first two contained odds and ends of maintenance materials: hardened buckets of roof-patching tar, dried paint cans, rusted screwdrivers and pliers. But when David pried the lock from the third—carefully, so as not to make any sound which might attract the creatures prowling below—he found a 50 KW gasoline generator set, dusty but intact. There were two five-gallon cans beside it. The first was empty, but the second contained a gallon or so of fuel.

Doria did not share David's optimism. "If you start it," she said, "the sound will bring them!"

"I won't try it, unless there's a good reason," he assured her.

"If only we had a telephone," Doria wailed. "Some way to tell someone we're here!"

"We'll do the best we can with what we have. Now, I want you to stay here, Doria—you can hole up in one of the sheds if one of our visitors should get this far—while I scout around down below—"

"I'm going with you," the girl said in a tone of finality.

"All right—but remember; if there's trouble, make for the roof. It's your best chance."

Doria shuddered. "I'll remember."

Together, moving as silently as possible, they descended the stairs, followed the ruined corridor past the body of the beheaded sea-thing, still twitching, an hour after its death—went down one more flight to the floor below. They checked room after room, found defunct furniture, mouldy carpets, bent coathangers, abandoned garments, lying where the last scavengers had left them. In a room which had apparently been used by a

caretaker after the closing of the hotel, they found an ancient wood-cabinet radio. David quickly inspected it.

“It looks all right,” he said. “The tubes are all there. If it works—if the generator will start—maybe we can find out what’s going on, when we can expect to be rescued.”

“I’m afraid, David!” Doria’s eyes were wide in her oval face. “Don’t start the generator! They’ll hear it, they’ll know what it means! They’re intelligent! Not as clever as a man, perhaps, but they’re more than just animals. David—where do you suppose they come from?”

“I don’t know,” David said grimly. “But I have an idea their being here is no accident.”

“I’ve never seen or heard of anything like them,” Doria said. “It’s as though they were creatures from another planet—but I suppose that’s silly.” She shook her head. “They must be a mutation from some ordinary creature. We’ve been dumping radioactive wastes in the ocean for years now; that might cause something like this.”

“Wherever they come from, they’re here now,” David said grimly. “It’s us against them. We won’t let them win without a struggle. There must be something here that will serve as a weapon.”

They searched on, picking their way through the lightless rooms, stumbling over rubbish, with their ears keened for any sound of a new assault by the sea-beasts. It was almost an hour later that David found a small utility room with mops, brooms, spare light bulbs, lengths of pipe, coils of wire. He examined the latter.

“Braided clothes-line,” he said. “Not the best—but it might work . . . “

“What will you use it for?”

“I’ll rig a dead-fall by the stairhead. Maybe a few other little items. As a boy, I did a little trapping. Maybe tonight we can catch some bigger game.”

2

The moon was high, gleaming ghostly through cobwebbed windows, when David stepped back to survey his handiwork. Over the shattered second story window through which the sea-thing had followed them, a massive block of stone rested precariously, one edge supported by the steel window frame, the other by a section of two-inch pipe to which was attached the cable. It had taken two hours of back-breaking labor to lever the stone from the coping of a small balcony overlooking what had been

the hotel garden, drag it here on improvised rollers, and lift it into position.

“The first one through there will get a headache, at least,” David said, mopping his brow. “Now let’s see what else we can manage.”

Back on the fourth floor, he studied the smashed doorway opening from the stairwell.

“This would probably be the next best spot,” he said. “They’ll be following our trail, I suppose. Maybe we can arrange a little surprise for the one that gets this far.”

With Doria’s willing help, David rigged a loop of tough wire in the opening, one end secured to an iron radiator a few feet along the hall, the other running over the stair rail and hanging down into open space. On the edge of the landing, propped against the rail, he placed an empty steel barrel, a 55 gallon oil drum which had apparently been in use as a rubbish container. He secured it with another length of wire, which he stretched across the opening.

“Now, we dump every piece of metal we can find in the drum,” he said. “We want it as heavy as possible. When the thing starts through the door, over it will go—and the noose will snap closed—with his head in it, if we’re lucky.”

For the next hour, the two prisoners gathered and hauled scrap metal: rusted pipe, tin cans, knobs twisted from brass beds, andirons from bird-nest-choked fireplaces, even bent nails and bottle tops. When the supply of metal was exhausted, they added bricks, broken china chamber pots, bottles.

“Save a few of those,” David suggested as they added the latter. “I think I have enough gas to make up a couple of Molotov cocktails.”

“Do you think it will work?” Doria whispered, near exhaustion, looking dubiously at the makeshift trap.

“Let’s hope we never find out,” David said. “Now, let’s go up and see how things look.”

Carrying the radio, they climbed the stairs. Back on the roof, they saw the distant glimmer of fires in the hills. Here and there, the darkness was punctuated by tiny flashes of light that winked intermittently all across the countryside, followed by staccato reports, muffled by distance.

“Shooting going on,” David said. “I hope they know to aim for the eye.”

Doria, close beside him, shuddered, looking down into the moonlit grounds below.

"I don't see them," she whispered. "Do you suppose—"

"Maybe they're gone," David said. "Moved on to greener pastures—or attracted by the shooting. Shall we chance the generator now?"

"If you want to, David." Doria's voice quavered, but she turned steadily, went to the shed, opened the door. David, working with difficulty in the pale moonlight, poured a quart of gas in the tank, found the starting crank, opened the choke, and turned the motor over. It resisted, groaning at the unaccustomed attention.

"It hasn't been used for a long time," he said. "The oil has stiffened up. But there's no reason it shouldn't go." He spoke cheerfully, knowing the unlikeliness of success. Again and again he turned the balky engine over.

"It's freer now," he said. "Any movements down below?"

Doria went to the edge and checked. "No—still quiet."

David gave the crank a hearty pull—and was rewarded by a sputter and a flash of blue from the exhaust stack.

"She's hot," David said. "She's going to work!"

A moment later, the worn engine gave a choked snort and broke into stuttering life. At once, a yellow gleam came up, shining from a window below onto the leaves of a tree that loomed almost to roof level.

"An emergency light," David said. "Someone must have left the switch on."

"Stop the generator!" Doria said urgently. "The light will attract them!"

"If I do, I may not get it started again. It doesn't sound good." David bent over the sputtering, missing engine. "Probably dirt and corrosion in the fuel line—" He broke off as a voice sounded near at hand:

.. situation is being brought rapidly under control." The words, half obscured by static, came from the ancient radio, which David had plugged into the generator outlet. "Under the onslaught of State Police, assisted by thousands of Army reservists called to duty during this crisis, the 'Kroks', as the invading predators have been nicknamed by the defending forces, are dying in increasing numbers. At latest report, over six hundred of the vicious beasts, of a variety unknown to science, have been killed—all in the area lying directly inland from the small community of Pine Beach where the animals first made their appearance five hours ago. The human death toll has now risen to thirty-seven, with more bodies being discovered minute by minute as police, using trap and heavy-caliber guns, clean out the areas previously overrun by the monsters. General Jespers,

commander of the National Guard unit, has announced that while the creatures have now been confined to a rapidly dwindling pocket of resistance near the county line, it is still dangerous to venture out of doors—”

“David—that means it’s over!” Doria exulted, throwing her arms around David’s neck. “They’re gone—we’re safe!” As she drew back to smile radiantly up at David, her eyes went past him. Her expression froze—twisted into a mask of horror. David whirled, leaped back, bearing the girl with him, as a *thing*—beaked, taloned, red-eyed, swooped in low, light glinting on leathery wings, wheeled, uttered a grating cry, and dived straight for them.

Chapter FOUR

David fell back into the doorway of the shed, the girl under him. Air buffeted violently as the flying monstrosity beat its wings, checking its vicious rush. A beak like a giant cleaver snapped, inches from his face; steel hard talons raked concrete, sending chips flying. David reached behind him, and his hand fell on a heavy insulated cable. As the winged attacker whirled and pounced again, he swung the cable like a club, struck a crushing blow across the monster’s head. With a vicious snap of its beak, it ripped the thick wire from his grasp—and fell, flapping wildly as sparks spewed from between its knife-edged jaws. The live wire, half shorn through, arced and flashed, as the full voltage of the generator poured through it. While the giant flyer beat its five-foot wings, sending up a shower of gravel, tarred roofing and splinters of the wood decking underneath, David dragged Doria to her feet. Together, they ran for the stair-head, leaped inside as the overloaded generator died with a choked gasp.

“David—what does it mean?” Doria gasped as they paused for breath. “They’ve stopped the sea-things—but now this! Do you suppose there are more of them? A plague of flying devils, to replace the sea-devils?”

“I don’t know. I suppose we’d better be prepared for the worst—although this kind doesn’t look quite as powerful as the other—”

“They’re worse! They can go anywhere, over any wall; they can evade the traps, and the men, and spread out over the whole country! No one will be safe—”

“Take it easy, Doria,” David gave her what he hoped was a reassuring smile. “There probably aren’t that many of them—and the troops will find a way to deal with them—”

“But it was so quick—the way it darted and swooped! They’ll never be able to shoot them down!”

“They’ll find a way. Meantime, we have to stay alive. Let’s get downstairs before that one’s big brother comes battering at the door.”

As he spoke, there was a tremendous, smashing explosion of noise from the room they had just passed. Sounds of frantic buffeting followed—and a moment later, the panel bulged, split, flew outward, and through the gap, a second winged horror burst, its wings folded back along a gaunt-ribbed body of purplish-grey circled with yellow stripes like a giant hornet. The glittering beak opened on a red throat; the great crimson insect-eyes glistened with a hundred fires as it threw itself toward its intended prey on lean, many-clawed legs. They were almost opposite the entry to the stair now. David jumped to the smashed opening.

“Go under the wire!” he snapped, and thrust the girl through. He ducked after her, leaped aside as the bat-winged creature hurtled through in their wake. There was a sharp twant of a cable parting, a scrape of metal against concrete, a flurry as the beast, its scaled neck snared in the loop of wire, squalled and beat its wings, stirring up a cloud of gritty dust. The weighted steel drum, snagged by the broken end of the restraining wire, sagged outward—but did not fall. David jumped forward, felt the striking beak brush his sleeve; then he was over the rail, his feet braced against the drum. He pushed, felt the wedged container move half an inch, and stop, held firm by the trailing wire. A scream rang out. He turned his head, saw the neck-caught beast lunge against the restraint, striking out with its forefeet at Doria, who shrank against the wall, cornered. The flyer hurled itself at her again, and this time its raking talons brushed her arm, laying the smooth brown skin open in three parallel cuts, as clean as though incised by a razor. As the dark blood started down, David set himself, threw all his strength into the effort to dislodge the drum. It budged, shifted—then, with a suddenness that made him grab for support, it leaned, tilted outward over the five-story abyss, and dropped away. The cable whined over the rail. The flying thing seemed to leap backward, drawn by the line secured around its neck. It slammed the rail, ripping the stout piping from its supports in the concrete, slammed over the side, and with a despairing howl, plummeted downward, its black wings fluttering like ragged sails, to smash thunderously below.

For the remainder of the night, David and Doria sheltered in an empty storeroom off the cavernous, empty lobby. While the girl slept, David sat with his back propped in the doorway, watching and listening. Again and again he heard the crashing of great wings as one of the flying creatures threw itself against the wall at an upper level; but none attempted the barred windows here on the ground floor. Once or twice he heard shooting, far away. As dawn streaked the sky, Doria woke.

“Morning—and we’re still alive,” she turned shadowed eyes on David. “You haven’t slept. Why not rest now, while I watch.”

“I haven’t seen one for an hour now,” he said. “I heard a plane go over a few minutes ago. I think maybe they’ve cleared them out. I want you to stay here while I take a look outside.”

Doria promptly stood, brushed her short, dark hair back from her face.

“We’ll go together,” she said.

Walking cautiously among the fallen lamps, rotted chairs, collapsed tables that stood on the mildewed carpeting, they crossed to the high doors, drew aside the tattered drapes, looked out through the grimy glass at a bleak aspect of weed-grown pavement. The cracked drive led to the gate, the twisted remains of which hung from broken mountings, obscure in the morning mist. The sky was grey, overcast. A restless wind plucked at the dripping leaves of the trees beside the drive. There were no signs of any life, monstrous or familiar.

“I need to set up some kind of sign in the road,” David said. “In case a car comes along.”

“There won’t be anyone,” Doria said. “This is the center of the trouble; the police wouldn’t let anyone through, even if they wanted to come this way.”

“Maybe the police will see it,” David said cheerfully. “You wait inside. There’s no point in risking two of us—and if one of those winged atrocities comes in view, you might slow me down.”

“Oh—I hadn’t thought of it that way.” Doria managed a smile. “All right, David—whatever you say. But hurry—please. I’m frightened being here alone.”

“It will only take a minute or two.” David lifted aside the heavy bar which had been installed to replace the lock, smashed by looters in the early days of the hotel’s abandonment. “Be ready to put it back in a hurry

if you see anything,” he said, and stepped outside into a chill, wet morning. From the porch, he scanned the sky; nothing moved there. He crossed the drive, noting the crisscrossing trails of the sea-things, the drag-marks of their heavy bodies, the slashes their talons had cut in the weathered concrete. Feeling naked and vulnerable, he passed the gate. Streaks of bright scratch-marks glistened on the scaled bars, bent and twisted as though struck by a truck. The road was empty. The only sound was the dull hiss and thud of the surf. At the side of the road, David scooped up loose, sandy soil, used it to scrawl an SOS in yard high letters across the road, added an arrow beneath. As he turned to retrace his steps to the hotel, a shrill scream ripped the morning air.

Chapter FIVE

It was two hundred feet to the sagging marquee over the hotel entry. Running with the girl’s terror-stricken cry echoing in his ears, the distance seemed to David to be ten times that—a nightmare run, through the syrupy medium of fear; fear not for himself, but for the helpless girl who had trusted him. His eyes swept the scene for the charge of a great sea-monster, or the death-dealing pounce of a flying killer—and almost missed the bristled thing, the size of an orange-red tennis ball, that bounded high, striking for his face. Instinctively David threw up his arm, felt searing agony as the midget’s needle-like fangs stabbed through his sleeve, speared deep into the muscle of his forearm. It clung, shredding the tough cloth of his shirt with its claws, until he stumbled to a tree, slammed the leechlike thing against the trunk. It dropped to the ground, whipping and scabbling at the bricks beneath it with the same diabolical ferocity that had characterized its larger cousins.

Bleeding freely from his lacerated arm, David ran for the entry, leaped the steps, burst into the mildewed lobby as Doria, the stand of a lightless floor lamp in her hands, aimed a roundhouse blow at another of the bristled horrors. The heavy metal rod struck it squarely, sending a spatter of vile-smelling, yellowish fluid across the floor. Even with its body crushed, the thing continued to crawl toward the terrified girl, its talons rasping splinters from the floor, until David brought a boot down on it, stamped it into a tangled pulp.

“Oh, David!” Doria threw herself at him, clutched him, sobbing. “I was so . . . so frightened!”

“Not too frightened to fight,” he said gently. “That’s quite a swing you’ve got there.”

She managed a ghostly smile. “I’m a tennis player,” she said—and broke off as another of the demoniac beasts skittered through the open door. David dodged its rush, slammed the heavy panel, catching another of the tiny killers as he did. He kicked the other away as it charged him again, dropped the bar in place, the trapped creature still keening and clawing, with its body almost cut in two. Doria, running up with her lampstand, smashed the surviving animal with a well-aimed blow.

“The windows!” David called, and ran to tilt a heavy table against the nearest barred opening, glimpsing as he did half a hundred of the kitten-sized monsters, swarming across the inn-yard. One bounded high, struck the bars, clung, raking at the table, sending splinters flying.

“It will hold for awhile,” David called to Doria, frantically stacking chairs before the other window flanking the entry. “Long enough for us to find a better defensive spot! Come on!”

Together, they ran for the stairs, emerged on the second floor to find the invaders there ahead of them.

“They must have come up via the trees,” David said, sending a viciously charging creature spinning with a kick. They retreated back onto the landing, where David held the door against the sledgehammer impacts of the bristled bodies hurling themselves against it from the opposite side. “Quick, Doria!” he snapped. “Get downstairs and wedge that door! The bars are slowing them down down there, but they’ll be through in a minute!”

She hurried away, and David heard sounds of scraping and pounding. Half a minute later she was back, dragging a heavy table leaf.

“Maybe you can use this to block this one,” she brushed her dark hair back from her forehead with the back of one scratched, grimy hand. Her face was tear-streaked, her eyes wide and frightened; but her voice was steady now.

“Good girl!” David braced the end of the five foot oak slab against the rail, jammed the other under the door handle. “That ought to hold,” he said. “Unless they find a way of reaching the window, we’re all right for now.”

Doria turned to stare out through the dusty glass of the big double-hung window on the landing below. She gasped and pointed. A few yards beyond the glass, the bough of a stately elm tree arched downward, clustered with the vermilion killers as thickly as bees on a honey rack.

There was a steady thumping against the side of the building as one after another of the frenzied animals threw himself into space, striving to reach the flimsy pane that barred their way to their prey.

“Sooner or later one of them will make it,” David said. “We’ll have to be ready.”

“We’re going to die!” Doria gasped. “They’ll kill us—and if not these, then whatever comes next!”

She whirled on David. “Don’t you see! As quickly as one kind is driven back, another comes to take its place! They’ll just keep coming, one after another! They’ll never end! And we’ll die here, torn to pieces by these—”

David swung his hand in a solid slap to the girl’s cheek. She staggered, her mouth wide as if to scream. Instead, she crumpled to her knees, sobbing. David lifted her tenderly, patted her smooth, bare shoulder.

“I’m sorry, Doria. This is no time to get hysterical. We have work to do—both of us. We’re not dead yet. As long as we’re alive we’re not going to let them take us without a fight.”

“David—what are they? They’re not natural! They’re like some sort of horrible imps from Hell!”

“They’re just animals,” David said. “Tough, vicious animals—but just animals. We’re animals, too!—the most dangerous predator on the planet. They’ll find us harder to prey on than they expected.”

“On *this* planet—but these things aren’t from this planet! I feel it, David! I know they’re not! I’m a biology student! There’s no life on Earth like these creatures—any of them! Protoplasm—earthly protoplasm—just isn’t as strong as theirs! And their horrible vitality—”

“You may be right,” David said. “It doesn’t change anything. They’re alive—but they can be killed. We’ve proven that—”

“We’ve been lucky—so lucky,” Doria said. “Time and again, we’ve escaped by a hair’s breadth—but lots of others weren’t so lucky! I saw that man in the car—and the radio said thirty-seven people had been found dead so far! We can’t go on being lucky forever—”

“Not just luck,” David said. “It wasn’t luck when you put the fish spear in the big fellow’s eye—or when you swatted his little brother—”

With a resounding smash, the landing window shattered. A clawing, hissing, tangerine-red creature struck the stair, and instantly leaped for David’s head as he jumped aside, bearing Doria with him. The attacker hit the wall, bounded off, whirled to resume the attack—and was sent spinning down the stairwell by a well-aimed kick.

“We need weapons,” David said urgently. “Where’s your lampstand?”

“I . . . I dropped it. David—your arm—it’s bleeding badly—and your leg! One of them slashed you—”

“It’s not bad, just scratches! Get your club—quick! And see if there’s anything else lying around!”

A second fist-sized bundle of ferocity hurtled through the broken window before Doria returned; this one missed the landing, struck the rail and fell after his predecessor. As the girl passed the heavy rod to David two more burst through, sending the last jagged shards flying. He caught one in mid-air, sent it flying back through the window like a bristly baseball; the other ricocheted from the wall, and with a leap, fastened itself on his thigh. He staggered back, in agonizing pain—and Doria rushed in, seized the needle-quilled creature with her bare hands, and ripped it free—only to have it twist in her grip, gashing her wrists, and lunge for her throat. She twisted aside, and the ripping, tearing limbs fastened instead in her unprotected shoulder. She fell, blood streaming down her arm, as David, with a blow of his hand, struck the thing from her, then smashed it with a swing of the improvised club.

Watching the window, David lifted the unconscious girl, placed her near the door, as far as possible from the window. Working rapidly during a momentary respite, he ripped strips from his shirt, bound up her slashed arm and hands, then his own thigh and arm. As he finished, another creature sailed through the broached window, struck the railing, fell back on the stairs. David jumped down, landed squarely on it with both boots, felt bones crunch. He kicked the still-twitching thing down the well—and turned at a sound above. Three of the barbed carnivores were on the steps above the landing where Doria lay, unconscious.

2

David reached the helpless girl an instant before the foremost of the creatures; he flattened it with a terrific blow of his club, sent a second skittering over the side with a kick. The third dodged past him, ripped at the girl’s ankle before David could kick it away. Doria struggled to a sitting position, then staggered to her feet.

“They’ve found a way in above!” David snapped. “We’ll have to go down! If a wave of them hits, we can’t handle them!”

“But—that will put us back in the lobby . . .” Doria gasped.

“We can hole up behind the old desk in the corner! That way they can only come at us from one direction!”

Supporting the dazed girl, David descended quickly to the barricaded door, dragged aside the chairs with which she had blocked it, stepped into the empty lobby. Broken glass lay scattered near the windows across the room. There was a rush of small clawed feet, and a pair of the imps flew at him out of the shadows, one from the right, one from the left. He smashed the first as it leaped at his face, whirled to meet the other with a backhanded blow that sent it spinning, then caught Doria's arm, hurried her around the end of the L-shaped reception desk. It was the work of a few minutes to heap massive, broken furniture on the counter and in the open end. David caught up a heavy chairleg, passed it to Doria for use as a weapon. Moments later, one of the creatures attempted to leap the new barricade, only to meet two crushing blows at once.

"That's the spirit," David cried. "You take that end, I'll watch this side!"

For half a minute there was nothing but the sound of scuttling claws to break the stillness; then two attackers bounded at them at once. Doria screamed, struck and missed, spun as the thing got behind her, smashed it with her second blow. The blood from her shoulder had run down across her side, trickled down her thigh. Her bandaged hands were red-stained. David saw this in an instant's glance as he batted down the second scarlet assailant.

"We can't keep this up!" Doria wailed. "One of us is bound to miss—and—"

From the other side of the barricade, a shrill squealing broke out, completely different from the almost supersonic keening of the red destroyers. David thrust aside a perished blue velour-bottomed chair, looked through the space. Ten feet away, a gigantic rat, grey bristled, yellow-fanged, reared up, whirling, snapping at a surrounding circle of the alien creatures. With a lightning slash of his chisel-sharp teeth, he laid one open, spun and struck down another, pounced on a third—and all the while, his rusty-bed-spring snarls rose over the rasping and thudding of the suddenly assaulted imps.

"It's a big rat!" David shouted. "He's taking on the whole army of them!"

Doria sprang to his side, cried out at what she saw.

"David! It's . . . horrible! That thing—fighting those devils!"

"He's on our side," David said, watching as the giant rodent gutted yet another of the verminous animals, dodging each leap, striking back. But valiant though the rat was, the end was inevitable. As he rose, shaking a

clawing victim from his face, another sprang from behind, locked on his back, bore him down, rolling and squealing. In an instant, half a dozen more had laid open the interloper's unprotected underside, then ripped his body to bloody shreds in a frenzy of revenge.

"The poor thing," Doria gasped. "He fought so hard—"

"He gave us a breather," David said. "We owe him one for that. Get ready; they'll be on us again in a second—"

"David! There—in the back hall!" He turned, saw a second great, grim rat bound forth from the shadowy passage, snap up a spined invader, leap on instantly to another, and another. And behind him, more rats swarmed out, throwing themselves into the fray with a ferocity not matched even by their enemies.

"They're coming up from the cellar!" Doria cried. "They're beautiful! Look at them!"

Dozens of leaping grey-brown forms were among the scarlet beasts now, each the focus of a ring of killers who, impeded by their very numbers, were unable to use their favorite tactic of leaping from a distance to fasten their talons in their prey. As they scuttled in, jostling each other, the rat who was the object of their combined attention would spring, strike, slash, whirl, and spring again. Already, David saw, the wily rodents had discovered the vulnerability of the rounded bodies, and ignoring the threat of the protective quills, leaped to the attack, ripping each foe with one swift stroke, then springing at another. In half a minute, the floor was littered thick with disemboweled, but still struggling imps, and a smaller number of dead, horribly mutilated rats. A minute more, and the undulating forms of the victorious rats, scuttling among their enemies' bodies searching out survivors, were the only things that moved there.

Chapter SIX

"They saved our lives," David said hoarsely in the momentary silence. "I'll never put a piece of cheese in a trap again . . ."

Doria caught at his sleeve. "Listen!" she whispered. Far away, a whining susurration sounded—a plaintive mewling, rising and falling.

Unheeding of the rats which scattered before him, David vaulted the counter, ran across to the window, pulled aside the table propped there. The scene he saw was like a medieval artist's conception of Hell. All

across the weed-grown inn-yard, crimson and grey forms were locked in mortal combat—a living carpet of rats and imps, of flashing teeth, ripping talons, from which the nightmare ululation arose. Here in the open, the numerical advantage the rats had enjoyed was reversed. Against a few hundred rodents were pitted what seemed to David to be thousands of their opponents, whose ranks were steadily swelled by new arrivals, swarming up across the road from the beach below.

“They’re losing!” Doria’s voice sounded close behind David. “Can’t we do something?”

“There’s only one thing we can do,” David said. “Open the doors, and let the rats that are trapped inside out to join the fight!”

“But—if we do that—they’ll get in!”

“It’s up to you,” David said. “But you’ll have to decide in a hurry!”

“Let—let them out!” Doria cried. “It’s their planet too!”

David lifted the bar, hauled the doors wide. With a rush, the imprisoned rats sprang to join the fray. From the dark back hall, more and more rats streamed, squealing their eagerness to be at the red-eyed creatures which had invaded their domain. They struck the swarming melee on the flank, cut a swath through clear to the center of the courtyard, then with instinctive tactical genius, split, driving the imp forces into two groups; those at the center of each swarm were unable to come to grips with their destroyers, while the outnumbered rats brought chisel-teeth to bear on their antagonists all along the periphery of each embattled cluster.

“It’s evener now,” David called. “The rats are holding their own!”

“But there are so many against them,” Doria clutched David’s arm. “No matter how they fight, they’re bound to tire . . . ”

As she spoke, a tongue of the invading killers broke through the encircling rats, overwhelming a twenty-foot section of their line, then turned to attack the adjacent animals in the rear. Swiftly, the breakthrough spread. A pair of imps, catching sight of David and the girl, bounded toward them, struck the door like thrown bricks as Doria slammed it.

“The rats are losing!” she wailed.

“Not yet!” David called. “Reinforcements are arriving! See there? The small brown ones—and those lean, black fellows: wharf rats! There must be thousands of them!”

Beside David at the window, Doria watched with wide eyes. For the first minute, it appeared that the new arrivals might turn the tide; then, as

the alien creatures discovered the comparative weakness of the smaller rodents, they concentrated their attack on them. Rats died by the hundreds, snapping and struggling. The diversion allowed the larger rats to reform their ranks, and again contain their adversaries, but there were fewer of them now, in spite of the trickle of late-comers still scuttling across the floor to leap through the door which David had again opened.

“They can’t hold them long,” David said. “Not without help!” As he spoke, a shadow flitted across the scene of the battle. An immense bird, five-foot wings spread wide, beak and talons ready, dropped like a thunderbolt into the midst of the fight. Beating with its great pinions, the eagle snatched up an imp, ripped it open with a single swift stroke, dropped it and snatched another. A hawk, smaller than his great cousin, but even swifter, swooped, caught a needle-bristled beast in talons like curved razors, tore it apart, dived for another. In seconds, the yard was filled with fluttering, screeching birds of prey, swooping to the attack. The imps, reacting to the new attack, bounded high, meeting the birds in full charge. Many missed their aim, were seized and shredded, their maimed bodies dropped back among the battlers below; but others, quicker or luckier, fastened to a fowl’s breast or neck, sending feathers flying in clouds before being torn away. Here and there a bird went down, was instantly inundated, ripped limb from limb by the scarlet horrors. But nowhere did a bird attack a rat, or a rodent a flying ally.

“They’re holding them!” David said tensely. “Just barely! The devils aren’t gaining any ground—but neither are the rats!”

“David—look there!” Doria pointed across the road. Through the low mist which still hung over the ground, a figure appeared—a man, tall, lean, dressed in a grey business suit. At that distance it was impossible to be sure—but David Vincent knew that the eyes in the pale face would be a strange shade of yellow. The Invaders—or an Invader, at least—had found him.

2

A stir ran through the outlying fringes of the imp-swarm as the apparition approached. One of the creatures bounded toward him, caught his pants-leg, darted upward to perch on his shoulder. Another followed; they nestled close to his face, their upraised claws vibrating as if in some arcane greeting. Beside David, the girl drew in a sharp breath.

“He’s a . . . he’s a friend of those . . . things! What is he? Who—”

“He’s not human,” David said swiftly. “He looks like a man—but he’s more alien to humanity than an octopus! You were right about these creatures: they don’t come from this planet—I’m sure, now! That’s their master—and he’s come to help them!”

In the inn-yard, the intruder had reached the scene of the battle-royal. He gestured. At once, the pattern of the fight changed as the crimson hordes concentrated their attacks at specific points.

In moments, the two groups had broken through their encirclers, merged again into one, which spread out in a wide arc, now presenting two, three, or four imps to the attack of each rat. Ignoring the pouncing birds, the alien creatures swept forward in a ragged line abreast, forcing the rats back, back; and though the fierce rodents took a fearful toll, it was plain that now there could be only one outcome of the unequal struggle.

“David—he’s helping them—and we’ve got to help the rats!” Doria turned to him, horror in her eyes—but fury, too—and determination. “We can’t just let them be slaughtered!”

“I hoped you’d feel that way,” David said. He caught up his club, passed one to Doria, threw the door wide, and plunged out into the fray.

3

Smashing out left and right, David cut a path through the lines that bulged back to contain him, fighting his way toward the unhuman thing who stood glaring across the melee with strange ochre eyes. Behind him, Doria guarded his back, knocking down with sure blows each attacker which strove to reach him. The alien, with no attempt at defense, sprang to meet him. David swung the heavy steel bar in a vicious cut that struck the Invader’s outstretched arm at the elbow joint. The impact almost knocked the weapon from his hands. As eagles screamed and beat about his head, he leaped aside from the other’s continuing rush, spun and struck again, this time at the other’s shoulder. The Invader stumbled and fell—but at once came to his feet again, seemingly unharmed. He bared his teeth and sprang; David dodged, brought the club up to strike again—and tripped over a mound of dead imps. As the alien sprang at him, he rolled aside—not far enough. The invader’s weight struck him across the legs, pinning him. He swung a fist at the implacable face that lunged at him; it was like striking a wooden image. The creature’s arm shot out, caught David’s arm in a crushing grip; the enemy’s fist swung up—

Doria, springing behind the pseudo-man, swung her oak chair-leg in a

powerful arc that caught the upraised wrist, deflected its blow so that the alien's fist smashed, not against David's face, but against the pavement beside his head. Her second blow slammed against the alien's neck, knocking him off balance. With a heave, David freed himself, came to his feet as the invader, whirling and rising with fantastic agility, knocked the club from the girl's hand, sending her spinning with the same blow. David looked frantically about for the weapon he had dropped. It was gone, sent flying by the alien's violent attack. He backed away, helpless now against his enemy, as against the scarlet killers that swarmed about him. Relentlessly, the man-thing advanced toward him, ignoring the battle that still raged about his feet.

With a bound, the creature was on him, clamping his arm in a vise-like grip. His yellow eyes fixed on David's, the alien bent his victim's arm back, back—

Something bulky, gray-bristled shot from nowhere to thud against the invader's face. It squealed, scrabbled, held on, its yellow incisors fixed in the pseudo-man's flesh. The alien staggered back, dragging David with him, then released his grip, struck at the great rat at the same instant that the latter dropped away, leaving a terrible laceration on the alien's cheek. With a rasping squawk of agony, the latter kicked out at the rat which crouched, bright eyes fixed on the hated intruder's face—then leaped again, clear past the flailing arm, to seize the enemy's lip and hang, raking at the throat with small clawed feet. Again, the alien struck at his own face, and again the rat dropped free, leaving a ghastly wound from which thick brown fluid oozed. Now two rats sprang at once, and as their victim hissed, beating futilely at them, more rats leaped, their razor-edged teeth seizing on arms, hands, throat. A great black rat climbed to the alien's head, leaned down to nip and tear; another wriggled inside his disintegrating coat, while others swarmed up the sodden legs of his ragged trousers. David watched in horror as the staggering Invader, breaking silence for the first time, howled, fell . . . and suddenly glowed through the rats that covered him like a living blanket. The mound of rats shivered and collapsed—now, where the Invader had lain, there were only scattered rat corpses, slain by the energies liberated at their victim's disintegration.

Minutes later, David, with Doria clinging to him shivering with shock and fear, watched as the last of the scarlet killers twitched its legs in a final

feeble attempt to attack, and died. Thousands of the creatures were scattered across the innyard, out past the gate, across the road, their vivid color fading swiftly to a muddy brown. Among them, rats prowled, noses atwilt for any sign of life; overhead, the eagles and hawks which had joined in the assault on the common foe circled, tilting their wings in rising air currents.

"It's over," David said hoarsely. "They're all dead or dying. We've beaten them, girl. We're safe now."

"David," Doria whispered. "That man—who was he? *What* was he? He helped those monsters—then he just . . . just went *poof*. Am I going crazy, David?" She trembled as she clung to him.

David did not try to explain. Doria, he knew, would reject this impossible scene—rested and recovered from the horror of the past day, she would delete it from her memory. And, for Doria, that was the best thing that could happen.

An engine sounded on the road. Moments later, a small armored car, its olive-drab paint scratched and scored, screeched to a halt beyond the gate, then turned in, stopped beside them. A stocky Army sergeant jumped down, stood looking around at the scene of carnage.

"It looks like you had the whole unholy swarm of the devils right here," he said wonderingly. He stared curiously at David, at Doria, her body a maze of cuts and scratches.

"How you lived through it's a wonder; but you're OK now. We've cleaned 'em out."

Painfully, David helped Doria to the car; a moment later, as the Sergeant gunned the vehicle along the road to town, the sun broke through the clouds.

"It's over now," the NCO said. "Things are back to normal. Now we can forget about it."

"Yes," David said. "I suppose we will."

THE CLAIRVOYANT

Chapter ONE

The lights of the city gleamed through the leaves of the trees that lined the path through the park where David Vincent sat on a bench, his mind as weary as his body from another long, empty day of tramping the streets, scanning the crowds, watching for a glimpse of telltale yellow eyes, listening for the buzzing tones of alien voices in the crowd.

Feet sounded on the walk. A stooped figure appeared, shambling toward him through the dusk. It was an old man, dark-faced, with a straggling white beard, a hawk-like nose, a twist of cloth around his head in Eastern style. As he came abreast of David, he paused, tilting his head as if listening to the sound of distant voices. He turned slowly to face the seated man. Dim, old eyes peered from beneath white brows.

“David Vincent,” he said in a thin, quavering voice. “Is it you?”

David stood. “Yes, I’m David Vincent,” he said. “You know me?”

The old man shook his head, slowly, as if with great effort. “No, never have we met, sir. But I have come far, in search of you . . .” He tottered, almost fell. David put out a hand to steady him; the old man’s arm was like a dry stick of wood.

“Here—you’d better sit down,” David said; but the old man held back.

“I must warn you, David Vincent,” he quavered. “Your life is in danger . . .”

“What do you mean?” David said, instantly alert. He looked along the path; there was no one else in sight.

“Strange beings . . . seek your life,” the oldster went on. “Beings of monstrous power; beings not of this world!”

David urged the old man toward the bench, but the latter held back. “No—there is no time! Even now peril approaches! You must flee, David Vincent!”

“Easy, easy,” David said soothingly. “There’s no one around . . .”

“The danger is here—all about you!” The old man protested. “You must come away—at once! The moment grows near!” He seemed close to tears; his hands shook. “They know your habit, David Vincent—how each

evening for the week past you have come here at this hour!"

"Have you been watching me?"

"It is sufficient that I know—and so do they! The trap is set!"

David shook his head—not in denial, but in irritation at himself. "Maybe I have been careless," he said. "All day I keep moving, never sleep twice in the same room—but you're right; I've come here several times. It's peaceful—"

"Not for long, David Vincent! Death walks these paths tonight! Come! Before it is too late!"

"Who sent you here?" David demanded. "Did someone hire you to decoy me?"

With a sudden, surprising twist, the captive slipped his arm from David's grasp, darted away across the grass. In three jumps, David had overtaken him; his outstretched fingers brushed the quarry's collar—but, with a sudden dart, the old man was away again, scurrying toward a stand of juniper. David charged after him, brought him down with a flying tackle—and as they struck the turf together, a bright flash lit the scene, followed an instant later by a muffled detonation. Something whistled past David's ear; clods of dirt rained down around him, followed by a flutter of leaves ripped from the trees by the blast. David looked back. Where the bench had been, a small crater yawned beside the path.

"Now," the old man quavered, sitting up with blood on his face, "now do you believe me, David Vincent?"

"I'm convinced," David grunted. "But how did you know, unless you're one of them?"

"Because," the old man said, "I read their minds."

2

Half an hour later, having eluded the crowd which had come running to the scene of the blast, David and the old man sat at a booth in a small, dim-lit restaurant. The ancient traveller sipped at a cup of broth held in a trembling, blue-veined hand.

"My name is Lai," he said. "But that is unimportant. I have found you in time. That is what matters, David Vincent." He managed a faint smile that creased his chestnut-brown face into a million wrinkles.

"How did you find me?"

"I followed the voices of their minds. They led me to you."

"You expect me to believe that?"

The old man paused, holding the cup; his eyes slipped out of focus, staring into space past David.

“The Invaders,” he whispered. “It is thus you think of them. Powerful, insidious, possessed of a terrible vitality, driven by a resistless need to find a resting place here on our Earth, to spread wide their seed, that the Great Race may rise again from the embers of ultimate disaster . . . “ He blinked, looked at David. “Is it not so, David Vincent?”

David nodded. “And where are they now—the ones who plan to kill me?”

“Near . . . near. But I hear their minds only as a restless, alien murmur, as of the leaves of the boabab tree stirred by the monsoon wind. Only when they rage in their hatred do their foreign thoughts come sharp and clear to me.”

“They tried once, and missed. Do they intend to try again?”

Mr. Lai nodded. “Already, twice before in the past month have they assayed the deed.” He fixed his deep-set black eyes on David’s. “Once, when you would have boarded a flying machine, at the place of Kennedy; there would have been one of their number aboard the craft, carrying explosives. He would have destroyed the ship, and himself and all aboard. But you turned back.”

David nodded. “I changed my mind about the flight,” he admitted grimly. “I took a train instead.”

“And on that train, a vial of a corrosive poison was placed in your food—but you pushed back the plate and did not eat.”

“I wasn’t hungry.”

The old man smiled. “You still do not believe, David Vincent. You think this is a trick, a plan perhaps of the Invaders, to lead you into danger. Even though you yourself have the Gift—as witness your escapes.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your life has been as charmed, is it not so, David Vincent? When Death reached out his hand for you, you knew, and were forewarned.”

“Just hunches,” David said. “Or common sense. I’m no hero. I don’t take unnecessary chances.”

“But each day you risk your life—that which remains of all that you once had—to seek out these alien ones, to reveal their presence—all this, in the name of a heedless humanity which scoffs at your warnings, or worse, impedes your efforts.”

“I’ll get my proof one day,” David said flatly. “They’re clever—and

careful. They know what's at stake. But I'll stop them. I have to stop them!"

"Peace, David! Do not draw curious eyes to yourself," Mr. Lai whispered. "Who knows what ears might listen—what tales might be carried?"

"There are no Invaders here," David said shortly. "I checked as we came in. Anyway, I'd know if they were near. I'd feel them."

"You see?" Mr. Lai smiled his shadowed smile again. "You use the Gift, even as you deny it."

"Mr. Lai," David said. "Maybe you saved my life—or maybe you planted the bomb yourself. If so, I don't know why—or why you warned me off. But if you expect me to give you money—"

"David Vincent—I beg you—talk not of gold." Lai's eyes bored into David's. "I live not by the things of this world, but by the spirit of another, fairer plane of existence to which, fate permitting, I may some day ascend."

"What do you want from me?" David held his eyes.

"Make peace with them, David Vincent! You have risked your life many times; in the end you must surely die—"

"Is that a prediction?" David smiled sardonically.

"The end of violence is death," Mr. Lai said. "You have done enough to show them that men are not weaklings; they will talk now, discuss armistice. The sanctity of life—"

"I'm sorry," David shook his head. "I don't believe in magic, Mr. Lai. As for the sanctity of life—I guess that's a matter of your point of view. You sit here a while and rest, then go see the people at the Indian Consulate. They'll help you get home—if that's where you want to go—"

"David Vincent! Wait!" The old man hissed, catching at his hand as he rose. "Suddenly I sense their emanations! One of their number is near at hand! His mind is filled with murderous thoughts—of you!"

"Nice try," David said. "But it's no go, old fellow. You'll have to find another sucker who's a little more gullible than I am." He dropped a dollar on the table. "This will pay for the soup—and the entertainment." He walked toward the door, heedless of the faint, distressed cry behind him—and suddenly slowed, turned to look toward the cluttered display window. Beyond it, peering in through the space between a beer sign and a dusty plaster roast turkey, was a puffy, pale-cheeked face—a face from which vivid yellow eyes, as bright as flawed diamonds, glared in unremitting hostility.

David plunged for the door, jostling patrons who stared after him as he slammed through the entry into the humid, neon-lit glare of the night street. But the sidewalk before the window was empty. The yellow-eyed man was gone.

“I am sorry, David Vincent,” Mr. Lai’s voice sounded softly behind David. “If you had waited, we might have spoken with this misguided one, reached understanding. Now he is gone, the opportunity lost.”

“You knew he was there,” David said, frowning. “And from where you were sitting, you couldn’t have seen him”

“Believe me, David Vincent,” the old man said earnestly. “In my nightmares, I hear the alien voices of their minds, plotting your downfall. Even among all the cries of the lonely and the bereaved here in your cruel city of stone, I could not mistake them!”

“Look, Mr. Lai. Maybe you’re what you say you are—but I can’t take chances on you. You’d better be on your way. Sticking with me is dangerous; all the more, if you’re sincere.”

“What is danger to me?” the old man said gently. “It is for you, who are young, your destiny unfulfilled, that my heart takes fear.” He shook his head. “No, David Vincent. Long have I travelled to seek you out. Now I will not abandon you while life remains in this poor husk.”

David looked at the old man searchingly; the bright, black eyes met his steadily.

“All right,” David said at last. “I don’t know how you do it, but if you can spot an Invader before I can, you’re a valuable man to have around. Come along. We’re going to hole up somewhere and get a night’s rest—and then we’ll see what tomorrow brings.”

A yawning hotel clerk in a dirty shirt offered them a room—emphatically without bath—for four dollars. David woke with watery sunshine in his face, to find Mr. Lai already awake. They breakfasted, then set out, walking the streets, David’s eyes darting from face to face in the way that had become instinctive with him, while the elderly seer trotted at his side, eyes half closed. The long day passed; it was early evening when the old man caught suddenly at David’s sleeve with lean, brown fingers.

“David—they come!” he hissed.

David looked up and down the street, saw nothing, started to step off the curb—

“Back! Back!” The tiny Indian threw himself at David as a car, rounding the corner on two wheels, tires howling, slammed up across the curb, shrieked metal as it brushed a lamp post, and careered on up the side

street to disappear in the traffic that closed in behind it. The voices of the other pedestrians narrowly missed by the speeding vehicle rose in outraged shouts of “Call a cop!” and “Get his number!”

“Again they struck—and missed,” Mr. Lai whispered. “Not forever can you elude their strokes, David Vincent!”

David caught his arm. “Can you follow them?”

“Eh?” Mr. Lai’s eyes flew open. “Never did I think to judge of direction, but . . .” he closed his eyes again, then nodded. “Yes—they speed now northward!”

David pressed through the cluster of pedestrians, dispersing now after the excitement, hailed a cab, hustled the little man into the back seat.

“What—what are we doing?” the latter protested.

“Head north,” David told the driver. “I’ll tell you when to turn.”

Chapter TWO

For half an hour, the puzzled cab driver followed Mr. Lai’s instructions, twisting and turning through the streets of the city, muttering as he found himself doubling back, threading a path through heavy after-theatre traffic, thwarted by one-way streets.

“Look, Mac,” he pulled to the curb and addressed the rear-view mirror. “You guys want to spend the night running in circles, OK; that’s your business. But count me out, see? That’ll be five-ninety, and you can skip the tip.”

“Keep going,” David said urgently. “We’re not through yet.”

“Out,” the driver turned a hard-eyed look on his passengers. “Come on, beat it, you bums. I got things to do—”

“This is more important than that beer you’re itching to get to,” David said. “Keep driving; I’ll tell you when to stop.”

“Wise guy, hah?” The driver stooped, came up with a tire iron. David opened the door on the street side, jumped out, jerked open the driver’s door and hauled the man out on the sidewalk. He caught the iron as the cabbie brought it around in a vicious swipe, jerked it from his hand and threw it aside, then with a clean right hook, stretched the belligerent man on the pavement.

“I’ll leave your hack in front of a police station—if it’s convenient,” David addressed him as he rolled over, groaning. He slid into the driver’s seat and gunned away from the curb.

On the open highway west of the last suburbs, David raced along at seventy miles per hour through the frosty night, following the directions from the rear seat.

“Now they turn south,” the old voice piped. “I think they are less than one mile ahead now.”

“How many are there? Can you tell that?”

“Three. One voice overshadows the others; they are but faint echoes of his shout.”

“That fits in with what I’ve seen of them,” David said. “Only a few of them are thinkers, planners. The rest are just order-takers.”

“Slowly now, David; a road branches ahead »

...

David braked, saw the turn-off, swung into a narrow blacktop road. Far ahead, a taillight gleamed.

“What will you do when you overtake them?” Mr. Lai queried worriedly. “Surely you plan no aggressive act against them—”

“I’ll think about that when I catch them,” David said. “Right now I’m tired of being the mouse in a cat-and-mouse game.”

“David—he senses you now—he sees our lights!”

“Good. Let him sweat a little—if he knows how!”

Ahead, the taillights winked off. David floor-boarded the gas pedal. The cab roared ahead, at eighty miles per hour.

“They have turned east,” the Indian called. “I sense that he drives at great speed through darkness. The road twists and turns . . . “

“His eyesight’s no better than mine,” David said grimly. He braked, swung left into a dirt road. The headlights gleamed through a pall of dust left by the passage of the fleeing car. David raced ahead, squinting through the obscuring cloud; the tires hammered across the rutted, potholed track, which dipped, curved up around a low hill, angled back to the left. Suddenly, the taillights glowed ahead. David braked hard, saw the headlights of the other car shining out across a brushgrown slope which dropped away into a dark ravine. They winked off; David cut the wheel hard, following the narrow trail chipped into the side of a steep rise. For a moment, his lights caught the rear of the car ahead, barely a hundred yards in the lead now.

“David—you must stop!” Mr. Lai cried. “He thinks to trap you! You

will surely be killed!”

“Is that another of your mystic visions?” David rapped out, staring out through the dazzle of dust-diffused light. He tramped on the accelerator, the tires spitting gravel as the cab clawed its way up the steep rise. Again, the car ahead showed its lights for a moment; now it was only a hundred feet in the lead. The twin beams, spearing out through the darkness, showed the narrow road angling upward in a righthand curve for fifty feet ahead of the car—and ending abruptly where a rockfall had carried a ten foot section away. Dust spurted as the car braked hard—too late. Skidding, it shot forward, arced gracefully out over the edge, lights blazing, and dropped away into the abyss. David, close behind, fought the wheel as the taxi veered, worn brake shoes screeching.

“Jump!” he called, saw the little man in the rear throw open a door and leap clear; he opened his door, hurled himself toward the ditch, saw as the cab slid sideways, to disappear over the edge in a shower of stones. Twin thunders smashed up from below, followed by a ruddy glare as shattered gas tanks burst into flame. David picked himself up, looked over the edge. A hundred feet below, the twisted remains of the two cars formed the nucleus of a raging inferno.

“I caught his last thought,” Mr. Lai’s agonized voice sounded as he staggered to David’s side. “As the flame took him, still his mind radiated rage—and triumph! While you live, David Vincent, they will not rest! Though you escape one trap, another will follow—until at last you die!”

“Or until they die,” David said grimly, scanning the dark hills looming above. “Come on, Mr. Lai. They were heading for somewhere up above. There may be a hideout up there. Let’s see if we can find it.”

“But—on foot, at night, in this strange, deserted country . . . ?” the elderly man protested.

“You can wait here if you like. But I can’t afford to let this lead die.”

Mr. Lai sighed. “I swore I would accompany you, David Vincent. “Lead—and I will follow—but it bodes naught but ill!”

3

For the next hour, under the faint light of a rising moon, they trekked higher into the barren hills. Abruptly, Mr. Lai called out.

“David—I sense them near at hand! But listen, I beg you, before you launch some rash attack! I have considered this tragic situation as we walked—and it is clear to me that these beings, too, have a right to life.

Alien they are, and lonely, far from the place that was their home—and courageous, too. Outnumbered by our kind a million, ten million to one, still they strive on—”

“To kill men,” David said. “To take our planet and make it their own.’”

“Why are you so sure of this?” Mr. Lai protested. “Perhaps they have struck out only in self-defense—”

“If they’d come to us openly, asked for asylum—they’d have gotten help,” David said.

“Would they?” Mr. Lai smiled faintly. “Even among our own, we seize on the most subtle differences to persecute our brothers. White man against brown, Indian against Pakistani, Moslem against Hindu—we are all guilty, David. Would we then welcome alien beings, stranger to us than the spider or the squid?”

“They’re intelligent beings,” David said. “We’d give them a hearing. But they didn’t ask for that. They came sneaking, killing—”

“David, David, open your heart to these forlorn ones! Given an opportunity, surely they will agree to live in peace—”

“It’s too late for peace. Too many men have been killed. It’s their war—but we’ll end it.”

“David, offer to them the hand of good will! Put an end to this horror!”

“I don’t want their promise to be good,” David said. “I want proof of their existence—something that will convince the authorities that we’re at war—that for the first time in our history, we’ve been successfully invaded!”

“Perhaps, David, there is a way to satisfy both of us.” Mr. Lai looked thoughtful. “If we propose a truce, entreat them to emerge into the open, to deal with our governments in good faith—we, on our part, will promise to seek another place for them—”

“Why? So they can gather their strength and attack us in force?”

“David, it is not for you to decide—or for me! We will be merely spokesmen for the whole race of man! And at that same time, you can require, as an earnest of sincerity, some proof of who and what they are.”

“Fine,” David said sardonically. “But I’m afraid you give them too much credit, Mr. Lai. They won’t meet with us. They consider us as no more than vermin. They’re the Great Race, remember?”

“But—if they will . . .”

“I wouldn’t believe anything they said.”

“You forget—I will be there. I will know if they plan deception.” Mr. Lai caught David’s hand, looked up into his face. “You are a brave man, David Vincent. Are you brave enough to try the way of peace?”

“How could we contact them—assuming we wanted to?”

Mr. Lai spread his hands. “We must capture one,” he said simply. “How else?”

4

It was twenty-four hours later. Carrying a heavy back-pack, David, accompanied by Mr. Lai, was again high in the hills west of the city. A chill wind blew streamers of fog along the rocky heights. At a dark canyon mouth, the Indian paused, pointed.

“In here, David Vincent. I sense them there, hidden deep in the rock.”

They went back fifty feet, picking their path among rank weed and loose stones, came to a dead end. Blank walls loomed all around.

“There!” Mr. Lai pointed to a shadowy recess under an overhanging shelf of rock. “They are there—below.”

David studied the surrounding, noting the ledge above. He opened the pack, took out a coil of tough, light-weight steel cable. Working quickly, he ran a line up over a point of rock, weighted it, arranged the other end in a wide loop around the cave mouth.

“You take up your post up above,” he told his elderly helper. “When he’s in position, trip the noose. That will give me my chance to spring the other half of the snare.” Using more cable, he stretched a trip line across the rocky ground, laid out an apparatus with jaws of polished, saw-toothed steel. Mr. Lai gasped when he saw the latter.

“David—what cruel device is this?”

“A bear trap. If we’re lucky, it will slow him down long enough to talk to him. If not . . .” David fitted the stock to a short-barrelled gun. “This will do the talking.”

“I grieve at this evidence of your implacable hostility,” Mr. Lai wagged his head sadly. “But soon, I trust, you will see the error of your philosophy.”

“All right,” David said. “I’ll bait him up now—and we’ll find out who’s right.”

Mr. Lai clambered up on the ledge. David went to the cave mouth, the uneven floor of which slanted downward at the rear. He selected a rounded boulder, sent it rumbling down into the throat of the cavern,

then flattened himself against the wall outside.

Half a minute ticked past in silence. Then a faint sound came from below—the rasp of a shoe against stone. A figure emerged from the shadowed entry, dressed in a shapeless brown coat, a hat pulled low over his face.

He stood, half in, half out, peering into darkness. At a sound from above, he looked up; his eyes fell on Mr. Lai. With a snarl, the alien jumped toward the little man—and brought up short as the cable came tight about his chest, pinioning his arms. He lunged against the restraint, a harsh buzz breaking from his back-drawn lips; then, grasping the cable in both hands, he ripped it from him, threw it aside.

“Fool!” he snarled. “You think you can snare me in a Gnarll’s web?”

“Not him,” David said from the left. “Me.”

The alien whirled, started for him; David stepped back. With a clang as of a sword striking stone, the bear-trap closed on the victim’s legs. He fell, threshed, slamming the hard steel against the rocks, then caught the edges with his hands, strained to force the jaws open against the powerful springs. David jumped forward to stand over him, the gun aimed at the alien’s head.

“Listen to me!” he said. “I could have killed you as easily as I trapped you—but I wanted you alive. I want to talk to you.”

“What does a member of the Great Race need to speak of with your verminous kind?”

“Truce,” David said.

“Well may you beg for truce—but in vain! We will destroy you all!”

“Not while your legs are clamped in that,” David nodded at the trap.

“You imagine you can truss me, drag me before your fools of leaders as proof of our existence?” The alien showed his teeth. “You delude yourself,

Man! My metabolic control enables me to die at will—and my body will disintegrate in an instant.”

“Not yet!” David rapped. “You can fry yourself later—but first, listen to me! Some of us think there may be a possibility of coming to terms with you—of agreeing on some sort of cooperative arrangement, trading your knowledge for ours, helping you to find another planet—Mars, perhaps—where you can survive—”

“We investigated that lifeless world. It is useless, not fit for the Great Race—”

“It’s not up to you to decide that,” David snapped. “No more than it’s

up to me. Pass the message to your bosses. Tell them I'm willing to meet with them, to arrange a conference with high-ranking officials. Perhaps we can come to terms. It would be better than this back-alley war—for both of us!"

"You would agree to give us living room?" the trapped creature's yellow eyes glittered at David.

"I don't know—but at least we can talk about it. There's one condition: You must supply me with proof of your existence—proof I can take with me."

"And have our secret known to all the world?"

"If you want peace, you'll have to take the chance. Or are you afraid?"

"Fear is a useless emotion," the alien said. "Very well—I will relay your proposal."

"Meet us in one hour," David said. "Down below, on the plateau by the river. Just two of you—no more. And no tricks!"

"As you wish. Now release me."

David stepped forward, holding the machine pistol ready in his hand. He tripped the release lever, and the jaws of the trap fell slack. The alien kicked it from him, stood, his eyes fixed on David's.

"I could take your puny gun from you and kill you with it," he said in his rasping voice. "But I will let you live—for an hour!"

"My feelings exactly," David said. "Come on, Mr. Lai. The meeting's over."

Chapter THREE

"You seem nervous," David addressed the little man as they waited in the darkness by the swift river which plunged downward over rocks toward the valley below. Dark clouds had gathered to cover the moon. The wind had risen. "If you want to change your mind I wouldn't blame you," David added. "I don't trust them."

"It is merely—something in the air."

"Maybe it's treachery you smell."

"The hour has passed. Why do they not come?" Mr. Lai inquired rhetorically.

For another five minutes, David and the elderly Indian waited in silence. Then a pebble rolled down, clattered on rock. Two dark figures appeared on the slope above. They were tall, lean, broad-shouldered,

dressed in plain dark suits. Clumsily, they clambered down the last few yards. David and Mr. Lai waited in silence as they came up, halted ten feet from them. They were strangely alike, wooden-faced, yellow-eyed.

"We have come, David Vincent," one said in a flat voice. "What area of the planet do you propose to vacate for our use?"

"Don't get ahead of yourself," David said coolly. "This is just a preliminary meeting, to agree on a time and place for an official conference. First, I want the proof of your presence here; something that will convince them you aren't something I dreamed up."

"And why should we provide such proof?" the alien demanded coldly. "And awaken these fools to their peril?"

"Because if you don't, you lose your only chance of making peace," David said. "And unless you end this war of yours now, you'll die—all of you. And where will your Great Race be then?"

The alien made a rasping sound deep in its throat, took a step toward David. He stood his ground. "Do you think I came here unprotected?" he asked levelly. "There's a TV cameraman with a telephoto night lens set up on the heights across the river. He's taping every move you make. A cold-blooded murder will make interesting enough footage to attract a little official attention, I think."

The alien checked, turned to its companion, emitted the raucous buzzing that served their kind for speech. The other replied in kind.

"You must come with us," the first alien stated in his emotionless tone. "We will take you to where proof will be given to you."

"No good," David said. "You'll have to bring it to me—here."

Again the aliens conferred.

"It is agreed," the lean one said. "In one half hour we will return. You must wait here. Do not leave."

"I may be here and I may not," David said. "Keep your fingers crossed."

"I do not understand the instruction," the alien said. The two turned away, walked away into darkness. David let out a long breath as they disappeared.

"The bluff worked," he said softly. "So far so good. What did you get from them?"

"Nothing," Mr. Lai shook his head. "It is strange, David—but it was as though their minds were not here at all . . ." He broke off, a startled look on his wrinkled face. "David! Now I understand! They were not living creatures! They were machines—robots—controlled from a distance . . ."

He caught at his arm. "David—now I hear their voices clearly! Treachery! They come—many of them! Their minds emit thoughts of evil like dark beacons!"

"Run for it!" David snapped. He caught the old man's arm and sprinted for the shelter of the river bank.

2

The turbulent stream ran through a narrow channel cut by the ages through the living rock. A quarter of a mile below, a bridge spanned the gulf. Splashing along on the gravelled shingle edging the torrent, David supported the old man as the icy water swirled about their ankles.

"So much for peacemaking," David said. "How many are there?"

"I sense eight of them," the Indian whispered. "Forgive me, David Vincent, for leading you into this trap! How could I know they were so clever—so diabolically clever! I understand now that they sensed my thoughts, even as I sensed theirs! They knew our plans—and laid their plot well against us! For myself, it does not matter—but you—you must live, David! These beings are evil incarnate! They must not be allowed to win!"

"I'm glad you agree," David said. "Don't take it so hard, Mr. Lai. I still have my Mauser. We're not helpless."

"Against these demonic creatures, as well employ a fly-whisk! No, David—force will not avail. Now our only hope lies in wile!"

The wind had risen, shrilling down the ravine. On the bank above, lights appeared, flashing among the rocks. Buzzing speech rang back and forth. Thunder rumbled; a brief flash of lightning lit the scene.

"We've got to move," David said. "There's going to be a thunder-storm; that means a flash flood right down the channel. In a few minutes this spot will be under ten feet of fast-moving water!"

A spatter of large rain drops fell. Thunder rolled again. A moment later, the downpour struck. Under cover of the blinding rain, David and Lai made their way along the bank, reached the massive concrete abutment that supported the two-lane span above. Water was pouring down from the approach, sending a muddy torrent swirling down about their knees. Lights winked and flickered above as the Invaders cast back and forth along the bank.

"David—we must cross now! Time runs out!"

Already, the downpour had drowned the base of the abutment;

churning water washed about David's waist, tugging at him with restless force.

"They'll spot us for sure if we try it now. We'll have to wait until they work their way back in the other direction."

"David—we must not wait! Believe me! Now!" Mr. Lai jumped up, scrambled up the bank. Instantly, a beam of light shot out through the veil of water, caught him, casting his darting shadow against wet rock. Harsh cries rang. Mr. Lai halted, looked back. "David—come! You must—" A whining hum sounded; a pencil of yellow radiance speared out, following the spotlight's beam, glared on the old man's chest. He tottered, fell. David leaped up the slope, caught up the feather-light body. The Indian's eyes were open; his mouth moved.

"Leave . . . me . . . David"

David hoisted the old man to his shoulder, ran for the bridge approach. A second destroying ray probed after him, missed narrowly, winked off. Then he was up on the span and running. A moment later, feet pounded behind him; an alien voice shouted after him.

"They . . . wish to take . . . you . . . alive . . . " Mr. Lai gasped out.

Awkwardly, David drew his pistol, halted, turned, fired at a pursuer who had just gained the bridge. The alien staggered under the impact of the slugs, but came on. Others were behind him, leaping up onto the roadway. Under his feet, David felt the span tremble at the weight of water pounding against its foundations.

"Run—David—run!" Mr. Lai whispered. "Run for your life!"

David turned, ran out across the high-arched bridge. Below, a booming sounded; he glanced right, saw a great boulder, dislodged by the flood, bounding ponderously down along the slope. It struck the bank, flew high, smashed somewhere below with an impact that almost threw David from his feet. A crack opened across the pavement ahead, widened. He leaped it, heard the sound of snapping reinforcing rods and crumbling concrete behind him. A great piece of the road dropped away ahead, leaving a narrow path beside the right-hand guard rail. David raced across it, felt it drop from beneath his feet as he leaped the last yard. The bridge swayed under him, sagging; the guard rail bent as the curbing under it tilted, dropped from view. David jumped another widening crack; running uphill now, he scrambled for footing, threw himself flat as the angle reached forty-five degrees. He clung with his fingertips to the broken edge above him, holding Mr. Lai pinned under him. Behind him, thunderous impact followed thunderous impact. He twisted, looked back to see

a twenty-foot section of road hanging from a snarl of twisted steel beyond a wide gap where the span had fallen. Two dark figures slid, kicking, down the slope, dropped into the darkness below, a fitful disintegration-glow marking the passing of one or both. Another fell from higher up. A lone alien, clinging to a twisted rail, crawled painfully upward, had almost gained safety when a ten foot slab of concrete fell from above, smashed him and the rail, carried the mass of wreckage down with it into the void below.

David pulled himself and the injured man up, reached the level portion of the road above—a mere stub that was all that remained of the bridge. Mr. Lai lay on his back, the raindrops spattering on his face, greenish pale now under the moon.

“All . . . have died . . . “ he whispered. “A pity . . . they would not . . . see the light . . . of brotherhood

»

“You knew the bridge was going to go,” David said. “That’s why you picked this spot . . . “

“I sensed it, David.” He drew a shuddering breath. “As I sensed . . . other things . . . “

“You knew you’d die, helping me!” David shook his head. “Why? Why did you do it?”

“Man . . . must struggle . . . against his fate,” Mr. Lai said. Then the light died from his eyes.

For a long time, while the rain drummed about him, David stood looking down on the placid, wrinkled face, still now in death. Then he turned to begin the long walk down from the hills.

THE TELESCOPE

Chapter ONE

“I have no time to waste!” The heavy, red-faced man frowned at David Vincent across a broad expanse of polished walnut desk. “If it weren’t for Dr. Lieberman’s letter I wouldn’t have consented to see you at all—and now, to make a preposterous suggestion such as this . . . “ He shook his head in irritation. “You don’t seem to grasp the complexity of NASA operations, Mr. Vincent, if you imagine I would request a hold on an Explorer launching at this late date—on such flimsy grounds!”

“Dr. Gogarty, if you’d take a few minutes to look at the material I have with me, I might be able to convince you that there’s good reason to modify the mission,” David persisted. “I know the importance of sticking to the schedule, but—”

“But nothing! We’re months behind our original program now! I fail to understand why a scientist of Dr. Lieberman’s reputation has involved himself in this crank attempt to interfere with the nation’s space progress!”

“All I’m asking you to do is look,” David repeated. “A scientist should be willing to do that, wouldn’t you agree?” His eyes held the other’s. Gogarty’s florid features turned a shade darker.

“Very well,” he snapped. “But make it brief!”

David opened his briefcase, took out a 14 by 22 map of the moon’s face, on which were marked a large number of small X’s and O’s.

“These represent the sixteen successful soft landings of instrument packages so far achieved by the United States,” he said, pointing to the X’s. “The circles represent the planned targets of the eleven shots that have failed.”

“Mr. Vincent, are you attempting to give me a beginner’s course in space exploration?” Gogarty cut in.

“The unsuccessful shots were largely confined to this one general location,” David went on, pointing to a large lunar crater near which nine of the eleven circles were inscribed. “Not one landing has been made there.”

“Come to the point, if you please,” Gogarty snapped.

“Those crashes may not have been accidental, Dr. Gogarty; they could have been caused—by someone who didn’t want that area photographed!”

“And who might that be?” Gogarty inquired sarcastically. “Spies within the ranks of NASA? The Soviets? Or perhaps merely the little green men on the moon!”

“Not green,” David said. “And not necessarily men. But someone.”

“Speak freely, Mr. Vincent!” Gogarty barked, his voice heavy with sarcasm. “After having revealed this thrilling information, surely you’re not going to hold back the identity of the villain?”

“I don’t know the answer to that, Mr. Gogarty—or I’m not sure. But surely you can see that there’s at least a possibility that someone wants to keep us away from that spot.”

“And why might that be, Mr. Vincent?”

“Possibly because they have an installation there that they don’t want seen.”

“I see,” Gogarty nodded. “It couldn’t be, as our scientists have theorized, that the surface in that area is such that our present relatively primitive equipment is simply unable to come safely to ground! It’s a difficult feat, Mr. Vincent, to jockey a rocket to a landing on a needle-sharp peak of rock—particularly when the landing is being controlled from a distance of a quarter of a million miles, and with a three second command-lag produced by the limiting velocity of propagation of radiant energy!” His voice had risen to a boom.

“It’s possible—but there’s no indication from high-altitude photographs that the surface is any more irregular there than elsewhere—”

“Good day, Mr. Vincent!” Gogarty pressed a button on his desk. “I don’t know what you thought you’d accomplish by coming here with your wild fancies, but I assure you—you’ll not be allowed to further interfere with the work of this organization! You’ll leave the premises at once—under guard! Don’t call again!”

2

“It went about as I expected, Paul,” David said into the telephone. “I’m afraid there’s no choice but to go into Phase Two.”

“I don’t like it, Dave,” Dr. Paul Lieberman’s voice sounded worried. “But—I suppose it’s the only way now. I’ll leave at once. Can you meet my plane at Denver?”

“I’ll be there.”

Late that evening, with the talented physicist who was his closest friend beside him in the front seat of his rented car, David listened to the

latter's account of the arrangements he had made:

"This may cost us the rest of our lives in prison,

Dave," he said, "but I've done it. The override device is installed in the base of the number two recording camera; I had to build a new sub-miniaturized squawk unit to replace the regular one to make room for it. The weight and dimensions are unchanged, of course. My contact at the Cape assures me it's been placed in the vehicle and has gotten past the inspectors and final testing. I've also bugged the blockhouse so that we can overhear their conversation. Confound it, David," the physicist finished. "I feel like a spy!"

"I know," David said. "But we're not sabotaging the space effort—although that's what we'll be tried for if they catch us. We're just cutting through the jungle of red tape and doing what needs to be done."

"Don't try to convince me of the logic of it, Dave. I'm not sure there is any. I'm going along on faith, that's all."

"Just so you're sure you've arranged matters so that once you've transmitted the keying signal, the system will respond to your command, rather than to NASA's," David said.

"That's correct. I hope you know what you're doing, David. If we're wrong, the consequences . . ." He shook his head.

"We're not wrong—and maybe this will prove it," David said flatly. "As for the consequences—they won't matter, if we're successful."

It was a three-hour drive to the remote mountain location Lieberman had selected as the most advantageous for the operation of the small but immensely powerful transmitter with which he planned to affect the course of the Explorer. In darkness, David and the physicist set about hauling the heavy gear up from the car to the small cabin perched on a ridge above the road. It was almost dawn when the task was complete. They slept for a few hours, ate a hurried meal, then worked all through the day to complete the wiring and testing of the maze of apparatus which duplicated the function of a portion of the monitor and control equipment at Cape Kennedy.

"All right, Dave," Paul Lieberman said near sunset. "Everything's ready. We won't be able to follow the first few seconds of flight, but as soon as the rocket rises above our horizon—an altitude of about two hundred miles—we'll lock onto it. From that point on, we'll intercept all telemetered information, and also be capable of overriding all commands."

David looked at his watch. "About two hours to go," he said. "You

may as well catch another little nap; I'll wake you at lift-off."

Lieberman shook his head. "I'd never got to sleep," he said. "This is the first time I ever knowingly broke a law. I'm afraid my conscience is bothering me—even if it is in a good cause."

3

Two hours later, David shook the physicist awake.

"The count-down is at minus two minutes," he said.

Lieberman struggled up from the chair in which he had gone to sleep. "Dave, why didn't you call me earlier! I have equipment to warm up, circuits to balance ..!" He switched on the big compound receiver, its gleaming complexity incongruous in the simple cabin, began turning dials, noting readings, muttering to himself. The four miniature TV screens jury-rigged in place around the camp chair which served as controller's seat glowed a ghostly blue in the deepening twilight which filtered through the dusty window. The special radio tuned to the audio pick-up planted at the space center droned out a mutter of block-house to gantry crew conversation.

"They're pulling in the last of the service detail and disconnecting the umbilicals," Lieberman said. "One minute five seconds and counting."

David listened as a technician read through a check-list; not the glib, hearty tones of the Public Information Officer whose voice was simultaneously going out to the watching millions over the major networks, but the hum-drum, workaday tones of a scientist, finishing up the final stages of the days-long pre-flight check. But even through the monotonous, matter-of-factness of the voice, the drama of the moment was conveyed. A mighty rocket, comprising millions of precision parts, the most sophisticated product of Earth's science, was about to lift on a column of raw, ravening force, hurtle outward into the emptiness of interplanetary space, its destination—the moon.

"Four . . . three . . . two . . . one . . . go!" Paul Lieberman chanted softly in unison with the radio.

Coolly, unhurriedly, the trained voice reported a perfect lift-off. The great rocket rose slowly at first, then with gathering speed, ascending through the lower atmosphere, ripping on up through the troposphere and ionosphere, tilting in response to command, racing away from the planet at eighteen thousand miles per hour.

"She's right on track," Lieberman reported. "I'm picking up her tele-

metry now . . . “

Three minutes after lift-off, the television screens suddenly cleared to show the views being transmitted back to Earth from the cameras mounted in the rocket. Two of them depicted the rapidly dwindling surface of the planet below, blurred by the whipping streamers of the exhaust trail; the other two showed black sky, with the luminous orb of the moon, one at low magnification, the other greatly enlarged.

“That’s it for now,” Lieberman said. “We just sit tight and wait thirteen hours for the mid-course maneuver.”

“Is there any way our monitoring can be detected?” David asked.

Lieberman shook his head. “Not as long as we’re merely observing. But of course as soon as we transmit a signal, we could theoretically be picked up at once.”

“Why theoretically?”

“They’d have to be very alert to catch a one micro-second squawk, tightly beamed—and on their own wave-length. If we’re lucky, they’ll merely assume a slight malfunction when the rocket takes up a new course slightly at variance with the one planned.”

“Can’t they correct again once they see it’s off-course?”

“The variation will be relatively slight; the rocket will simply be aimed for a point on the moon’s surface a hundred or so miles from the chosen area. They might consider a new attempt to correct too risky; but—if they try it, we can interfere again.”

Both men slept then, awakening occasionally to study the screens, on which the Earth images steadily dwindled, while those of the moon grew correspondingly. Morning came; a dull, overcast day here in the western mountains. David built a fire in the stone fireplace, prepared a meal from the supplies they had brought with them. Night fell; now the lunar surface had grown to twice its original diameter; the dark areas of the *maria* and the pocked craters were clearly visible, the pictures being transmitted as they were from far beyond the obscuring haze of the atmosphere. Two hours before midnight, Paul Lieberman seated himself at the console and began switching on the command transmitter components.

“This is going to be tricky, Dave,” he said. “Success depends not only on perfect accuracy by all of the rocket’s sensing and telemetry systems, but also on flawless performance at this end by the receiving equipment, the computer that will convert the input into the correct command pulses, and finally in the transmitter that fires the command—to say nothing of the tracking clock, the beam focussing gear, the—”

“I understand, Paul,” David said. “Correction: I don’t understand—but I’ll take your word for it. What would you say our chances of success are?”

“At the risk of sounding impossibly optimistic—I think we have about one chance in ten of putting the rocket down where we want her.”

“I’m glad you’re not a pessimist,” David grunted.

Paul glanced up at him. “You’re nervous, eh? Can’t say that I blame you. I don’t think they’ve invented a punishment yet to fit what we’re about to do.”

“It’s not that I’m sweating, Paul,” David said. “It’s what we’ll find when and if this experiment works out.”

Paul, intent on the clock, did not reply. Half a minute later the telltale light atop the transmitter flashed on.

“Their command unit is on the air,” he said tensely. “As soon as they transmit, the signal will activate our unit, which in turn will send out a pulse which will trip the override device, and simultaneously fire our corrective command. It should appear to be a perfectly normal maneuver. The error in the track won’t become apparent for some time.”

There was a sharp *beep!* from the big cabinet.

“Override activated!” Paul snapped. A second sharp signal sounded.

“That’s it,” the physicist said. “For better or worse, we’re committed. Now all we can do is sit back and see what happens.”

Chapter TWO

“So far so good,” Paul Lieberman said forty-two minutes later. “According to our computer, NASA’s command was perfectly executed, and my amending command had precisely the effect I wanted. She’s on course, estimated time of arrival, twelve hours, fourteen minutes.”

“She’d better be right on the button,” David said. “Too close to Copernicus, and we’ll trigger the same hostile action that’s destroyed eleven previous shots in the area; too far away, and it’s a dry run.”

2

Twelve hours later the craggy lunar surface filled the high-mag screen. The vast sprawl of the giant crater Copernicus covered half the visible area, centered off to the right of the screen.

“Altitude, two hundred miles,” Paul said, his voice harsh with strain.

“She’s dropping in right on target—so far. It’s still not too late for the Cape to try a last-minute correction.”

“They’ve tried three times and been overridden each time,” David said. “I don’t think they’ll try again now.”

In silence, the two men watched as the Lunar plain expanded, the larger craters spreading off the edge of the screen, smaller ones growing into shadowed pits, clearly defined while pin-points previously invisible swelled to clarity on the thousand-line-per-inch screen. Smoke obscured the view as the retro-rockets fired an automatic burst.

“Look there!” David pointed. “It’s the wreckage of a rocket!” The tiny patch of irregular markings drifted off-screen before his guess could be confirmed. Now the target point, a small crater a quarter mile in diameter, selected from recon photos of the area, almost filled the screen.

“Twenty-one miles up, and slowing fast,” Paul reported. Again, gasses swirled across the screen as the forward-pointing jets blasted energy into space, braking the massive inertia of the descending vehicle. The high-mag screen blurred into incoherence; Lieberman switched to the low-mag screen, watched the crater grow.

“One mile!” he called. “Velocity, fifty-one hundred feet per minute. Four thousand feet, velocity thirty-nine hundred. Three thousand feet, twenty eight”

“It’s coming down too fast,” David muttered.

“It’s all right,” Paul rapped. “The curves will bottom out at about one hundred feet. Trust the NASA men; they’re handling this part for us.”

Two minutes later, amid a blanketing whirlwind of stirred dust, the rocket came to rest on the surface of the moon. The dust-cloud dispersed quickly, to reveal the stark lunar landscape stretching away to a row of jagged, fire-topped peaks in the distance.

“That’s Copernicus,” Paul said. “Bull’s-eye, Dave!” He flipped a switch, turned a dial. “Let’s see what the boys think of this.”

“. . . like a feather,” a flat, mid-western voice was saying on the NASA intercom band. “A hundred and forty-one miles off target, but otherwise a perfect shot.”

“What have you come up with on the mid-course snafu?”

“The calcs check out to nine points. It looks like interference—but where from, or how, I don’t know.”

“The Russians?”

“Not unless they’ve got a secret station working in the continental U.S. Any command at mid-course time would have to have originated no

farther west than the dusk-plus two line.”

“Keep working on it.”

“They’re puzzled,” Lieberman said. “But they’re going to catch on as soon as I start tampering again.”

“That’s the chance we’ll have to take,” David said. “Let’s get started. If I’m right about this thing, we may not have much time.”

3

“I’m going to wait until they’ve carried out the routine post-touch-down drill,” Paul said. “When they deploy the secondary solar panels, I’ll step in. Perhaps, under cover of the activity, they won’t notice my pulse—at least not in time to get a fix on it.”

Minutes later, dust stirred on the screen, as a sealed panel opened outward into the field of view of the number one low-magnification camera; there was no sound but the whirring of tapes recording the information being transmitted from the quarter million mile distant Explorer.

“Here it comes,” Lieberman said, and threw over a switch. There was a tone from the receiver—an answering *beep!* from the transmitting unit. At once, the view on all four screens trembled as from heavy vibration.

“Something’s happening,” Paul said. “Unusual amount of vibration. Possibly the exit hatch is jammed—” he broke off as a bulky shape moved into view, passed slowly across before the camera’s eye.

“That’s it!” he exclaimed. “The surface crawler is clear of the capsule! She’s operating, Dave!”

“Who’s got control—us or them?” David snapped the question.

Lieberman keyed his array of buttons. Obediently, the fat-wheeled, spider-bodied crawler rolled forward, turned, and started away from the mother machine, its doughnut tires on their long, flexible axles sinking into drifts of powdery dust.

“I’ve got her!” Lieberman said.

From the radio, excited voices had broken out, reporting the sudden, unexpected deployment of the crawler.

“They’re trying to take over,” Lieberman said. “But they’re wasting their time on this one. They don’t know the recognition code I arranged to have fed into the crawler’s command response circuitry. They can’t touch it.”

One of the four screens now showed the view as seen from the turret

atop the free-ranging surface explorer. Lieberman turned the turret, sweeping the pick-up across a monotonous expanse of dark, rubble-strewn rock. The shape of the rocket came into view, an awkwardly truncated conic perched on three jointed legs, large landing pads propped against the uneven ground, the solar panels spread like the petals of some huge mechanical flower. The crawler's tracks led away from the open ramp down which it had emerged from the capsule.

"A remarkable sight," Paul said in a hushed tone. "An artifact of man, standing there alone on the surface of another world."

"Not quite alone," David's words rapped out sharply. "Look beyond it—to the left!"

Over the crest of a low ridge a hundred yards beyond the rocket, a strange machine stood silhouetted in highlight against the black sky.

4

Curiously shaped antennae mounted on the irregular curve of the stranger's hull pivoted, came to rest aimed at the immobile capsule. A tubular assembly swung ponderously around to bear on it.

"Dave!" Lieberman snapped. "Could that be a weapon—?"

Even as he spoke, a beam of dusty light speared out across the intervening space, harshly illuminating the rocket. At once, three of the TV screens went black.

"They've knocked her off the air," Paul cried. "She's dead! No signals whatever are coming through!"

"The crawler's still operating," David said.

"Maybe he doesn't see it in the shadows," Lieberman said. "If he only expected one unit, he may pass the crawler up."

The antenna atop the newcomer continued to rotate slowly, scanning the landscape. Then, as if satisfied, they retracted into the hull. The machine moved ahead, pivoted right and trundled back over the ridge and out of sight.

"He's heading back," Paul said. "We're safe!"

"Follow him," David snapped.

Lieberman complied. The picture on the screen jumped and wobbled as the crawler churned ahead at full speed—approximately twenty miles per hour. It slowed, crawling up the steep approach to the ridge. Then the horizon swept up suddenly as it topped the rise. The alien machine was already a quarter of a mile away, racing across the plain.

“We can’t stay with him,” Lieberman said.

“We can follow his trail.”

“I’ll try.”

Lieberman bent to the task of steering the crawler across the rugged terrain of the moon; David again turned to the NASA communication channel. Excited voices shouted questions, drowning each other out, until abruptly one voice blanketed the others:

“This is General Moore!” the bass bellow rang out. “Silence! Mission Control! What the devil happened! What was that machine visible on number four?”

“I don’t know, General! It’s nothing of ours, certainly! I think we’ll have to assume the Soviets have capabilities we’ve never dreamed of—”

“This is no time for dreaming! That was good work, getting the crawler clear; where’s it headed?”

“It’s—ah—moving in the direction of Copernicus, General,” the harassed voice came back.

“Copernicus! What the devil’s it headed that way for! We know the surface there is impassable!”

“General, as a matter of fact—the crawler isn’t under our control. Our command channel has been overridden!”

“You mean the enemy machine has captured our crawler?”

“I assume so, General—though the commands seem to originate from an Earthside point. Actually, the first interference occurred in mid-course —”

“Why wasn’t I informed!”

“We weren’t sure, sir. In fact, it’s only on the basis of this latest development that we theorize it must have—”

“Destroy the crawler at once!” the general roared.

“That’s impossible, General! There is no separate destruct charge for the crawler!”

“Then . . . then . . . blast it, man! What CAN we do?”

“I don’t know, sir,” the technician’s voice was desperate. “We’ll have to just wait and see.”

“In the meantime, find that Earthside transmitter!” The general’s voice was the crack of a whip. “I don’t care who or what you use! Call on the Army, the Air Force, the Navy—whatever you want! But find that transmitter and destroy it!”

David turned the volume down; his eyes met Lieberman’s.

“That means us,” the physicist said. “It won’t take them long. Every

signal I send will bring them closer. All we can do is hope to carry out what we started, before Moore finds us.”

“Or the alien machine blasts the crawler,” David added. “Either way, chances don’t look good.”

Chapter THREE

“It’s a miracle,” Paul Lieberman said. “Almost three hours, and we’re still operating. The batteries are weakening—we’re making barely five miles per hour—and the picture is beginning to fade. But just grant us another fifteen minutes, and we’ll be into Copernicus.”

“They have us pretty well triangulated,” David said from the table where he had spread out maps to keep a running tab on the official effort to pinpoint the origin of the one-millisecond transmission bursts that had been necessary to keep the crawler on course. “They’re within forty miles now. With luck we’ll have our fifteen minutes—but not much more.”

“That’s all we need—if we see what we expect to see,” Lieberman said. “They’ll see the same views we do; if there’s an alien installation in Copernicus, they’ll have a full videotape record of it. Let them try to scoff *that* out of existence!”

“They’ll try,” David said. “But this time we’ll have the proof—on their own tapes!”

“Let’s hear what they’re saying about this at the Cape,” the physicist said.

David turned up the radio volume.

“. . . fire in the blockhouse!” a frantic voice was yelling. “Evacuating all personnel! It’s raging out of control!” Aghast, the two men listened to the excited voices, following the progress of the disaster.

“That’s it—wiped out,” Paul said as the sound ceased. “They’re off the air, no data being received, the records destroyed.” His eyes met David’s. “We tried,” he said. “And failed.”

2

“We’re not licked yet! We still have our tapes!” David said. “They’ll show everything!”

“Dave—you know as well as I they’ll simply call it all an elaborate hoax; and you can’t blame them; it’s simple enough to fake a video tape, make it show anything you want it to—as easy as photographing a garbage

can lid tossed in the air, and claiming it's a flying saucer."

"What about the alien crawler? They can't dismiss that!"

"They'll assume it's Russian."

Both men were silent, watching the scene unrolling on the screen. The trail, faintly marked on the hard rock, curved upward past massive lava out-croppings, approaching the mighty peaks of the crest. It passed between two flanking spires of rock, and the valley floor below came into panoramic view: a miles-wide expanse of flat rock, studded by minor craters, fallen stones—and the outlines of what was unmistakably an artificial installation covering many acres of the surface.

"Good Lord, Dave," Paul breathed. "It looks like an antenna array—a big one! Possibly to supply solar power to an underground facility! And here we sit—unable to show proof of what we've discovered!"

"How big would you say that complex is?" David asked tersely.

"It must cover fifty acres, at least. And notice, Dave—it's cleverly camouflaged so as to be well-nigh invisible from directly above. It's only from this angle that it's possible to see clearly what's really there!"

"Well-nigh invisible—or completely undetectable?"

"I suppose it might be possible to discover it—if you knew precisely where to look, and what to look for."

"We know."

"Of course—but the crawler's batteries won't last much longer. Not nearly long enough to get anyone here from NASA—even if we could persuade them to come."

"What about using a telescope?"

"Hmm. I'm afraid not," Paul shook his head. "It would require something on the order of the two hundred-inch reflector at Palomar to resolve detail that fine—and even then—" He broke off, glancing out the window. "Dave!" he said in a new tone. "Your estimate of fifteen minutes was somewhat optimistic! They're here now!"

3

David snapped off the lights, sprang to the window. Against the pale dust of the road below, dark figures moved in the moonlight.

"It's all over, Dave," Paul said. "I suppose we never really had a chance."

"If we can get the officer in charge of the troops to look at the screen, his testimony may convince them."

“You’re grasping at straws, Dave. It’s no use—”

“I can try,” David said. “I’m going out and give myself up, try to talk to him.”

“Dave—it’s better if we wait here! They may assume you’re attacking them, and shoot on sight!”

“I’ll have to chance it.” David stepped to the door, threw it open. Before he had stepped outside, a beam of yellow light stabbed out, seared a gouge in the door frame beside his head. He dropped flat, rolled inside, kicked the door shut.

“Those are no troops,” he rapped the words at the startled physicist. “They’re Invaders!”

4

“What else can we do, Dave?” Paul asked quietly. “We have no choice but to destroy the equipment to keep it out of their hands.”

“All right—but . . . somehow . . . I hate to abandon the crawler.”

“The picture will soon fade beyond utility; it’s done its job.”

“I know—it’s ridiculous to feel loyalty to a machine. If I had a few men as faithful as the crawler, we wouldn’t be in this spot now!”

“I’ll short the main transmitter circuits out. The resultant fireworks should occupy their attention here for a few moments.”

Quickly, Lieberman pulled the cover plate from a complex maze of wiring, set to work with a screwdriver.

“They’re up to something,” David said. “Oh-oh—I see why they’re waiting. They’re surrounding the house!”

At that moment, a tremendous sputtering and arcing burst from the powerful electronic installation, lighting the room like an explosion. In seconds, the dry wood of the wall and ceiling was aflame.

“We’ve got to get out,” David called over the roar of flames. “Aliens or no aliens!” He used a chair to knock out a window at the back of the cottage, went through it in a running dive, turned back to help Lieberman through. As he did, the actinic beam of the alien destruct ray speared out, scoured the logs beside them as they dived for cover.

“Only a matter of seconds now,” Paul gasped, hugging the ground. “Dave, I want you to know that I don’t regret anything that’s happened. If I had it to do over—” He broke off as a brilliant light dawned directly overhead. A flare, dangling from a billowing white parachute, was hanging in the sky above the peak. A second flare sprang into life, and more,

lighting the ground below like a stage. And dimly, above the glare, other shapes were visible, dropping swiftly downward.

“Paratroopers!” Lieberman exclaimed.

A shot rang out, followed by more in quick succession. From the road below the cottage, one of the yellow beams scythed upward; a flare burst in a shower of fireworks. The shots had become a steady fusillade. There was a crashing in the underbrush, and a paratrooper burst through, swung a sub-machine gun at hip level and fired a long burst. A lean, dark-clad figure sprang past him, fell, clawing, to the ground. The soldier pivoted to follow, fired another burst, spun and disappeared toward the cabin.

“Let’s go!” David caught at Paul’s arm, urging him away downslope. A minute later, they emerged on the road. Above, around the furiously blazing cabin, the sounds of combat raged on. David started toward a big, dark sedan parked along the road.

“David—where are you going?” the physicist gasped out.

“Palomar’s too far,” David said. “We’d never make it. Where’s the nearest telescope with the capacity to see what we saw?”

“Why . . . why . . . the new hundred-and-eighty-inch refractor at the San Gabriel Tracking Station is within fifty miles—but it’s not complete yet—”

“We’ll have to take a chance,” David said. “It’s our last hope.”

5

It was a difficult, dangerous two-hour drive, without lights, over unpaved back roads. Nearly exhausted, the two men reached their destination near 5 a.m. Behind a flood-lit perimeter fence, lights burned in the office complex beneath the great dome housing the huge scope designed for direct visual observation of satellite docking maneuvers.

“With luck, A1 Jamieson, the Deputy Chief of the station, will be here,” Paul Lieberman said as the car drew up to the closed gate. “We worked together on the early stages of the Titan One. I haven’t seen him for several years, but we always got on well. Maybe he’ll listen to me.”

A uniformed guard had appeared from the gate house. He listened as the physicist made his request, then used a wall-mounted phone.

“Dr. Jamieson will be right out,” he reported, eyeing the two ruggedly clothed, unshaven men with curiosity tinged by suspicion obviously reinforced by their hour of arrival.

Jamieson arrived within minutes, a tall, lean, brown-haired man in

coveralls over a white shirt and tie. He greeted Lieberman warmly, shook hands with David Vincent, then escorted them across the compound and into the building, smelling strongly of new paint and fresh cut lumber.

“Ninety-eight percent complete, according to the contractor,” the astronomer said. “It’s going to be the finest ever built—and wait until you see the ‘scope, Paul. It’s based on new optical principles and employs a special high-transparency glass—” he checked. “You still have your TS clearance, I suppose?”

Paul nodded, got out his wallet and showed the card to Jamieson.

“And what about Mr. Vincent?”

“I’ll vouch for him, Al.”

“Sorry, Paul—you know that’s not good enough. Security regulations —”

“I’m going to have to ask you to forget the regulations tonight,” Lieberman said steadily. Briefly, without elaboration, he told his friend what he and David had observed through the electronic eye of the moon-crawler.

“I have no proof of what we saw, Al,” he finished. “None whatever. But you can give me that proof.”

“Paul—wait a minute! This is coming at me too fast! An alien installation on the moon—a stolen rocket—paratroopers—”

“The essential part is quite simple,” Paul cut in. “We want to take a look through your scope, Al—to confirm what we saw. We need photographs—clear ones—”

“But, Paul—the installation’s incomplete! The tracking clock hasn’t been calibrated or linked in!”

“We can jury rig it.”

“It’s impossible, Paul! Aside from the total illegality, there are too many obstacles!”

“Are we going to argue legalities while an alien species takes over our world?” Paul interrupted harshly. “Al, you know me quite well, I think. You know my position in the world of science. Do you imagine I’d be here if I weren’t totally certain of what I’m talking about?”

Jamieson looked at the slim, grey-haired man. “No,” he said. “You wouldn’t. Come along, then, Paul. This may mean the end of my career, but I’ll do what I can.”

Chapter FOUR

“We’re running out of time,” Al Jamieson said. “We have another two hours of good seeing, at the most—but the moon’s declination is only thirty degrees now. Much closer to the horizon, we’ll see nothing but atmospheric haze.”

“I think I have the tracking synchronized closely enough now,” Paul said. “Go ahead and align the instrument on Luna, Al. The point we want is just inside the south-west rim of Copernicus.”

Jamieson threw the switch which activated the mechanism which swung the eighteen-ton telescope tube, with its massive, ten-ton lens, in precise coordination with the rotation of the earth, with the correct compensation for the proper motion of the moon in its orbit, so as to hold a fixed field of view in the observer’s eye.

“I’m setting up with nothing but a UV filter,” the astronomer said. “For the kind of detail you’re after, we need all the light we can get. That means it’s going to be extremely bright—perhaps painfully bright. We’ll have to exercise great care to avoid damaging our vision.” He stepped onto the tiny elevator which lifted the viewer to the level of the eyepiece, rode up, settled himself in the chair twenty feet above the floor. Above, the great clamshell door slid back, revealing a wedge of dark, star-filled sky and admitting a blast of chill air.

“Paul, you can follow this on the small repeater,” Jamieson’s voice issued from an intercom speaker at the base of the giant eye. “Tell me when I’m precisely on the locus.”

Lieberman complied, speaking directions into the microphone before him.

“Dave,” he called. “Take a look.”

Vincent took the physicist’s place at the smaller telescope, linked to the giant one so as to bear concentrically with the latter’s field of view. He squinted against the blindingly bright sunlight of the Lunar noon; a small, dark marker-point indicated the area identified by Lieberman.

“That’s Copernicus,” Lieberman said. “The point from which we approached was at the lower left, just above the small dark igneous intrusion, I believe.”

“That’s right,” David confirmed. “I remember skirting that lava flow. It’s difficult to make out detail under vertical light, but I’d say you’re within a couple of miles of it.”

“Roger,” Jamieson said. “I’m traversing to center on it.”

The giant tube shifted position minutely. A minute passed in tense silence before Jamieson called out.

“Paul—I’m not sure—but I seem to see something—or imagine I see it! The air is turbulent tonight, but as it cleared for a moment, I picked up a suspiciously straight line, running right across the crater’s rim.”

Half a minute later Jamieson exclaimed in excitement. “I have it, Paul! Amazing! It’s a grid pattern at least a quarter of a mile in diameter! It’s very faint, but unmistakably artificial!”

“It’s been meticulously camouflaged, Al,” Lieberman said. “Do you think you can get photographs of it?”

“Perhaps—if I have time for time exposures—wait!” He broke off suddenly. “Paul! I see something moving there!”

“Describe it!”

“It’s a mere point—almost invisible in itself—but it’s raising a dust trail—”

“That could be the crawler,” David cut in.

“Al—is it possible to get any greater magnification?” Lieberman called.

“Yes—I can fit a special eye-piece into position, designed for close inspection work on satellites—but the field of view is extremely small—”

“Good! If we can get a photo of the crawler, it will establish the authenticity of the pictures beyond any question!”

“You’d better come up and confirm this yourself,” Jamieson said. “Both of you.”

David slid into the chair with a curious sense of revisiting familiar territory. For hours he had followed the progress of the unmanned crawler across that desolate landscape; now he was seeing it again, from a new angle.

“The area you’re seeing is only about a hundred and fifty yards in diameter,” Jamieson said. “The moving object should appear at the left any moment now.”

As he spoke, David saw it: a small, brilliantly white shape, creeping steadily forward across the barren rock. The image danced and wavered—but it was unmistakably the crawler.

“How could it be?” Lieberman asked rhetorically as he confirmed David’s identification. “The batteries were almost dead, two hours ago!”

“It’s barely moving,” David said. “It’s only covered about half a mile since we shut down its transmitter.”

“That’s it!” Lieberman said. “A large part of the power was going into the TV transmission circuits! When we switched them off, that shunted all the remaining power to the drive!”

“It’s headed straight for the installation,” David said. “I’m surprised they haven’t sent their interceptor out against it.”

“I doubt if their equipment is designed to detect an intruder on the surface,” Paul said. “The crawler is slipping in under their hypothetical defenses.”

“Too bad it’s not wired to destruct,” David said. “We might be able to blast a hole in that setup.”

“It is,” Lieberman said.

“I heard one of the technicians tell General Moore it wasn’t.”

“He was mistaken. My override device includes a circuit which will short-circuit the power storage cells, and release the remaining energy in one burst. Not a large explosion, but enough to totally destroy the crawler. I wanted to be in a position to eliminate the evidence of tampering, if it worked out that way.”

“Can we trigger it from here?”

“No, I’m afraid not. It requires the very special type of transmission equipment we left behind us at the cabin.”

“Hold everything!” David cut in. “Something’s happening! An opening’s just appeared at the midpoint of the site. Something’s coming out—the alien crawler, I’d guess! It’s swinging around now—and starting out to cut off our crawler!”

2

Swiftly, the massive alien machine threaded its way, following a path laid across the grid. It reached the perimeter of the installation, raced along the edge toward a point from which it could re-enter the pattern and overtake the barely moving machine which had penetrated its area.

“The watchdog was asleep at the switch,” David said. “But he smells a victim now.”

The pursuer came up swiftly, halted just behind the crawler, sat unmoving for a moment. Then David saw a brief glint of yellow light—a barely perceptible flash. For a moment, nothing happened; then the crawler erupted in a gout of white light.

“It blew!” David called. “When the alien hit it with his killer beam, he triggered the destruct circuit!” Suddenly, a blinding flash of light stabbed

David's eyes. He recoiled from the telescope, bright spots swimming before him. Paul caught his arm. "Dave—what is it?"

"There was another explosion," he said. "The alien machine, I think . . ."

Paul swung into the chair.

"There's nothing but dust in sight—a huge dust-cloud!" he called excitedly. "That was a tremendous blast! And—Dave! The explosion must have set off something! Smoke is pouring up from the central silo! Now the whole grid area is buckling . . ."

David, still blinking, put his face to the scope as Paul leaned aside. The entire area was a boiling sea of dust, through which bright streaks glowed. As David watched, great rocks hurtled skyward from the maelstrom. The glow spread until the view resembled a glimpse down the throat of a volcano.

"Too late to get a picture now," David said. "It's gone—blasted into slag!"

Before Paul could answer, a sound shattered the stillness: a shot, followed by the scream of a man in mortal agony.

3

From the windows above the steel stairs which led down into the rotunda from the observation deck, the three men saw a scene of carnage at the gate fifty yards distant. A heavy car, its headlights blazing, was parked a few feet beyond the sentry box. Beside it stood a tall figure—manlike, yet not a man, yellow-eyed, hollow-faced. At his feet the guard lay twisted in a widening pool of blood. A second man was crumpled against the fence, as if thrown there like a broken toy. The gate itself was gone; the stub of it hung, glowing red hot, from the supporting post, above a puddle of molten metal.

Two guards were running from the temporary barracks across the compound. David sprinted down the stairs toward the observatory entrance, threw the door wide.

"In here!" he shouted to the two men. "Don't try—" his words were drowned in the roar of the car's engine as it gunned through the vaporized gate, swerved, tires squealing, heading directly for the two guards, who halted, brought up their guns and opened fire. Bullets shattered the car's windshield, but it didn't slow. At the last moment, one man leaped from its path; the other attempted to follow, too late. The impact as the

car struck him threw his body fifteen feet in the air. The other man staggered to his feet, attempted to fire after the car as it braked to a screeching halt; then he lowered the jammed gun and ran for the observatory door. A tall, lean figure sprang from the car, dashed in pursuit, running with grotesque leaps. David waited, ready; as the man plunged through the opening, he slammed the door. An instant later, it shook in its frame as the invader, unable to stop, slammed against it full-tilt.

There was a smashing of glass from the rear side of the rotunda.

“They’re breaking in through the offices!” Jamieson shouted from the gallery above. “Up here, quickly! We can barricade this door against them! It’s the only entry to the observation deck!”

David caught at the dazed guard’s arm, pulled him after him up the steel stairs.

“Who are they?” Jamieson blurted. “You spoke of . . . Invaders . . . but I thought . . . “

“I know; you thought I was suffering from delusions,” Paul said in a tight voice. “Now you know differently. The telephone, Al! Where is it!”

“Here!” The astronomer ran to a table, lifted the phone, listened.

“Dead!” he said. “They’ve cut the line!”

Below, feet racketed on the stair; heavy, inhuman fists pounded at the door.

“They can’t get past that,” Jamieson said. “It’s armored; this is a maximum security area—”

“It won’t stop them long,” David cut in. “Did you see the gate?” He looked around. “I don’t suppose you have any weapons stored up here?”

“Nothing,” Jamieson shook his head. “Paul,” he looked at the physicist with wild eyes. “I can’t believe this! An armed attack—three men dead—”

“Start believing it,” Lieberman said. “It’s happening.”

“How long before the work crews arrive?” David rapped the question.

“About seven-thirty.”

“That will be too late to do us any good. What about the guard posts? How often are they supposed to call in?” he addressed the shaken guard.

“Every . . . every fifteen minutes,” the man gasped. “They killed Charlie,” he said. “Did you see them? Ran him down. And Joe and Lew, at the gate—”

“That’s not all,” David snapped. “They’ll kill you too, if they get their hands on you! Pull yourself together, man! Clear your gun; you may get a chance to use it shortly!”

“It’s done for,” the man said. “Can’t fix it without tools—and they’re

in the guard room downstairs.” He looked sourly at the useless weapon.

“Dave—what can we do!” Paul hissed. “They’ve got us trapped here!”

David Vincent looked around the big, high-domed room, at the banks of computers arranged around the base of the giant scope, up at the great instrument itself, aimed as a challenge at the sky.

“Dr. Jamieson, how much mobility does the telescope have?”

“Eh? Why, it rotates a full three hundred and sixty degrees, of course, and—”

“How far can it be depressed?”

“Right to the horizon. But see here, Mr. Vincent—with a party of maniacs or worse threatening to bring the building down about our ears, I hardly see what—”

“Bring it down,” David said in a tone of command. “As far as she’ll come.”

“Paul, what in the world—” Jamieson turned to the physicist.

“Do as he asks, Al,” Lieberman cut him off.

It took five minutes to swing the giant tube down to a horizontal position, rotate it in accordance with David’s directions to aim like a cannon at the door. Halfway through the maneuver, the clamor outside ceased abruptly.

“Hey,” the guard called in a strained voice. “I hear feet out there—and some kind of buzzing; sounds like a rattler about to strike. Shall I open up and take a look?”

“Stay back,” David said. “It will open soon enough now.” He looked at his watch. “How long until sunrise, Dr. Jamieson?”

“Six twenty-one; another four minutes,” the astronomer replied. “You think they may be breaking off attack because of that?”

“No. I think they’ll come through that door any second now. Listen, Doctor. This is what we have to do . . . ”

4

“Do you think it’s possible?” Paul Lieberman asked.

“It might work,” Jamieson said. “If I have time to make the adjustment . . . ” He went quickly to the console controlling the great telescope, began pressing control buttons on the panel.

“Unlike most astronomical instruments, this one has a variable focal length, due to the purpose for which it’s designed,” he said. “Whether it will be sufficient—I can’t say. But we’ll know in a moment.”

With a rumble, the dome rotated, aligning the opening with the telescope's new position. Jamieson made delicate last-minute adjustments, then shook his head.

"That's all—I don't know if it will be sufficient—"

"Six-twenty," David said. "One minute to go—"

A detonation smashed across the silence like the clap of Doomsday. The metal wall around the door frame bulged inward, but the heavy panel held. The guard brought up his gun, jacked the action, his jaw set determinedly, watching the door. Half a minute passed in silence. Then a second blast roared out; the upper hinge burst from its socket.

"The next one will do it," Paul said.

"Ten seconds," David said. "Nine . . . eight . . . seven—"

There was a final shattering crash from the door; smoke jetted through a rent in the torn metal, peeled back like paper to form a ragged aperture. A saturnine face appeared in the opening; ochre eyes swept the room. With a yell, the guard hurled the Thompson gun; the alien, half through the opening, recoiled as the weapon struck his shoulder and clattered to the floor. Calmly, ignoring the futile attack, he put one lean leg through, turned sideways to force his shoulders through. He stepped clear, and turned to face David Vincent.

"You were a worthy enemy," he said in his flat, raucous voice. "Almost it is a pity that you must die; but there is room for only one Great Race under your yellow sun."

At the last word, a beam of searing white light sprang into existence from the center of the telescope's eyepiece, a solid bar of eye-dazzling brilliance spanning the space to the advancing alien. With an explosive hiss, a gaping hole appeared, penetrating the Invader's chest. For a moment, the body stood, fire spouting from it; then it toppled, burning fiercely. From beyond the breached door there was a harsh buzz, swiftly cut off, followed by a sound of crackling flames.

5

In the pink dawn, David Vincent stood with Paul Lieberman and Dr. Alvin Jamieson, the latter coughing hoarsely from a breath of the acrid fumes emitted by the combustion of alien protoplasm, staring up at the observatory dome, from which smoke still boiled. There was a six inch circle cut through the front of the building; an elliptical patch of the unsodded earth before it was scorched and fused where the intense heat of

the concentrated rays of the sun had swept it in the seconds before it had risen out of focus of the telescope lens.

“I’m going to have a little trouble explaining a tapered hole bored through steel and concrete,” the astronomer said, with a pale attempt at a smile. “But I’ll do my best.”

“Leave us out of it, if you can,” David said. “Don’t try to tell them what really happened; they won’t believe you.”

“But—what should I do—simply forget what I’ve seen? That an alien species is here, on Earth—and on the moon—”

“Not any more,” David said. “The moon station’s gone—thanks to their watchful interceptor. Just patch things up and carry on, Doctor. Some day I’ll call on you to tell what happened here; until then, it’s better if you say nothing.”

“But—surely, you can’t intend to go on fighting these creatures alone! Their powers are too great! You’ll only be killed.”

“We live in a strange world, Doctor,” David said. “A world our grandfathers couldn’t have dreamed of. Every day, new and more fantastic discoveries are being made; the whole Universe is opening up to us. And yet—there are some things people can’t believe—won’t believe, because they strike at their security; at their comfortable conception of the uniqueness of man.”

“So—what will you do?” Jamieson persisted.

“Fight,” David Vincent said.