

The House in November

Keith Laumer

To Gordon Dickson, who explained it.

Chapter 1

1

Jeff Mallory's first thought when he woke that morning was that he was back in the field hospital south of Inchon, with a hole in his shoulder where a Chinese .30-caliber slug had gone in, and a bigger one between his ribs where it had come out. And Uncle Al had been there, calling to him to come along: they were going to the Old House; and he had wanted to go, even though he was stitched and bandaged and confined to bed Mallory moved his shoulders experimentally, felt a twinge of pain from sore muscles. Probably he had moved in his sleep and tried to weave the resultant ache into a dream that would allow him the luxury of a few more minutes of cosy oblivion. Strange thing, the dream mechanism: as if half the brain set out to delude the other half. And the haunting desire to see the Old House again still clung, like a memory of a long-ago outing

He got out of bed, stretched, noticing other small aches and pains as he did. Must be old age catching up with him, he told himself, not meaning it.

Through the curtained window, fog hung like a cottony veil across the lawn, making ghosts of the poplars at the far side of the garden, obscuring detail, blurring outlines, lending to the familiar a hint of the charm of the unknown. The Bartlett house, looming high and wraithlike beyond the trees, might have been perched on a cliff at the edge of the world. The

street, dwindling into invisibility half a block away, might lead down to a silent beach edging a tideless sea. It would be pleasant to follow that phantom shoreline, wade in the warm, reed-grown shallows, emerge in some pleasanter, simpler world . . .

Mallory smiled at his fancies. It would be time enough to start dreaming of white beaches when the firm of Mallory and Nolan, Engineering Consultants, had weathered its first year in business.

As he turned away from the window, something caught his eye, lying beside the hedge lining the Bartletts' drive. It was difficult to make out in the misty light, but it looked like an old overcoat flung carelessly on the grass, a jarring note in the orderly composition. Probably something left and forgotten by a handyman. Mallory put it out of his mind and went into the bathroom.

His razor lay on the edge of the basin, clogged with gray soap. *Bless the ladies*, he thought as he rinsed it under the tap. He rummaged in the medicine cabinet for a new blade, failed to find one. The shaving cream can was empty, its spout crusted with dry, green foam. The toothpaste tube was crumpled and flat. His toothbrush was nowhere in sight. He found it after a brief search, on the floor behind the toilet bowl.

He used the electric razor Gill had given him for Christmas. He didn't like using it. It didn't shave close enough and left his face feeling dry and unrefreshed.

Eyeing himself in the mirror, he thought he looked a bit gaunt and hollow-cheeked. There were dark circles under his eyes, and he was badly in need of a haircut. That was at least a month's growth, he decided, angling his head so as to see the sides. He must be working too hard, losing weight, forgetting his biweekly trim. He'd have to think about taking things easier.

In the closet he noticed a pair of battered shoes on the floor. It was his best pair of Bostonians. The soles were badly worn, the uppers scuffed deep into the leather, the strings broken and knotted. Frowning, Mallory looked through the hanging clothes for his gray suit, found it dangling on a hook at the end of the closet. It was dusty, shabby; the cuffs were greasy black, both elbows worn through. It looked, he thought, like something a hobo might wear, calling at the back door for a handout. Lori must have borrowed it, he decided, for some sort of student Rag Day or scavenger hunt thing. To a youngster, all old folks' clothes—meaning over thirty-five—probably looked the same. He'd have to have words with that young lady.

He dropped the coat on the floor with the ruined shoes, selected a tan suit. His favorite tie was missing. He picked another, smoothed the frown off his face. Whistling, he went down to breakfast.

Gillian was at the stove, stirring a pan. Marly and Randy, the ten-and-eight-year-olds, sat at the kitchen table, spooning up oatmeal.

“Looks like I’m last man on deck,” Mallory said jovially. Gill smiled abstractedly and went on with her work. The kids didn’t look up. He poured a cup of coffee and pulled out a chair. There were bread crumbs on the seat of the chair and on the table. Sugar was scattered around the bowl. In a clouded glass vase were the dried stems of a bunch of faded wild flowers. He tried the coffee. It was lukewarm, stale-tasting.

Gill came across and put a bowl of oatmeal before him. She was still the best-looking girl in town, Mallory thought; but this morning she looked pale, her skin dull.

“You’re late, Jeff,” she said. “I was just going to call you.”

“I got involved in looking out the window,” he said. “Nice fog.”

Gill sat down across from him. “Fog?” she said vaguely.

Mallory glanced out the window. The air was sparkling clear.

“Funny. Must have been just a patch.”

He sampled the oatmeal. It was barely warm. There was no salt in it, no salt on the table, no butter, no cream. He started to mention it, glanced at Gill, noticed the darkness under her eyes, her abstracted expression.

“Gill—are you feeling all right?”

“Very well, thank you,” she said quickly and smiled a fleeting smile.

Mallory got up and went to the cupboard where the dry cereal was kept. There were half a dozen boxes there, their tops torn open, all but one empty. He took a bowl from the shelf, noticed dust in it, rinsed it at the sink.

“Any toast?” he inquired.

“Toast?” Gill looked mildly puzzled.

“You’ve heard of it: bread that’s been in the toaster.” He tried to make it sound jolly, but the words hung dead between them. It was chilly in the room, he noticed. There was a faint, foul odor in the air. Or not so faint, he amended, noticing the overflowing garbage pail by the door. Bits of food and soiled paper lay around it.

Marly, the ten-year-old, scraped her spoon against her empty bowl. She licked it front and back, dropped it on the table, and stood. Her skirt and sweater didn’t match.

“Hey, did you kids have any milk?” Jeff asked. Marly didn’t answer. Randy pushed his chair back and started from the room after his sister.

“Why did the kids rush out of here without a word?” Mallory asked. “Is anything wrong?”

“They have to go to school,” Gill said. She looked troubled. Mallory reached across to put his hand over hers. He was shocked at how cold it felt under his; and thin. And the nails, always so carefully groomed, were chipped, not even clean.

“Gill, what’s the matter?” He tried to catch her eye. She looked down, into her bowl. She pulled her hand away, took a bite of gruel.

“Gill . . . I think you’ve been working too hard,” Mallory said. “Being around the house too much. What do you say we get away for a few days? We could go out to the Old House this weekend, camp out, do a little work on the place. The kids would enjoy it and—”

“What old house?”

“Our Old House. What else?”

“Do we have an old house?” Gill looked at him innocently.

Mallory shook his head. “Never mind, it was just a thought.”

“You’d better eat,” Gill said. “You’ll be late.”

“One of the prerogatives of being boss,” Mallory said, smiling, “is that I can be late when I want to.”

Gillian shook her head. “You mustn’t joke about your Work, Jeff.”

“Why not?” he smiled at her.

Gillian looked concerned.

“Jeff, you seem so strange this morning”

“I was just thinking you seem to be in a curiously playful mood.”

“In what way?”

“Acting as if you never heard of the Old House, teasing me about being a few minutes late to my own office—”

“Jeff, what are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about my business. Where I make our living.”

“Jeff, are you sure you’re feeling all right?”

“Why shouldn’t I be?”

Gill’s glance went to the clock over the refrigerator. She made as if to rise. “We really have to go now—”

Mallory caught her hand. “Where are you going?” She tugged against him, trying to pry his fingers loose.

“Let me go,” she gasped. “They don’t like it if you’re late!”

“Gill—I asked you where you’re going!”

“To the Star Tower, of course—”

“What’s the Star Tower?”

“You know,” she whispered. “It’s where we work.”

“We? Since when do you have a job?” He tried to smile. “I’m the breadwinner around here, remember?”

She was shaking her head; her eyes were wide, fearful. Mallory came to his feet, drew his wife to him. “Slow down a minute, girl. Let’s start at the beginning—” He broke off as the front door slammed. Through the window he saw Marly and Randy hurrying down the front walk.

“Where are their coats?” he said. “It’s cold out there. And their schoolbooks—” He turned urgently to Gill. “And where’s Lori?”

“Lori who?”

“Our daughter Lori. You know.” He tried to cover the impatient edge to his voice with a smile.

“Our daughter’s name is Marly,” Gillian said carefully.

“Of course. And our other daughter’s name is Lori. Has she already eaten?”

Gill gave him a fleeting half-smile. “I’m sorry, I don’t understand you. I have to go. I mustn’t be late to the workrooms.”

“All right, I’ll play along,” Mallory said. “Anything else new I ought to know?”

Gillian looked worried. “Jeff, you know the quota has been increased —”

“Oh, so the quota has been increased.” Mallory nodded solemnly.

“So many have not been coming to their benches.”

“Their benches? What benches are those?”

“At the workrooms.”

“What workrooms?”

“Where we work, of course, Jeff! Please stop—”

“Funny, I thought I had an office in the Miller Building,” Mallory said harshly.

Gillian shook her head, glanced at the cereal bowl at Mallory’s place. “You’d better eat quickly. It’s a long time until midday break.”

“Never mind the midday break. You still haven’t said where Lori is.”

“I don’t know any Lori—”

He gripped her arm hard. “Stop it, Gill! Where is she—” He broke off at a sudden thought. “There hasn’t been an accident? Has she been hurt?”

“No, there hasn’t been any accident. And I *don’t* know anyone named Lori.” She tugged against him, trying to reach the door. He picked her

up, carried her to the living room, lowered her to the couch. She tried to struggle up. He sat beside her, held her.

“There *has* been an accident, hasn’t there?” He tried to hold his voice steady. “You’re trying to keep it from me, aren’t you?”

“I don’t know what you mean! I have to go!” Gill tried to pull away. He drew her back.

“I’m talking about our eldest daughter, Lori,” he said, forcing himself to speak calmly. “Age nineteen, born while we were still in school, tall, blond, likes to ride and swim and play tennis. Are you telling me you’ve forgotten her?”

Gillian looked into his eyes, shaking her head.

“There isn’t any such person, Jeff. We have two children, Maria and Randy. That’s all.”

He rose, went into the hall and called. There was no answer. He ran up the stairs three at a time, at the top wheeled to the left, his outstretched hand reaching for the doorknob—

And slammed into a solid wall. Where the door to Lori’s room should have been was an unbroken stretch of plaster.

2

Gill was standing wide-eyed on the landing.

“Why?” he said. “Why is her room sealed?” His voice was a croak.

“Jeff, you’re frightening. I don’t understand—”

Mallory ran his hands over the wall. It felt solid to his touch. He stepped back and looked along the hall. There were the doors to the other three bedrooms, the bathroom, the attic stairs. But Lori’s door was gone as if it had never been.

“Where is our daughter Lori!”

Gillian shrank away from him as he came down the steps. “Jeff, you’re sick. You’re having some kind of attack. Lie down, and I’ll call Dr. Everet —”

“I’ve never felt better in my life—” Mallory started and broke off abruptly. Through the window on the landing he saw the familiar street, clear of fog now, the big, old-fash-ioned houses, steep-gabled, the leafless trees above them. But beyond, where the steeple of the Methodist church should have been, a tower rose up and up into the morning sky. It was big, his engineer’s eye told him: hundreds of feet in diameter, and so tall that

its flaring top was lost in the high haze. The material was pale green, glassy, translucent. An incredible structure, sprung up overnight like an enchanted mushroom.

“Gill—what *is* it?”

“The Star Tower, of course.” She stared into his face. Her eyes had a glazed, remote look.

With an effort, Mallory spoke calmly.

“Gill, something’s wrong. Maybe it’s me. It must be me—unless I’m imagining *that*-” He glanced at the tower. “And if I am, I’m still in trouble.”

“You’ve been working too hard,” she said. “I knew you were working too hard.”

“Gill, do you remember a church? The steeple used to stick up right behind the Meyer house—”

“But . . . that’s where the Tower is.”

“No church? I imagined that?”

“You saw the Tower, Jeff. Surely you don’t—”

“I saw it. I admit it. That’s the one thing that makes me think I may be the one who’s out of his mind. Because the tower is impossible, Gill.” Mallory laughed and was surprised at the weakness of the laugh. “All right. I’m imagining things. Anything else?”

“You seem . . . very confused, Jeff.”

“We don’t have a nineteen-year-old daughter?”

“No, Jeff.”

“I don’t run my own engineering company?”

“I don’t understand what that means. We work at our jobs at the Tower—”

“What do you do in this workroom you say you have to hurry off to?”

“We perform the tasks set us.”

“What is it, some sort of factory?”

“I . . . I don’t know. I suppose so. We . . . make things. Work on things. With wires. You work in the loading sheds.”

“Gill—is this what it’s like to lose your mind? I feel perfectly normal. No headache, no confusion. Just a lot of ideas that seem to be totally false. But how much of it is false? Everything? No, not everything,” he shook his head. “You’re my wife, Gill. You know me. And the kids, Randy and Maria. But what about everything else?” he broke off, a vision of a flat earth filling his mind. “The world is round,” he said. “OK so far?”

She nodded hesitantly.

"We live in the United States. In the state of Nebraska. The town of Beatrice."

Gill frowned. "No—this is the Center, Jeff."

"The center of what?"

Gill made a vague gesture. "Of . . . everything. It's just . . . the Center."

"What do we do?"

"We work, we do our part—"

"Our part of what?"

"Of the Work."

"Gill," Mallory said. "I may be crazy—but I didn't imagine Lori. She exists, damn it!" Pulling her behind him, he went into the library.

"Where's the picture of her that we keep on the desk?" he demanded.

Gill didn't answer.

He took a blue-covered album from the drawer. There were snapshots of Gill, of himself, of Randy and Marly. But none of Lori, only patches of torn paper where pictures had been removed.

"Who tore her pictures out?" Mallory gripped Gill's arms, almost shaking her. "Why?"

"Please, Jeff—you're hurting me—"

There was a soft *click* from the direction of the front door.

"Lori?" Mallory stepped past his wife, hurried through the arched entry to the front room—and stopped dead.

A man stood there, staring fixedly past Mallory's shoulder.

Or—Mallory amended his first impression—not a man. Something that looked like a man. Something that might fool you in a bad light, or at a greater distance. But not here, ten feet away, in the full light of morning. The face was the wrong color: a dusky purplish pink, and of the texture of foam rubber. The eyes were dull, empty, without movement, the mouth and nostrils sealed, the hair a spongy mass. It was dressed in an old-fashioned golfing outfit, baggy knickers, Argyle socks, a loose cardigan of a pinkish gray color

Mallory's thoughts reached this point, recoiled, approached, recoiled

"You are late, Worker." A rich contralto voice sounded from the region of the simulacrum's rib cage. Behind Mallory, Gill made a whimpering sound.

"Gill—stay back!" Mallory took a step sideways and grabbed up the wrought-iron poker from beside the fireplace. The stand went over with a

dull crash of iron. He hefted the two-foot bar, watching the thing as it pivoted to face him.

From the corner of his eye, Mallory saw Gill start past him. He put out an arm to stop her, but she darted around him, toward the door. At once the monstrosity moved to intercept her. Mallory swung the poker up, brought it down across its shoulder. The impact was as if he had struck padded steel. With a motion too quick to follow, the thing twitched the poker from his hand, dropped it carelessly on the rug. Gill had the door open, was standing hesitantly looking back.

“Gill, run!” Mallory shouted and launched himself at the creature. Iron hands gripped him, thrust him effortlessly away.

“This is incorrect behavior, Worker,” the warm, feminine voice said in a tone of kindly correction. Mallory seized a heavy chair, hurled it at the thing, whirled and made a dash for the door through which Gill had disappeared. He had taken two steps when the room exploded into dazzling light that slowly faded into utter darkness.

Chapter 2

1

Mallory became aware that he was lying on his back on a soft surface, looking up at a flower-patterned ceiling. He turned his head; an elderly man was sitting beside him. He recognized him: Doc Everet—George Everet. Everet was staring vaguely at the wall.

“Where’s Gill?” Mallory said. Everet turned, looked at his left ear.

“She had to go, Jeff. The Work can’t wait, you know.”

Mallory sat up. His head ached sickeningly. He looked around the room. The thing that had attacked him was gone. The fire tools were neatly racked beside the fireplace, the furniture in its normal position.

“Where’s it gone?” he asked. “What was it, George?”

“What?”

“The *thing*—whatever it was. It knocked me out. Didn’t you see it? Didn’t Gill tell you?”

“You fainted, Jeff. Gill told me of your attack.”

Mallory went to the window, twitched aside the curtain. The tower loomed behind the familiar roofs, impossibly tall, undeniably real.

“Have I gone crazy?” he said thickly.

“Just a temporary loss of orientation,” the doctor said. “I have a tablet for you to take—”

“George—what’s going on?” Mallory came back to look down at the other man. Everet’s thin white hair curled untrimmed about his ears; there was a silvery stubble on his lined cheeks. The collar of his shirt was grimy, his tie tied in a hard, greasy knot.

“Maybe you can tell me—where’s Lori? Gill acted as if she’d never heard of her, George.”

Everet shook his head. “I know no one of that name.”

“Don’t know her? Hell, George, you delivered her! Nineteen years ago!”

“You have two children, Randall and Marlene, Jeff. Their ages are eight and ten—”

“Certainly—and another, named Lori, age nineteen! She was born the year I started with Universal—the year after Gill and I were married, the year I first met you!”

“Jeff, you have to reject these fantasies.”

“Is that so fantastic?”

“Worse than that. It’s nonsense. Many of the words you’re using are gibberish. They don’t mean anything.”

“Which words?”

“Never mind that. Put all that out of your mind—”

“How can I? I want to know what’s going on! If I’m crazy, I want to know how crazy!”

“Not crazy, just talking a little wild. I’m going to give you a pill that will make you sleep again—”

“No, no pills. Just give me some facts. The tower: how long has it been there? Who built it?”

“Why, I suppose the Tower has been there since before I can remember. Never thought much about it—”

“A thing like that?” Mallory leaned forward tensely. “Doesn’t it strike you that it looks different from anything else in the town? It’s too high, too big! What’s it built of? No material I know of could take those stresses —”

“Jeff, stop exciting yourself!” Everet frowned, offered a spherical purple capsule on his palm. “Take this, Jeff. It will help you.”

“Why not answer my question?”

“Jeff, next you’ll be asking me why trees have branches, and where the leaves come from, and what holds the sky up. I’m not here to help you

concretize your delusions! Talking about these fancies of yours will just stabilize them, make them seem more real to you! That's not good, is it? We want you well, sane, back on the job! Now take this! Or would you rather have the needle?"

Jeff accepted the pill, took the glass of water Everet offered. The elderly doctor watched him swallow, a stern look on his face.

"Now, you lie back and relax. Don't think about these notions of yours. Just be glad you've got a fine home and a fine wife and two fine children and that you have your Work. I'll look in on you this evening. By tomorrow morning you'll be feeling better, much better."

Mallory nodded, let his eyes close. He listened to the sounds of Everet closing his bag, tiptoeing across the room, the door opening, closing, the click of the latch.

He waited a full minute, then sat up, tossed the pill he had palmed into the fireplace.

"Delusions, eh?" he muttered. "We'll check on that . . ."

2

He found the ax among the garden tools under the basement steps. Back upstairs, he studied the blank wall where the door to Lori's room had been. Was there a faint, irregular line, an almost imperceptible discontinuity in the surface of the plaster? He couldn't be sure. But there was a way to find out. He raised the ax, swung it at the wall.

It struck with a solid *thunk!* that jarred his arms to the sockets. Plaster cracked and fell away, exposing a gray, papery surface. He chopped at it, knocking pieces loose. It was light, tough stuff, like the material of a hornet's nest. A fragment broke loose and fell inward; dim light shone out through the hole. Mallory knelt, saw the corner of a bed, a rug, a papered wall and a window, the shade drawn tightly over it.

"Nothing there, eh?" He attacked the wall again, enlarged the opening, crawled through it. He was in Lori's room.

Dust lay thick on the dresser and bedside table. Papers and books were scattered on the desk. He opened the closet door; Lori's clothes hung, dusty, on hangers. He touched a pale blue sweater that Gill had given their daughter on her last birthday.

"Lori," he whispered. "Where are you?"

His eyes fell on a thin-spined book lying on a shelf: a high school

annual. He picked it up, leafed through to the pages where photographs were ranked in rows. Her picture was there among the others, blond and smiling. He tore it out, folded it, put it in his shirt pocket.

He left the room, stepping over the litter of plaster in the hall, automatically careful not to step on it, grinding plaster into the carpet.

“Start at the top,” he told himself. “Check the whole house. See what else is phony about this situation.”

The attic looked as it always had; long rays of early sun slanted through the dusty window on worn carpet, ancient trunks, cardboard cartons filled with unable-to-be-parted-with mementos of past lives: on broken toys, the old brass standing lamps and faded valour furniture. An old frontier Colt .44 in a blackened leather holster hung on a peg. He lifted it down. There were corroded cartridges in the belt. No way of knowing if they would fire; the gun hadn’t been used in twenty years. He loaded the gun, buckled it on.

Room by room, he checked the rest of the house. Everything looked normal, though dusty, the beds untidily made. In the pantry the shelves were crowded with ranked boxes of soap flakes, detergent, cases of dog food, paper napkins—Gill hated them—dietetic fruits, canned hominy and sweet potatoes. On the back porch more cartons were stacked.

He found a half-full bottle of Scotch, poured himself four ounces, neat. It seemed to clear his head a bit. But his body still felt numbed. Like a thumb in the instant after the hammer hits it and before the real pain arrives. On the curled calendar on the wall, the days of November had been x-ed out through the fifteenth.

He went into the living room, looked out through the glass curtains. The orderly street was silent. There were a few cars visible, parked in driveways or at the curb. They looked a little dusty, as if they had been sitting for some time.

Dead leaves lay drifted across the sidewalks and the street in a pattern undisturbed by traffic. He went to the telephone in the hall, lifted the receiver, listened to the steady hum of the dial tone. He dialed O; it rang twenty-five times before he hung up.

He switched on the console TV; after half a minute, static crackled from the speaker. He tuned: a dancing grid of light blanked all channels.

He took a coat from the front closet, went to the back door and looked out at the garden. Morning sunshine lay across dormant flower beds, leafless shrubs, dry grass. A bird twittered in the hedge. He left the house, walked quickly back to the garage. The door was locked. Through the

window, the two-year-old Buick was visible. In the gloom it was hard to be sure, but one front tire seemed almost flat.

Keeping to the shrub line, he crossed to the rear of the Bartlett garden. The house stood high and silent in the morning light. There was a broken window on the ground floor. A light breeze blew a scrap of paper across the dry grass. Beside the walk, green shoots poked up through the black earth. In a few more weeks the daffodils would be blossoming. Mallory went on toward the back door, almost expecting to see Meg Bartlett appear there, plump and aproned, to wave and invite him in for coffee.

A wrongness in something he had seen nagged at him. He stopped and looked back.

Daffodils.

Daffodils didn't appear until March; late February at the earliest. But this was November, wasn't it? Or had time jumped ahead from autumn to spring overnight? *Three months* lost. What had happened during those ninety days?

He didn't know. He couldn't remember.

He went on along the drive, opened the unlatched screen, rapped on the back door. There was no response. He started around to the front of the house.

A heap of old clothes lay in the drive. Closer, he saw that what remained of a man was in the clothes, talonlike hands clawed at the earth; skull-face, leather-covered, teeth bared in a yellow grin. He recognized the curly gray hair: Fred Bartlett, his neighbor of ten years.

Mallory skirted the mummy, went on to the front of the house.

He started off along the sidewalk in the sparse shade of the barren trees. Tall weeds grew across once-immaculate lawns. Formerly shiny cars sat on half-flat tires, their windows opaque with dust. Halfway down the block the bay windows of a brick house gaped black and gutted.

There were clabbered milk bottles on porches. Yellowed envelopes poked from mail boxes. At the corner a dead dog lay in the gutter half covered with leaves, snarling a dessicated snarl. Above the rooftops, the faerie tower loomed against the blue sky.

The school was in the next block. Mallory crossed the silent playground where papers blew across hard-baked earth, entered the building through a shadowy arcade entrance. The doors were unlocked; his footsteps were an intrusion on utter silence. He went along looking at the names lettered over the doors, recognized the name of Randy's teacher. The door stood half open. Inside, papers were scattered over the floor. A

chalk mural on the blackboard was spotty and streaked. A dead geranium stood stiffly in a painted clay pot. Paper turkeys and pilgrims' heads which had been pasted to the windows had come loose and lay on the floor among other clutter. On the desk that Mallory remembered as Randy's lay a battered geography book.

The children weren't here, hadn't been for some time.

3

It was strange to see the downtown streets deserted under the cold midmorning sun. At the corner of Main and Jefferson two empty cars blocked the intersection, their front wheels interlocked in a tangle of metal. There was a broken window in the next block: a liquor store. A few bottles lay scattered in the display window among glass shards; otherwise the stock seemed undisturbed. Mallory started at a sharp *click!*, then saw that the traffic lights were still working.

Three blocks ahead, the street ended in a blank wall of dull black material.

Mallory walked on slowly. The wall was five feet high, running across pavement and lawns, curving away to both sides, shearing through the houses lying in its path. There was no rubble, no disorder; but he could see exposed wallpaper, pictures hanging above beds in rooms sliced open like dollhouses. Two hundred yards beyond the wall the tower stood, its outlines vague as a rainbow. The twenty-acre circle of flat ground enclosed by the wall was as bare and featureless as a concrete slab. There were no visible openings in the tower.

Far away, a siren whooped.

Mallory retreated to the nearest house, flattened himself against the wall in the shelter of a cluster of cedars. A section of the wall swung back, gatelike. The head of a loose column of people appeared, emerging from the enclosure. There were men, women, children. They walked briskly, not talking, streaming out through the gates and off along the street. Many of them were incongruously clothed: a middle-aged woman with unkempt hair walked barefooted in a torn and dirt-streaked formal evening gown; a round-shouldered man stumped along, hugging himself, in a stained bathrobe. One man limped on shoes that had worn completely through, so that the loose uppers flapped about his ankles. All of them looked rumped, bedraggled, threadbare, uniformly thin-faced,

lean, some to the point of emaciation. They looked, Mallory thought, like concentration camp victims marching toward the gas ovens. But Gillian was not among them, nor the children.

The main body passed, followed by a few stragglers. A lone man brought up the rear, trailing fifty feet behind. As he approached Mallory's hiding place, Mallory went forward to intercept him. The man did not look up or halt. Mallory fell in beside him.

"Just a minute, if you don't mind, Mr. Zwicker," he said. "I'd like to talk to you."

"Mallory, isn't it?" the man shot him a keen look. He was an ordinary-looking fellow of middle age, a builder, a customer of the firm. He looked thinner than Mallory remembered. "Have to hurry along," he said. "No time to waste."

"Listen," Mallory said, "have you seen my family? You remember my wife, Gill—"

"I've done my quota," Zwicker said. "And now I'm going home as always, to nourish myself and rest and—"

Mallory caught his arm, spun him around.

"Is she in there?" He nodded toward the tower that loomed over them like a cliff.

Zwicker tried to pry Mallory's fingers loose from his arm.

"You weren't on the docks today," he said accusingly. "I remember, the Watcher found your place empty. That's bad, Mallory. How can we accomplish the Work if each doesn't do his share—"

"Have you seen her? Answer me, damn you!"

"No! No, I haven't! My Work is on the docks! I see no women, not even . . ." Zwicker paused, frowning. "I must go home," he said flatly and tried again to pull away.

"What goes on inside there?" Mallory demanded.

"In the Star Tower?" Zwicker tugged, prying at Mallory's fingers. "We carry on the Work, of course."

"What work?"

Zwicker looked sharply at him. "You're acting like a crazy man, accosting me in the street, asking wild questions—"

"How long has it been there—the tower?"

Zwicker looked at him blankly. "Why—forever, I suppose," he said. "What a curious question!"

"Zwicker, this is all wrong! I want to know what's happened!"

"Nothing whatever," Zwicker yelled. "The sun is shining, night

follows day, we do our Work—all but you! Why are you questioning me? Why are you trying to make trouble?” The man’s eyes slid past Mallory; their expression changed, became vague. Mallory turned. A flat cart had rolled through the gate on silent doughnut wheels. On it squatted two creatures like the one that had invaded his living room.

4

“Well, I must be on my way,” Zwicker said jauntily. “Nice seeing you, Mallory—”

“Zwicker, for God’s sake, what are those things?”

Zwicker shot him a frown. “Mallory, you make me uncomfortable—”

The cart was rolling closer. Mallory thrust Zwicker ahead toward a gap between the bumpers of parked cars. “Through there—run!” he snapped. Zwicker planted his feet, resisting.

“Here, Mallory, let me go!” The cart was approaching swiftly, with a soft humming sound. It was too late now to run for it.

“Quick—into the car!” Mallory yanked a door open, thrust the man in, slid in beside him, under the wheel.

“Keep down!” he whispered as Zwicker lunged for the door handle. Zwicker yelled; Mallory clapped a hand over the man’s mouth; Zwicker kicked out frantically; Mallory hit him on the side of the jaw; he went limp. Quickly, Mallory locked the doors, tried the starter. There was a heavy click, nothing more.

The hum of the cart had grown louder; now it descended the scale and ceased. Mallory watched the two not-men step down from the cart, moving efficiently but somehow wrongly, with a subtle distortion of normal human rhythm and balance. They came up to the car, stood staring in at him through the glass. One wore a tuxedo with a pink carnation in the lapel; the other was in a blue coverall with the name HERB stitched over the pocket. The latter reached for the door handle: the car shook as it tugged. The other sprang lightly to the hood, reached back out of Mallory’s line of vision. There was a sharp ripping sound, and something sharp sliced down through top and head-liner, cut a yard-long incision. An instant later, a parallel cut appeared.

Mallory shook Zwicker; he pulled away, mumbling. Mallory opened the door, thrust it wide, dived, struck shoulder-first, rolled, came to his feet and sprinted for a gap in the hedge.

“Halt,” a resonant voice boomed after him. He cut across a stretch of leaf-strewn lawn, followed the curve of a graveled drive leading toward a colonnaded white house. He heard the shrill whine of the flatcar as it maneuvered swiftly, coming in along the drive. There was another sound: a thinner, more piercing tone. Pain lashed at him. He stumbled headlong toward the trees that lined the way, bounced off the trunk of an ancient elm, went down hard. On his knees, he crawled under the shelter of a line of low-spreading junipers, made his way along it for twenty feet. He heard the flatcar slow to a stop. There were sharp clicks and rasping sounds, then voices.

“ . . . I don’t know,” Zwicker’s thin tenor was saying. “I only want to go to my home and take nourishment and rest—”

“It is necessary for the highest good that you give this information,” a warm, fatherly voice cut in. “Why did the other worker accost you?”

“I don’t know, I only want—”

“It will be necessary to give pain until you remember,” the kindly voice said. Zwicker’s voice broke into a scream that ended in a whimper.

“The runaway worker is damaged,” another voice said, this one a bright young executive type. “There are stains of ichor on the husk of the tree.”

“He will be found,” a society matron gushed. There were sounds of multiple limbs moving across gravel, crunching dry leaves. Mallory got to his feet, keeping to the shelter of trees retreated past the corner of the house. Then he ran.

5

Mallory covered three blocks, cutting across dead lawns, pushing through brittle hedges, without seeing any sign of life, human or alien. He dropped to the ground to recover his breath; in the silence he heard the whine of a flatcar.

It came closer, stopped nearby. There were soft clattering sounds advancing along the driveway. Mallory unholstered the heavy gun, cocked it, leveled it along the drive. An alien appeared, limbs flickering in mincing steps. Mallory took aim at the center of the body, pulled the stiff trigger.

At the solid clack, the alien halted, pivoted swiftly, came across toward him. He pulled the trigger again, double action—

The *boom!* almost kicked the gun from his hand. The alien was on its back, limbs scything air. Mallory came to his feet as a second creature appeared at the foot of the drive.

“Worker, halt!” a boyish voice called in a tone of warm congratulation.

Mallory fired and, without waiting to see the effect, ran for the alley behind the house.

In half a block he knew he had made a mistake. His wind was gone; his legs ached, his head was swimming. The three lost months had robbed him of his conditioning.

There was a garage ahead, a converted stable, fronting on the alley, its door secured by a massive, rusty padlock. Mallory staggered to a halt, steadied himself, fired twice into the lock, the *boom-boom!* of the gun racketing deafeningly between the hedgerows. He twisted the shattered mechanism from the heavy hasp, hurled the door wide.

A late-model convertible sat in the gloom; two bright-edged holes marred the smooth curve of the deck lid where his shots had penetrated. He pulled the door open, slid into the seat, twisted the key. After an instant’s hesitation the starter ground over sluggishly. He pumped the gas pedal; abruptly, the engine caught, barked, roared into life. Mallory slammed the car into reverse, backed out, cutting hard, then gunning forward toward the street ahead. He swung left, caught a glimpse of the flatcar in the middle of the street to his left, one alien squatting on it, another coming toward it. He floorboarded the gas pedal, hit sixty in the next block. A strong odor of gasoline blew past his face. The engine bucked, surged ahead, sputtered, stopped. As the car coasted to a halt, a cart bearing three aliens rolled into view around the corner a block and a half ahead.

Mallory vaulted over the side, crawled backward, keeping low, gained the shelter of a hedge. The cart rolled to a halt beside the car. Two aliens scrambled down, approached the stalled vehicle. When they were beside it, Mallory took out his cigarette lighter, snapped it alight, tossed it toward the dark puddle forming under the bullet-punctured gas tank. There was an explosive *whump!*, and fire boomed up to envelope the car in roaring heat. An alien ran across to the left, burning from heels to crown, leaving fiery footprints across the dead grass, disappeared between the houses. Mallory jumped up, ran straight away from the car toward the big frame house. There was a harsh *buzz*, and the lawn ahead and to his left exploded into roiling dust. He veered right onto the graveled drive. As he approached the corner of the house, it burst in a whine of flying splinters.

A spiked hand caught him, sent him spinning. He was only half conscious of struggling to his feet, stumbling toward the breached wall. He pulled himself up and through the opening, into the gloom of a curtained living room. The blast had brought down plaster, filled the air with swirling dust. Mallory made his way past a toppled purple divan, stepped over a framed picture fallen from the wall, was in a dark hallway. Stairs led upward. He mounted them, one at a time, as if carrying a heavy burden. Behind him he heard a soft clacking and scraping; one of the aliens was entering the house through the same opening he had used. He reached for the gun, felt only the empty holster. There was a fiery pain in his left arm just below the shoulder.

In the upper hall he halted, breathing hard. There was a high, humming sound in his head. He could hear the alien moving about below. There was a closet door beside him.

With a half-formed thought of hiding, he opened it. It was crowded with cardboard cartons, garments, loose articles: tennis rackets, a pair of water skis, scuba tanks, a spear gun.

Mallory eased the lightweight weapon from its place. Two steel tube darts were clipped in a retainer below the guide channel. He held the gun between his knees, dropped the dart into the slot, then, bracing the butt of the stock against his thigh, cranked the spring-loaded cocking lever back. It caught with a sharp *snick!*, and at once the sounds from below ceased.

Then they resumed: a rhythmic *rasp, click; rasp, click*. Mallory braced himself against the wall, the spear gun leveled at the head of the stairs ten feet away. The head of the creature appeared, then the upper body, dressed in a flowered aloha shirt. It saw him, paused at the head of the stairs. He aimed at the middle shirt button and pulled the trigger.

There was a sharp *thwack!* of the mechanism, the stiff jolt of the recoil. Six inches of bright steel stood quivering against the bright-patterned chest. Mallory realized quite suddenly that the "shirt" was not a garment; it was a part of the not-man's body, molded with it . . .

For a full five seconds, neither Mallory or the alien moved. Then the creature stirred, leaned sideways, took quick, tiny steps as if to catch its balance. Its legs folded bonelessly. With a jarring series of impacts it tumbled backward down the stairs.

The electric clock on the wall hummed loudly. Somewhere in the old house a board creaked. Mallory felt a hot trickle across his left hand. His sleeve was wet, heavy as a plaster cast. Blackness was rising up inside. His head felt huge and hot. His arm burned with a dull fire.

He skirted the dead thing at the foot of the stair, went on into the living room, peered out past the edge of the drawn curtains at the empty road. There were no people in sight, no aliens, no movement except the restless stir of the unpruned shrubbery below the window.

It took him an hour to search the house. There was another corpse in an upstairs bedroom, a woman with gray hair. He found a .22 automatic pistol in a dresser drawer, took it and a box of hollow-point shells. The medicine cabinet in the bathroom yielded iodine, aspirin, a roll of gauze. Back in the kitchen, he drew the blinds, lit the gas range for heat and a faint light. He drew a pan of warm water, removed the bandages from his arm, carefully washed the wounds. There were splinters bedded deep in the flesh. He withdrew one, starting fresh bleeding. He used a heavy linen napkin from the sideboard to bind the arm, then ripped a tablecloth to form a sling. Afterward, he checked the refrigerator. It was still running, but the butter and cheese and vegetables were mounds of dessicated corruption. There was a small steak in the freezer unit. He found a skillet, put it on the gas, opened cans of peas and corn. Sitting at the table, he ate, forcing himself not to think of Gill, of what might have happened to her, of the children, perhaps at home now alone.

They had survived for three months. They'd be all right for a little longer. They had to be all right. Going back now wouldn't help them. He had to get clear of Beatrice, find help, come back with force behind him

A thing like this couldn't be a secret. Alien invasion: an idea that had been talked about for a century but never really believed in. And now it was here. And why wasn't the Army or the Air Force hitting back?

There would be reasons, but without information he couldn't hope to deduce them. The facts he had were meager. He had been a Worker like everyone else; that was clear enough from the clothes, from the calluses on his hands, from what Gill and Zwicker had said. But something had brought him out of the trancelike state that gripped the others. What? How was he different?

He tried to remember the last days . . . before. Early November was clear enough. The tenth—he remembered that. There had been the quarterly payment on the plant mortgage. He remembered signing the check. All right, that narrowed it down. Then what? There had been the conference with the chain-store clients; that had been on a Monday

There was a calendar on the wall; Monday had fallen on the seventeenth and the twenty-fourth. Which had it been? There had been something . . . a trip. They had talked about a visit to the parent company's home office, up north. He had planned to drive, because . . .

It was something to do with the Old House; he had meant to take the opportunity to stop by, check on things.

Abruptly, he was thinking of Lori. He remembered that he had invited her to go along on the trip. But she had had other plans—a visit—a friend who lived outside the city

Hodges. Sally Hodges. The Hodges house was about twelve miles out, on the state road. And Lori had been there when *they* came. That was why she wasn't at home, hadn't been caught with the others. She was safe. Safe. And tomorrow he'd find her

The stairs were too steep to climb again. Mallory settled himself in a chair in the living room, covered himself with a throw rug, and slept.

7

During the next day flatcars passed close to the house twice. Mallory watched them from an upstairs window. They showed no interest in the house. He slept, ate. By nightfall he felt well enough to travel. He donned a fleece-lined coat he had found in the hall closet, filled the pockets with canned goods and dried fruit, bottled soda water. He left via the back door, crossed the untended garden. He was dizzy and light-headed; but his legs felt as if they would support him for a while. He came onto the blacktop, started off along the dark road.

A hundred yards from his starting point, a burned-out tank rested on its side in the ditch. So the Army had fought-and lost. He plodded on, head down against the chill wind, headed north into the dark countryside.

Chapter 3

1

Mallory remembered the Hodges house as a pleasant old brick structure, steep-roofed, gingerbread-trimmed, built among century-old elms at the crest of a low hill half a mile off the highway. It looked gaunt and forbidding in the pale dawn light when he crawled over the fence and came up across the pasture. There were lights in two of the windows.

As he came up along the driveway, no one moved behind the curtains, no eager farm dogs leaped forth to bark a greeting. Three pickup trucks were parked on the rutted grass before the wide porch, and a heavy-laden convertible behind them. As Mallory reached the steps, the lights inside went out.

He halted. Air sighed through the branches overhead. A stick cracked somewhere in the darkness off to the left side of the house.

"Hello, anybody there?" Mallory called. There was no answer. He thought he heard a faint sound which might have been the hammer of a gun coming back to full cock.

"I'm a refugee from the city," he said. "I need help."

The bushes shook; a big, broad, heavy-looking man stepped into view, holding a shotgun ready.

"Get down on your knees and put your hands on the ground," he ordered brusquely.

"I'm unarmed," Mallory said.

"Better move fast. I'd as soon blow your guts out as look at ye."

Mallory looked at the loose-mouthed, unshaven face, the bristly black hair tufted under the rim of a new-looking yachting cap with an elaborate gold badge.

"Don't be a fool," he said. "Do I look like an alien?"

"You're a spy." The man fingered the gun, coming forward slowly. "A damned, sneaking spy!"

"Lonny, you damn fool! Can't you see he's hurt?" A woman, heavy-hipped, bundlesome in a mackinaw, had come up behind the man.

"He'll hurt some more 'fore I'm done with him—"

"Sure, shoot off that twelve-gauge and let everybody inside five miles know we're here!"

"I'll just stomp him." Lonny advanced, his teeth showing white in the

pearly light.

“Has it occurred to you that we need every man we can find?” a quiet, elderly voice said from the background.

Lonny thumbed the safety off, squinted down the barrel at Mallory’s face.

“Where’s Frank Hodges?” Mallory asked.

Lonny lowered the gun, grinning. “I forgot,” he said. “I aimed to stomp ye.”

A girl appeared behind the big man. She was young, pretty, with a pale, big-eyed face, dark hair tied under a scarf.

“It’s Mr. Mallory,” she gasped. She came forward. “Mr. Mallory—how . . . what . . .”

Lonny’s big hand caught her, pushed her roughly away. The big woman caught her half protectively, half angrily. “Lonny, I told you to keep your hands off her,” she snapped. “And you can forget about busting this fellow.” She tilted her head toward Mallory. “Sally knows him, that’s plain. And like the Professor said, we can use an extra hand here.”

“He could still be a spy,” Lonny snorted, but he stood by passively as the big woman and the girl led Mallory into the house.

2

There was a fire in the fireplace, a kerosene lamp on the table. The girl brought a tray with hot soup and coffee to Mallory as he sat at the kitchen table. “Lori was here when it started,” she said. “Then men came here, soldiers. They shot Father. Lori and I got away into the woods. We were separated. I haven’t seen her since.”

“How long ago?”

“We were together for a week. So it’s been about three months. She was all right when I saw her last. When I came back, the soldiers were gone. The house was empty. I don’t know where Mother is.”

“Sally—what are the—the *things* in the city? Where do they come from?”

Sally looked puzzled. “I don’t know what you mean.”

The Professor came into the room. He was a gray-haired, worried-looking man wrapped in a muffler. The tip of his nose was red with cold.

“You spoke of ‘things’ in town, sir,” he said. “You refer to the enemy troops, I assume?”

Mallory described the simulacra. Sally and the old man listened silently. "They have a kind of hypnotic control over the people who work for them," he finished. "They walk and talk and feed themselves, but that's about all."

"You say you worked for the, ah, creatures for three months?"

"I must have. I have no memory of it."

"Why is it you weren't affected by this hypnosis you speak of?"

"I assume I was affected—for a while. Then I came out of it."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

The Professor nodded. "You've had a difficult time of it. You need rest and care—"

"You don't believe me."

"I have no doubt you're quite sincere, sir, but it's apparent you've suffered hallucinations. It's not surprising, considering what you've been through, alone with your dead in the ruins of a deserted city—"

"It's not deserted, and it's not in ruins. It's been taken over. It's easy enough to check. But where's the Army, the police? Why isn't anyone doing anything?"

"There's been a war," the elderly man said coolly. "A short war—one which the United States failed to win. The country has been invaded. We're under occupation by Soviet troops."

3

The elderly man, whose name was Jarvis and who was a general practitioner from the nearby town of Minneapolis, Nebraska, pulled up a chair and tamped tobacco into a clay pipe.

"I can't help wondering what you did in the city these last months, Mr. Mallory. How did you survive?"

"I've already told you, Dr. Jarvis," Mallory said.

"Your story still sounds reasonable to you in the light of what I've said?"

"I didn't say it sounded reasonable. Just that it's true."

"Mr. Mallory—you've elaborated a fantasy to spare yourself the shame of defeat by the Communists, to give yourself hope that your wife and children are merely captives, rather than dead—"

"I know what I saw."

“Have you any proof?”

“Why would I concoct such a story?”

“We’ve all been through a terrible experience,” Jarvis said softly. “Some of us survived in one way, some in another. Some by physical flight, some by a fugue of another sort.”

“We’re only twelve miles from Beatrice. Haven’t any of you ventured near enough to see that the city’s intact?”

“There’s an epidemic there, Mr. Mallory.”

“What about the tower? You should be able to see it from here.”

“Tower?”

“It’s half a mile high, luminous green.”

“You mean the searchlight?” Jarvis raised his wispy eyebrows.

“I mean the tower. They’ve cleared away the houses in a quarter-mile radius around it. It’s their headquarters, that’s where the workroom is, where Gillian is.”

“Mr. Mallory, the Russians have set up a big beacon light in the city,” Sally said diffidently. “You can see it shining at night—”

“The light is invisible in the daylight, of course,” Jarvis said.

“You’ve got an answer for everything.”

“Tell me, sir—since your awakening, as you put it, have you yourself had any doubts as to the reality of what you saw?”

“Of course I had doubts. Who wouldn’t? The aliens aren’t easy to believe in, even when you’ve seen one. But after they’ve shot at you, they’re hard to ignore.”

“You had no gunshot wound, Mr. Mallory. Only lacerations, apparently caused by a piece of wood. There were splinters in the wounds. I suspect you had a fall, probably in a damaged house. Looking back, can you see any small discrepancies, any objects or creatures which changed their aspect from time to time? Anything miraculous, logically impossible?”

“The door to Lori’s room,” Mallory said reluctantly. “It was sealed over. I had to cut my way in with an ax.”

“I submit that you sealed away the memory of your lost daughter, Mr. Mallory. But behind a mental barrier, not one of lath and plaster.”

“I tell you I chopped my way through it! It was solid . . . but not lath and plaster. It was like layers of gray tissue paper.”

“To a trained psychiatrist, I’m sure all these symbolisms would be significant,” Jarvis said. “I’m no more than an amateur dabbler in the subject; but I’ve done a bit of reading. I feel sure that if you returned to

your house—assuming you weren't haunting a ruin—you'd find a perfectly normal door shattered to splinters by your ax. In fact"—Jarvis' tone grew minutely animated—"that may be precisely how you acquired the wounds, forcing your way in—"

"Next you'll be telling me Lori doesn't exist. That's what Gill said. But Sally knows her. Explain that away."

"I'm sure your fantasy is built on some basis of facts. I'm merely trying to help you strip away the facade of illusion—"

"Maybe you shouldn't, Dr. Jarvis," Sally said. "Maybe he's better off believing—something."

Jarvis looked skeptical. "Believing in alien monsters? I doubt if that concept will prove to be more comforting in the long run than the reality that the Russians launched a surprise attack and won the war."

"They haven't really won," Sally said. "They must be as badly off as we are. I haven't seen a Russian soldier in months. And they haven't bothered us here. Not since the first day."

"We're too close to the plague city. And in any event—what do we have they might want? They have the cities to loot. But they'll get around to us in time, I dare say."

"Have you actually seen these Russians?" Mallory asked. "Are you sure you're not making them up?"

"Of course I've seen them. Paratroopers, dropping out of the sky. There was heavy fighting south of Minneapolis; that was why I ran away."

"I saw them, too, as close as you are," Sally said. "I'll never forget them, those baggy uniforms, and the captain with his red shoulder boards, and their strange smell, the language they spoke—"

"Don't reopen the wound," Jarvis patted her shoulder. "You promised not to think of all that, eh?"

"Why here?" Mallory asked. "What military objective is there in Nebraska?"

"Possibly some secret base, a missile launching site, who knows?"

"What does the radio say about all this? Television? Isn't there any news?"

"No news. No television. The radio comes alive now and then, mostly in Russian. I'm afraid I don't understand the language."

The back door banged open. Lonny, coming in from outside with an armload of firewood, stared at Mallory. He thrust the door shut with his foot and dumped the wood on the floor. "Carry that into the fireplace. Then go out there and cut more."

“Not with that arm, Lonny,” Jarvis spoke up.

The heavy woman, Mae, appeared at that point to second him. Lonny went away, muttering.

“I suggest you mend as quickly as possible,” the medical man advised Mallory. “Our Lonny is a hypochondriac; he tends to tolerate me for that reason. But he’s also one of the laziest men alive. He even tried to force Sally to chop the wood for him.”

“Lonny ain’t so bad when you know how to handle him,” Mae said, sitting down heavily across from Mallory and tucking back a lock of graying hair. “He ain’t right bright, and he’s yellor, so he’s gotta be bullied. But he ain’t no more’n a big overgrown kid in some ways.”

After eating, Mallory and Sally went out into the yard. The barn door hung in pieces from its hinges, shattered by some winter storm. There were no animals in sight. The place had a forlorn, decayed air. A season of neglect had done more to destroy the image of peace and order than three-quarters of a century of use.

A huge oak in front of the house had had all of its lower limbs lopped off: one of the sources of Lonny’s firewood. Mallory investigated the three pickup trucks. All were new, with shiny paint under the mud, dealers’ plates still attached. They were loaded with merchandise: a red plush divan, heaps of cheap, new clothing, boxed shoes, kitchen appliances, hand tools, television sets—Mallory counted three in one truck, four in another. Everything was rain-spotted and rust-stained, the thin veneer on the TV cabinets peeling from weeks of exposure to the elements. The convertible’s interior, though obviously new, was musty and mold-grown, soaked with rain. Sodden leaves were packed in the front seat and over the fur coats and fishing rods and shotguns in the rear.

“There were two other men here with Lonny and Mae when they first came,” Sally told Mallory. “They’d been looting all along the way here, loading up and then throwing things away to make room for more. They made trips every day for a week or so after they got here. The house is full of things. After a while they got tired of it.”

“What happened to the other two men?”

“There was a fight. Lonny beat them up. I haven’t seen them since.”

“When did Jarvis arrive?”

“About a month ago. Lonny almost shot him, but he called out that he was a doctor. That saved him. Lonny is deathly afraid of getting sick.”

“Why did you stay after they came?”

“Where else was there to go?”

“What about those towns where Lonny and his friends gathered in their prizes? Aren’t there any people there?”

“No. I went into two towns while I was on my own, after I ran away. I saw some dead bodies, not many. Everything was intact, just deserted.”

Mallory turned as a door banged; heavy footsteps clumped on the porch; Lonny stood there, rubbing his mouth with the back of his hand. He scratched his stomach, then slouched down the steps and across toward Mallory and the girl.

“I been thinking,” he said. “Get on out back the house and cut up that kindling.”

“He’s not well enough yet, Lonny,” Sally said quickly. “Dr. Jarvis said —”

“What I care what that dried-up old man said?” Lonny cut her off. “I told ye to git, dude: now git!” The big man started toward Mallory.

“Lonny, stop!” Sally jumped in front of him. Lonny seized her as if to throw her down, then hesitated, obviously struck by a new thought. He pulled her close, his loose mouth searching for hers.

There was a broken ax-handle lying near the trimmed twigs from the woodcutting. Mallory caught it up, stepped up behind Lonny, raised the heavy billet one-handed and brought it down across the man’s head with a sound like a dropped pumpkin. Lonny tottered two steps, went to his knees. Mallory walked around him, took careful aim, and hit him again, at the base of the neck. Lonny went down hard on his face. Mallory threw the club aside.

“I’ve had all the Lonny I can take,” he said.

Sally came to him, clung to him, her body trembling. Mallory held her, made soothing sounds.

“But what will happen when he comes to? Your arm—”

“I’m leaving,” he said.

“Where will you go?”

“I don’t know. Lincoln or Omaha. Somewhere there has to be some kind of organization, some troops holed up, something.”

“Jeff—are you *sure* about what happened back there in town?”

“You believe Jarvis? You think I’m crazy?”

“It isn’t a question of being crazy, Jeff. Just that under stress sometimes people see things that aren’t there. You know it can happen. It’s one of the mind’s defenses. It’s no disgrace—”

“When do I start believing? Now? Did I really give Lonny a concussion? Did Jarvis tell me the Russians have taken over the country? Are you

real? Or am I imagining this, too?"

"I'm real, Jeff. Don't ever doubt that."

He looked down into her face. She pressed against him, warm and alive

He let her go, stepped back.

"My God, Sally, you're my daughter's friend, I'm old enough to be . . .

"His voice trailed off, unequal to the cliché.

"I'm nineteen, Jeff. I'm a woman. Certainly Lori's my friend, but that doesn't . . . doesn't . . . " It was her turn to falter.

"Sally, you're a very lovely girl—woman, if you prefer. I'm twice your age. Don't think I don't find you desirable: I do. That's the trouble. I—"

"Things have changed, Jeff. Three months ago you were just a nice middle-aged man, young-looking, but worlds away from me. Now . . . it's different. Maybe it's instinct. I don't want one of those thin-legged mop-haired boys. I want a man. Someone who'll take care of me. Someone like you."

"Sally, all this will end some day, and everything will be back to normal—"

"Do you really believe that, Jeff?"

"What would you have me do, Sally? Pretend it was all a dream and settle down here with Lonny and Mae and start enjoying a lot of leisure time?"

"Jeff," Sally took his hands. "If it's the way you say it is—what can you do alone?"

"I don't know. I have to try." Mallory looked at the pickup trucks, walked over to the nearest, a pale blue Dodge, circled it, looking at the tires. Sally came up to him, took his arm.

"I'm going with you," she said.

"Don't be silly. You belong here."

"With Lonny and Mae?"

"Dr. Jarvis is here," Mallory said.

"We'd better dump this stuff out of the back," Sally said and swung up on the side of the truck. Mallory hesitated for a moment: then he clambered up over the tailgate and awkwardly, one-handedly, began tumbling television sets over the side.

They left half an hour later, with the truck loaded lightly with food and camping equipment. Mae and Jarvis watched from the porch as they drove away. Nobody waved.

Chapter 4

1

They drove until dark, cruising at thirty miles an hour along empty roads. Three times they passed military vehicles stalled in the road. Two were Russian, one American. There were no bodies around them, no sign of battle. It was as though they had run out of gas. They passed through the town of Hickman, desolate and deserted in the twilight. A few miles beyond, they pulled off the road into a stand of hickory trees. Sally helped Mallory inflate air mattresses, rig a tarpaulin over the bed of the truck.

“It’s too bad they don’t make double sleeping bags,” Sally said. “I want to sleep close to you. I want to know you’re there.”

“I’ll be here, Sally,” Mallory said.

“Jeff, tell me about yourself. I want to know all about you.”

“Where should I begin? With my exciting childhood in the orphanage?”

“Oh, Jeff—were you really . . . ?”

“It wasn’t exactly an orphanage. More of a paying home for a few lucky lads who didn’t happen to have families. It wasn’t bad. We were well fed and clothed, and the school was good. But it was all a bit impersonal.”

“Don’t you have any family at all?”

“No. Not unless you want to count Uncle Al.” Mallory laughed briefly.

“Tell me about him.”

“He used to come to see me. He was a big man with a big moustache and strange, colorful clothes, smoking a cigar with a wonderful smell. He’d tell me stories—all about a marvelous old house that he was going to take me to some day. I’d get all excited about it. And then I’d wake up.”

“Oh! You mean . . . ?”

“Uncle Al was just a dream.”

“Jeff . . .” She clung tightly to him. “But I’m no dream. I’m real—and I’m here.”

“Yes,” Mallory said. “And . . . I’m glad you are, Sally. Very glad . . .”

The next day they pushed on to the north through Johnson and Otoe counties, passing deserted farms, deserted towns. South of Lincoln they found the road blocked by a jumble of wrecked vehicles, a pileup in the dark, Mallory guessed. There were half a dozen dirt mounds in the field

beside the road; graves, hastily dug and untended.

They backtracked, detoured to the east. Just before noon, under a wet, gray sky, they came into the outskirts of the village of Alvo, drove along the potholed main street, pulled into a formerly prosperous-looking Shell station now overgrown with weeds springing up through cracks in the pavement. Half a dozen cars were parked beside it. Mallory cut a six-foot length from a plastic hose to siphon fuel from the tank of a heavy, dusty Cadillac, took a can of oil from a stack by the pumps. He wiped the truck's windshield, examined the tires, then broke open the door to the women's toilet for Sally.

There was a display of firearms in a sporting goods store across the street. The door was locked, but Mallory broke it open with a kick. Inside, he helped himself to a .32-caliber Browning automatic pistol in a black leather shoulder holster. He buckled an ammunition belt around his waist, opened a box of fat brass cartridges and filled the loops, dumped the rest of the box in his pocket. As an afterthought he picked up a tiny German-made .25 Mauser, filled the magazine and a spare, slipped it into his watch pocket. He exchanged his soiled coat for a lightweight fleece-lined leather windbreaker, took a pair of pigskin driving gloves, added a sheath knife and a small flashlight. Leaving the store, a display of shoes caught his eye. He spent another five minutes selecting a pair of tough cordovan climbing boots and heavy wool socks.

"You look ready for anything now," Sally said admiringly.

"And we'll probably meet it," Mallory said.

They drove through the town, the roar of the engine racketing between silent facades, shattering the utter stillness. They passed the last scattering of hamburger joints and cut-rate service stations, slowed for a railroad underpass followed by a sharp turn. As Mallory swung the corner, a man stepped into the road fifty yards ahead. He wore a baggy gray tunic and khaki pants, a flat cap with red band. The submachine gun in his hands was aimed squarely at the windshield of the truck. Mallory braked to a stop twenty feet from the man. More soldiers emerged from concealment in the brown growth of weed.

"Russians," Sally whispered.

the holstered automatic, sauntered forward, a cigarette between his lips. He had a wide mouth, eyes that were narrowed to slits, sandy hair that needed cutting. A couple of unimportant-looking medals were pinned to his stained tunic. He stood by the truck, looking it over, looking Mallory over, peering expression-lessly at Sally.

“Get out, please,” he said in a conversational tone and stepped back a pace. “Put both hands over your head.”

Mallory and the girl climbed down. They stood in the road, waiting. The men came up, glanced at them, checked the back of the truck. At a nod from the officer, one of the men searched them, took Mallory’s .32.

“I am Lieutenant Brozhny,” the officer said. “Who are you, where do you come from?” He had only a faint Slavonic accent.

“I’m a civilian. Mallory is the name. This is Miss Hodges. We came from near Beatrice.”

“How near?”

“Twelve miles.”

“Why did you leave? The sickness?”

“There isn’t any sickness.”

“You are aware this area has been designated off limits?”

“I could see it was deserted.”

“You do not believe in following orders issued by competent authority?”

“I never heard of the orders.”

“The woman is your wife? Mistress?”

“Mistress,” Sally said promptly, taking Mallory’s arm.

The officer pursed his lips thoughtfully. “What did you observe in the vicinity of Beatrice?” He shifted his gaze from Mallory to Sally, back again, watching their expressions. Sally pressed Mallory’s arm warningly.

“Nothing,” he said.

The officer nodded as if this were the answer he had expected.

“I must ask you to accompany me to my headquarters,” he said. “This is a matter for the colonel to deal with.”

“You don’t have to arrest us. I told you we were noncombatants; and I *want* to see your colonel.”

“There are no noncombatants,” the lieutenant said. “Please get into your vehicle. One of my men will drive.”

Mallory and Sally climbed into the cab. A grinning, thick-featured youth with a goaty odor pushed in under the wheel, started up with a grinding of the starter gears. Fifty feet along the road a six-by-six Stude-

baker truck rolled out from the shelter of a tattered and sagging billboard. The other men swarmed aboard it.

The pickup did a U-turn and followed the bigger truck back toward the town limits of Crete. They drove through the three-block business district, past another block of houses of diminishing grandeur, turned left into a farm road. It led for a mile across flat prairie. As it topped a rise, Mallory saw a vast encampment spread across the fields below. There were acres of tents, miles of muddy catwalks, score of Jeeps, trucks, command cars, some bearing the white star of the U. S. Army, some the red Soviet star, men by the hundreds. They pulled up beside a large farmhouse near the center of the camp under a stand of sycamores.

Sally held his hand as they climbed down, followed the Russian officer toward the house. The men standing by stared at the girl as they passed. The lieutenant conducted them through a former living room from which all the furniture had been removed with the exception of half a dozen straight chairs and a library table where a uniformed girl sat typing. A large map of the state and the adjoining area was taped to the wall. Colored pins were stuck on the map in no discernible pattern.

“Wait here,” Brozhny said and went through a door and closed it behind him.

Through the curtainless windows men could be seen wandering across the yard.

“They don’t seem to be worried about the American prisoners causing any trouble,” Sally said. “They let them wander around loose, not even guarded.”

The door opened; the lieutenant beckoned. Mallory and Sally went through into the next room. It was a former parlor; there was dark wall-paper, a shiny sofa. Behind a large desk a man lounged in a swivel chair, playing with a pencil held in blunt fingers. He was big, with a tough, square face, short-cut reddish hair: he wore a green uniform with three rows of ribbons and the silver eagles of a U. S. colonel.

3

In dead silence, he looked at Mallory and the girl.

“I’m Colonel Strang,” he said. “Brozhny tells me you claim to have come from near Beatrice. That right?”

Mallory nodded. “Clear up one point for me, will you, Colonel?”

Who's in charge? You or the Russians?"

Strang stared at him. Brozhny laughed.

"You thought the dreaded Reds had invaded Nebraska?" the lieutenant inquired in an amused tone.

"Invaded, hell," Strang said and laughed without humor. "We invited them in. They're our allies. We've been invaded, all right—but not by Russia."

"I'm glad you realize that," Mallory said. "Nobody believed my description. I was about to be convinced I was seeing things."

"What are you talking about, man?" Strang frowned up at Mallory.

"I'm talking about the creatures that have taken over Beatrice."

"Creatures?"

"You said you knew we'd been invaded."

"And so we have," Strang said grimly. "By the Chinese Communists."

4

"They hit us on the morning of the twenty-third of November," Strang said. "A day that will live in infamy beside Pearl Harbor and the sinking of the *Maine*. We underestimated the Chinks; underestimated them badly. They had stuff we'd never dreamed of. They came dropping straight in from extreme altitude at velocities our radar people couldn't believe. We launched everything we had—and they picked it out of the air. The Air Force scrambled—but there was nothing for the fighters to fight, and the bombers were called back when word came down on the Hotline that it wasn't the Russians. Then our radar went out. All of it, all at once. But we knew where they were grouped. We poured in the firepower: low-level bombers, strafers, armor. None of it got anywhere. Aircraft went out of control and crashed. Vehicles stopped dead. Guns wouldn't fire. That was when we called in the Red Army. And then, of course, the Sickness hit us. We had to pull back and regroup."

"Is the fighting still going on?"

Strang frowned. "There hasn't actually been any fighting, as such. The Chinks are an elusive enemy. We can't even make contact, dammit!" The colonel's fist hit the desk. "But we've got 'em stalled, bogged down. They bit off too much. They can't chew it."

"That was three months ago," Mallory said. "What's happened since?"

"We've taken advantage of the lull to consolidate our positions,

prepare our counterattack.”

“If you haven’t made contact, how do you know it’s the Chinese?”

“Who else would it be?” Strang came back. “And how is it you know nothing of all this?”

“He’s been sick,” Sally spoke up quickly. “He’s had amnesia.”

Strang grunted. “You claim you were near Beatrice. You saw nothing?”

“I haven’t seen any signs of the Chinese,” Mallory said carefully.

Strang nodded. “What did you do in civilian life, Mr. Mallory?”

“I’m an engineer.”

“Good.” Strang nodded. “I need engineers. I need everything I can get, but qualified men most of all. Mallory, I’m prepared to offer you a commission in my army.”

“Your army?”

Strang gave him a hard stare. “That’s what I said. I raised it, I provision it, I give the orders. *My* army.”

“What does Washington say to all this?”

“Not a damned thing,” Strang said softly. “Or Moscow either. Better readjust your thinking, Mr. Mallory. The old organization is gone. Communications are gone, and with them the old government, the old economy. The sooner you realize that, the better chance you’ll have of surviving under the new conditions.”

“What’s happened to all the people?”

“I took the able-bodied ones, of course. The rest have been evacuated outside my perimeter. Why?”

“I just wondered how they fit into the new order.”

“Forget them, Mallory. There are matters of more immediate concern. As an officer, you’ll have the best, of course. I’ve scoured the countryside stockpiling supplies. You’ll find we live pretty well here. Not that we’re settling into complacency. Let the enemy get that impression. All the better when I’m ready to make my move. They’ve put their necks into a noose, concentrating as they have. Panicked, no doubt, after their first unexpected successes. Like the Japs after Pearl Harbor: they’d wiped out the U.S. Navy and didn’t know what to do next.” Strang rose, paced across the room and turned. “Damned shame you saw nothing in the Beatrice area. I need intelligence, Mallory—need it badly! I’d give my left arm to know what the yellow bastards are up to!” He smacked his fist into his palm. “But with it or without it, I intend to hit them with everything I’ve got—and wipe the city of Beatrice off the map!”

“Colonel—there are no Chinese in Beatrice,” Mallory said.

Strang swung to face him. “And how would you know?”

“I was there—two days ago.”

Strang walked around behind his desk and seated himself. He opened a drawer and took out an automatic pistol, laid it on the desk before him.

“Tell it from the beginning, Mallory. This time tell it all.”

Mallory gave a terse account of everything that had happened from the moment of his awakening until his departure from the city. When he finished, Strang eyed him disgustedly.

“Your brains are scrambled,” he said flatly.

“Colonel, try to keep an open mind, consider what I’m telling you. Everything you’ve said fits in with what I’ve told you—”

“Poppycock!”

“Have you seen a Chinese soldier? Even a corpse?” Mallory demanded.

“I’ve explained to you—”

“You’re wrong! There are thousands of people trapped in Beatrice. You can’t bomb the city, Colonel. It would be mass murder!”

Strang drew a breath as if to yell, let it out slowly. “Mr. Mallory, you’ve had a bad time of it,” he said flatly. “It’s affected your mind. I can understand that. You were away from home when the attack came, you returned to find the city barred to you, your family dead. You couldn’t take it; your mind snapped under the strain and you invented these zombies of yours to enable you to believe your wife and children are still living. I’m sorry for you, but I can’t let that interfere with military necessity. I need men—and women. I need them badly.” Strang glanced across at Brozhny. “I can’t see that his delusions will prevent him from performing basic military duties, Lieutenant. Put him in D Company, First Battalion. And keep an eye on him.”

“Just a minute, Strang—”

“That’s Colonel Strang to you, *Private!*”

“Colonel, I don’t have time to play soldier in your private army. My family’s in that town—”

“Forget it,” Strang said. “You’re not going anywhere.” He lifted the pistol as Mallory took a step toward him. “I’m warning you for the last time, Private. The penalty for mutiny is the firing squad.”

“The colonel is quite serious,” Brozhny said and took Mallory’s arm. “Come along. You’re not the first man to be drafted into the army in wartime.”

The barracks was a former cow barn, converted to troop use by the addition of a floor of raw-looking plywood and the installation of assorted beds, ranging from antique four-posters to brand-new Sears, Roebuck camping cots. Men in uniforms, both Russian and American, looked Mallory over as Brozhny conducted him to a stained and lumpy mattress on a makeshift frame at the far end of the long room. The odor of the former occupants was, if possible, stronger here than in the rest of the building.

“What about the girl?” Mallory asked. “What’s Strang got in mind for her?”

“Speak with more respect of the good colonel,” Brozhny said softly. “For your own safety.”

“Lieutenant, do you believe me?”

“I’m sorry, no. I have no belief in walking department store dummies who operate a factory—”

“But you believe in an invisible army of Chinese fanatics who suddenly learn enough space technology to launch thousand-man transports high enough to make a deep-space approach and soft-land in the middle of the country? Who ignore military objectives to capture a prairie town? Who consolidate their victory by bunching up to make a perfect target and then sit there and wait for Strang’s next move?”

“There are many things about this curious war which puzzle me, Mr. Mallory. But I find your story even more puzzling. Why should intelligent aliens behave in this way, any more than Chinese? Why were you alone immune to their control? Why have none of the rest of us seen such creatures?”

“Brozhny,” Mallory said urgently, “get me out of this Boy Scout camp. If I can find a clue to what’s going on, prove that I’m telling the truth—”

“It’s out of the question,” the Russian said. “The colonel is right in one thing: we need every man.”

“For what? To sit here on this broken-down farm and play soldier?”

“We are gathering force, readying ourselves,” the Russian said. “When the time comes, we will launch our counterattack.”

“You think a mob of foot soldiers can do what the whole Army and Air Force—U. S. and Russian—couldn’t do?”

“As the colonel said—we have plans, Mr. Mallory. Be patient.”

A lean, craggy-faced, big-fisted man in U.S. greens with a technical sergeant's chevrons strolled up, looking Mallory over with his lip lifted to show yellow horse teeth. Brozhny made brief introductions and left. The sergeant propped his fists on his hips and squinted his eyes at Mallory.

"You and the Russki are pals, hey?" He spat on the floor in the general direction of the door. "Well, the sweet talk's over. You're in the Army now. I'm Sergeant Gaunt. You work for me. The first job I got for you is latrine detail."

"I'm not in the Army," Mallory said. "I'm a civilian. I was brought in here at gunpoint by my pal the lieutenant—"

"Don't talk back to me, boy!" the sergeant prodded Mallory's chest with a finger as hard as a pistol barrel. "You've been called to the colors legal and proper!"

"In that case, I'm in the wrong place. I'm a reserve major. I'll take my gold leaves now."

"Officer, eh?" Gaunt's mouth curved in a V. "Any proof?"

"I left my wallet in my other pants."

"Ain't that too bad, now? Looks like you're lying. I don't like that in a man, Private. I reckon you'll be on latrine for a while. Chubb!" He turned and roared the name, and a short, runty man with jug ears, wearing corporal's stripes, came over.

"Set him to digging slit trenches. See he digs 'em deep."

"Let's go." Chubb tipped his head, fingering his carbine.

Mallory followed the noncom out into the cold wind, across to a barn where he was handed a long-handled spade, then marched around behind it to a rectangular screen of canvas strips mounted on poles.

"You heard the man. Dig 'em deep."

Mallory started in, handling the shovel awkwardly.

"What's the matter with your arm?" Corporal Chubb asked.

"I picked up a few splinters from an imaginary explosion."

Chubb grunted. Mallory dug. After an hour he had finished one trench a foot wide, two feet deep, twelve feet long.

"All right, that's enough," Chubb said. He was shivering, his hands deep in his pockets. "I reckon you can break for chow now. Sarge never said you couldn't eat."

Chubb escorted him across to a long tent from which steam and sour food odors emanated. In the canvas-smell-ing gloom inside, he picked a greasy tray from a stack, went to the serving line. As he held the tray out, his eyes met those of the server.

“Lori!” he said.

6

She stared at him, wide-eyed. The ladle in her hand dropped unnoticed. In the same moment that she spoke, Mallory leaned toward her and whispered swiftly, “Don’t let them know!” Then in a normal voice he said, “What a surprise to see you here!”

Lori leaned toward him. Her lips moved; there were suddenly tears in her eyes.

“How . . . how . . . when?”

“I arrived a couple of hours ago,” he said. “Courtesy of Lieutenant Brozhny.”

“I can’t believe it! I thought you were dead!”

“I’m alive, all right—”

“Hey you, the new guy. Move it along,” Corporal Chubb ordered.

“Lori—I’ll see you in a few minutes—”

Chubb hustled Mallory along the line. “Nix on the dames,” he said. “You want to get the both of us in hot water, feller? I took a chance just bringing you in here. Sarge prob’ly meant fer you to eat cold chow on the job.”

“She’s an old friend, Chubb—”

“You ain’t got no friends, mister. Just keep your nose clean and leave the women alone. You figure it out. You do your job and show your loyalty and maybe you get privileges. It’s up to the colonel.” Chubb led the way to a small table in a corner. The food was surprisingly good: meat and potatoes and gravy, bread, green vegetables, strawberries and cream, fresh coffee.

“We feed good here,” Chubb said. “Unless you’re on the colonel’s list, it ain’t a bad life. Just don’t make no waves—like with the dames.”

“How long have you been here?”

“Couple months,” Chubb said. He swallowed coffee, wiped his mouth on his sleeve. “What’d you do to rile Strang?” he asked.

“I turned down a job offer.”

“Wasn’t smart,” Chubb grunted. “Why’d you do it?”

“I have other plans.”

Chubb grunted. “Better forget it and get with the program. He’s got it all doped out. Got to give him credit, he gets things done. Good thing,

too. Wasn't fer him, be nobody doing anything. He seen what needed doing, got some men together, started organizing things. Now we're getting somewheres. We're not licked yet, by God!"

"Getting where?" Mallory asked.

"Getting set to hit 'em. Hit 'em hard."

"With what? Bows and arrows?"

"He's got it doped out," Chubb repeated. "He knows."

"Corporal," he said, "I want to talk to the girl. Just for a few moments. How about arranging it?"

"You crazy? I told you—"

"She's an old friend of mine."

"Tell that to Strang."

"All you have to do is—"

"Shut up, you!" Chubb barked. "Comes o' trying to treat you decent. Maybe Sarge was right about you!"

As they entered the barracks, Sergeant Gaunt rose from an easy chair and strolled over.

"How'd the new boy work out, Chubb?" he demanded. "Give you any trouble?"

Chubb glanced at Mallory. "No trouble," he said.

"Good. Hey, you," Gaunt said as Mallory started past. "I didn't dismiss you, boy. You're on kitchen detail tonight. Pots and pans. Nice clean work. Don't bother to set down. You're late now. Mess sergeant won't like that."

Chubb opened his mouth as if to speak—

"Don't say it, Chubb!" Gaunt grated. "I'll decide when a recruit needs a break."

Chubb clamped his jaw shut, nodded curtly.

"What are you waiting for?" Gaunt barked at Mallory.

"For dismiss orders," Mallory said.

"Don't try me, boy," Gaunt said and jerked his thumb. "Pots and pans, on the double."

For three hours, Mallory scraped grease from cooking vats, elbow-deep in scummed tepid water. The Mess Sergeant, a round-faced, paunchy man with tufts of gray hair over his ears, watched him obliquely. When the supply of pots was exhausted, he assigned him to scraping soot from the fireboxes of wood-burning bake ovens. Mallory worked steadily, in silence. At midnight the NCO gruffly told him to take a break, gestured to a table where a plate of steak and eggs, toast, coffee waited.

“Thanks,” Mallory said. “Where’s the latrine?”

The NCO gestured. Mallory left the mess tent, walked across the muddy farmyard to the barbed-wire enclosed area Chubb had pointed out as the women’s barracks. A guard armed with an M-16 stood at the lone gate under the glare of a two-hundred-watt bulb. Mallory walked directly up to the man with no attempt at concealment. The latter watched him come with a bored expression; when Mallory was ten feet away he shifted his rifle and opened his mouth to speak—

Mallory took two quick steps and rammed his right fist hard into the sentry’s stomach. As the man grunted explosively and doubled over, he struck down at the back of his neck. The man fell on his face and lay still. Mallory caught him by the belt and dragged him inside the gate, behind a stack of cordwood. He pushed the gate shut, went to the nearest tent. A plump woman in a lumpy skirt and an unbuttoned fatigue jacket was just emerging through the fly. She halted when she saw him, slapped the jacket closed.

“Say, what’re you—” she started.

“I want Private Lori Mallory, Sergeant,” he said briskly. “Which tent?”

The woman hesitated, tucking back a strand of sandy hair. “Just who are you? I never seen you before.”

“Major Disaster. I just hit camp. Snap it up, Sergeant. Which tent?”

The woman pointed with a plump forefinger. “Number three, sir.”

“Thanks.”

“But you can’t go in there,” the woman added quickly. “Sir.”

“Of course not. That’s why I want you to get her for me,” Mallory said promptly.

“Well . . . I’ll see if she’s able to talk to you.” The woman waddled along the catwalk, poked her head inside the tent. A moment later she withdrew, came back past Mallory without a word. Lori appeared, looking anxious. She saw Mallory, hurried to him, a smile fighting with tears.

“Dad! How marvelous to see you!” She huddled against him, her arms around him. “Dad, it was awful, thinking I was all alone . . .”

“You’re not alone, honey.” Mallory patted her back. He gripped her shoulders, looked into her face. “Lori, I have news for you. The best news in the world. Your mother is alive, and the kids—”

“Dad.” Lori’s grip on his arm was convulsive. “Are you sure?”

“I was with them two days ago.”

“But-where?”

“At home—in Beatrice.”

Lori’s face rippled like a reflection in disturbed waters. “Dad, you couldn’t have—” she whispered. “The Chinese—”

“There are no Chinese in Beatrice,” Mallory said. “I doubt if there are any anywhere on this side of the Pacific. That’s a delusion of Strang’s—”

“Dad—Colonel Strang is a fine man! He’s making order out of this chaos—”

“Strang is a dangerous lunatic,” Mallory said. “He intends to destroy Beatrice. His plan is crazy enough to work. If it does, he’ll kill Gill and the kids along with a few thousand other people.”

“There’s no one left alive in Beatrice,” Lori said. “The Chinese massacred them all. That’s why we have to—”

“That’s what Strang thinks—but he’s wrong. There are no Chinese in Beatrice. We’ve been invaded, Lori—but not by any human enemy. They’re alien creatures—things from some other planet, I believe. They have fantastic powers of hypnosis. The people in the city are like sleepwalkers. They’ve been enslaved, and they aren’t even aware of it. There’s a tower—an immense thing—where they work every day at some incomprehensible project.”

Lori was looking at him with a horrified expression. “Dad—what are you saying?”

“I know—I’ve already been told it’s a fantasy I dreamed up to protect myself from the knowledge that Gill and the kids are dead. But they’re *not* dead, Lori! Believe that, if you can’t believe anything else.”

Lori shook her head. “I can’t, Dad,” she whispered. “I’m sorry. They’re gone. I know they’re gone, I’ve gotten used to the idea—”

“You thought I was dead, too,” Mallory cut in. “But I wasn’t.”

“That’s different—” she started; then: “How did you get away? You were at home when they attacked . . .”

“Never mind. I’m afraid you wouldn’t believe me. And there’s no time now. We’ve got to get away from here first. Afterward we’ll talk.”

“What do you mean? Dad, you can’t—”

“Which tent is Sally in?” Mallory cut in on her protest.

“Mine-number three. But Dad—if you’re talking about—”

“Did someone mention my name?” Sally spoke from behind them. “When they called Lori out, I knew it was you, Jeff.” She caught Mallory’s arm possessively. “We’re leaving now?”

“Dad, you can’t mean this!” Lori gasped. “You’re planning to *desert*?”

“That’s a pretty harsh word, Lori. Escape would be closer.”

"You can't," Lori said. "The colonel is counting on you—on all of us."

"Don't be a fool, Lori!" Sally said. "If Jeff thinks we should go, he has a good reason!"

"What possible reason? Where would we go?"

"To the house, of course. It's not far north of here."

"Dad—you're not thinking of trying to go back into Beatrice?"

"No—not yet. Not until we have help. I mean the Old House, Lori. We can rest, and—"

"Dad—please talk sense! What old house?"

Mallory felt a sudden sense of disorientation. He shook his head. Was he mixing dreams with reality? For a moment it had seemed . . .

"Never mind, Lori." He shut off the train of thought. "There's no time to waste. There's an unconscious guard lying a few feet from the gate; someone may stumble over him at any moment—"

"Dad I think I understand: this is another of your fantasies, like the Martian invaders, and mother being alive. You needed a place to escape to, so you've invented a house. But, Dad—there isn't any house! There's no place to go! Colonel Strang offers us the only possible hope of ever rebuilding anything—"

"I won't argue with you, Lori. We're going. Now." Mallory caught her hand. She pulled away.

"You can't go. I won't let you!" She backed away.

"Lori, for God's sake—"

"No, for *your* sake, Dad. I guess you'll hate me now, but maybe later you'll realize I was doing it for you—" As Lori brought a brass whistle to her lips, Sally sprang suddenly, knocked it from her hand. In the next instant Mallory had caught her wrists.

"My God, Lori, has Strang brainwashed you?"

"Colonel Strang is a wonderful man, a real leader! He's the only one with the strength and the vision to do what has to be done! I won't betray him—and I won't let you!"

There was a shout from the direction of the gate: "Corporal of the guard post number three, on the double!"

As Mallory took a step Lori threw herself at him, wrapped her arms around his neck. Feet were running toward the gate.

"Hey! Down that way!" a rough voice yelled.

Mallory lifted Lori bodily from her feet and set off at a heavy run along the dark aisle between the tents toward the tangled wall of shrubbery that lined the rear of the compound. A shot boomed behind them.

“Dad—they’ll shoot you!” Lori cried. There was a second report, and Sally gave a sharp cry. Mallory skidded to a halt. Sally had fallen to her knees, holding her left arm.

“Go on, Jeff!” she gasped. “Don’t wait for me!”

Lori whirled on her father. “Give yourself up, Dad! They shoot deserters!”

“If they catch them,” Mallory rapped. “It’s up to you, Lori.”

Another shot whanged nearby. “Take care of her,” Mallory said swiftly. “And yourself.” He whirled and ran for the shadows. Behind him, he heard Lori shout, “That way! That way!” As he plunged into the shrubbery, he looked back, caught a glimpse of Sally crouched in the glow of a pale light and of Lori running toward the advancing men, pointing in a direction away from that he had taken.

Chapter 5

1

Mallory covered three miles in the next three hours, mostly on his stomach. A drizzling rain started up, accompanied by fog. Vehicles blundered past on the roads, their headlights soaked up by the mist; men called and beat the brush, but none came closer to him than fifty yards.

When he emerged on a hard-surfaced road, the lights of Strang’s encampment were a pink glow in the sky behind him. There were no stars. The rain had stopped, but the wind was bitter. Mallory’s injured arm felt swollen to giant size.

Got to get under shelter, he told himself. Got to find transport, get past Strang’s patrols. There’ll be some kind of authority in Omaha. Military headquarters. But maybe that was the first target to go . . .

He gave up the effort to think further ahead than the immediate future. Shelter first, rest, food if possible, rebandage the arm. That was enough for now. Maybe more than enough.

Earlier in the day the wind had been blowing from the east. He’d have to assume it still was. Keeping it on his right, he started along the road. He recognized it as the route along which Brozhny had escorted him and Sally less than twelve hours earlier. It seemed like days ago. He thought of Sally, with a bullet in her flesh, of Lori, torn two ways by pressures too great for her to handle. He thought of Gill, of Randy and Marla-

“Don’t think,” he ordered himself. “Just walk.”

“How far?” another part of his mind asked.

“Until you come to something,” he answered.

2

It was a group of large buildings, tall, flat-fronted, mansard-roofed, rising among century-old trees at the crest of a rise. Lights glowed there; faintly, over the whisper of the wind, he heard sounds: a voice, the thud of a slamming door, the soft chug of a power generator.

Mallory left the road, approached through a ploughed field across the angle of the rising ground. There were trees and tangled growth ahead. He pushed through, encountered a high brick wall. It took him a quarter of an hour, hampered by his injured arm, to climb into the lower branches of a beech to which dead autumn leaves still clung, work his way out, let himself down on top of the wall, then drop on the inside.

The ground was smooth here, with the feel of dead lawn. He came onto a path, followed it along a curving route between wild-grown shrubbery. It debouched into a narrow drive that extended back past the main building. Dimly, Mallory made out the bulk of a parked vehicle; pink light winked from a reflector.

Directly opposite him, twenty-five yards away, was a lighted window. A tall man with coppery hair was seated at a desk, writing. The civilized scene was reassuring; he would have to approach someone for help. A scholarly man in a quiet study seemed as good a bet as he was likely to find.

He crossed the dry grass to the drive; he had taken two steps along the pavement when the light struck him in the face.

Mallory stood still, his hands clear of his sides. Two men emerged from the concealment of a tall, untrimmed juniper hedge. One was lean, long-armed, with a crooked-jawed face under a red plastic baseball cap, a bedraggled beard. He wore a rain-blackened mackinaw, tight jeans that were three inches too short for his long shins, high-topped shoes. His companion—shorter, older, bundlesome in a shiny black raincoat—carried a compact crossbow, a quarrel in place, his finger on the trigger. Both men eyed Mallory warily.

“Where you come from?” the thin man barked the question. “What you sneaking around here for?”

Mallory indicated the direction from which he had come with a tilt of his head. "I was looking for a place to get out of the weather."

"One o' Strang's bunch, hey? What's the matter, get tired of sin and evil?"

"I'm tired of evil, all right," Mallory said. "I haven't gotten in on my share of the sin lately."

The thin man took a quick step forward and swung a backhanded blow; Mallory, caught off guard, ducked back; the pain of the sudden movement was like an ice pick in his flesh. The plump man backed a step, raising the crossbow. Black lights rose to obscure Mallory's vision. He shook his head, tried to blink the mist away.

"Hey—he's hurt, Wiss." The crossbowman's voice penetrated a high-pitched hum that filled Mallory's head. "He's out on his feet."

"He'll be hurt more before he's done," Wiss said from far away. "Let's search the smart-talking limb; let's see what he's got on him."

The plump man held the weapon ready while his companion patted Mallory's pockets, darting furtive looks at his face every few seconds.

"Nothing," he said, and stepped away. "Go ahead, Deeks," he said in a tense, thickened voice. "What are you waiting for?"

"My God, Wiss—you expect me to shoot a man in cold blood!"

"But you can take the name o' the Lord in vain! Give me that, I'll do it —" Wiss halted abruptly as Deeks pivoted to cover him with the crossbow.

"Stay back, Wiss! I warned you before!"

Wiss half raised his hands. "All right, all right. Don't get jumpy."

Deeks backed away, covering both Mallory and the lean man.

"We'll take him up to the house. You first, Wiss, where I can keep an eye on you."

3

The light in the room was too bright. Mallory's shoulder ached with a vast, throbbing ache. His head felt soft and bruised, his eyes gritty. There was a faint odor of ammonia in the air.

From behind the desk, the man with the coppery hair—glossy, arranged in meticulous waves above his imposing forehead—smiled gently up at him. He had a ruddy, pink-cheeked complexion, a well-shaped but longish nose, finely modeled very red lips, a sharp, jutting chin.

“Suppose you account for yourself, eh?” he said in a resonant, rather nasal voice. He waved a small vial of what Mallory saw was smelling salts under his own nose, sniffing gently, smiling faintly. “I understand you’re from Strang’s camp.”

“Colonel Strang tried to draft me into his army,” Mallory said. “I didn’t want to be drafted. I left.”

“Oh?” The shiny-haired man pushed his lips out, nodding sagely. “I thought Strang posted sentries.” His tone was mildly chiding.

“I made a diversion. The rain helped.”

The seated man glanced at Deeb, standing beside the desk, a drop of water trembling on the tip of his nose. “Brother Henry seems to feel you came here to spy on us.”

“He’s wrong.” Mallory looked around the room. It was large, high-ceilinged, with buff and brown walls, a row of large double-hung windows with roller shades and net curtains. There were book shelves along two walls, a long table with more books, a dictionary on a stand, a globe. “What is this place?”

“You’re on the grounds of Revelation College—in the Dean’s library, to be precise. I’m Brother Jack Harmony.” He paused as if awaiting recognition. When Mallory said nothing he frowned a little.

“Why did Strang send you here?” he asked abruptly.

“I’ve told you—I’m on my own—”

“No insolence,” Brother Jack said sharply; for an instant his large, pale eyes glared bleakly. Then he relaxed and twitched his lips into his smile. “How many men does Strang have now?”

“A few hundred, I suppose.”

Brother Jack nodded. “Guns? Ammunition?”

“They seem to be well-armed.”

Brother Jack’s eyes narrowed. “When is he planning his attack?”

“You seem to know more about him than I do. I was only in his camp for a few hours—”

“But he *is* planning such an attack?”

“So he says.”

“You see?” Brother Jack looked at Deeb with a pitying expression. “And you thought I was imagining things.”

“I never thought that, Brother Jack—”

“Get out, Henry,” Harmony said mildly. “I want to talk with our guest in private.”

When Deeb had left the room, Brother Jack indicated a chair, waited

until Mallory was seated.

“I’m surrounded by fools,” he said. “They know nothing, understand nothing.” He leaned forward, looking shrewd. “What sort of deal is Strang offering?” he asked crisply.

“Mr. Harmony, I wish you’d rid yourself of the idea that I’m working for Strang—”

“Call me Brother Jack; I’ve put aside all titles.” Harmony looked speculatively at Mallory. “Now, you and I know how to accommodate.” His eyes slid aside from Mallory, roved around the room, came back to Mallory.

“I hope so, Brother Jack.”

“Now, if in order to survive, it becomes necessary for a time to come to terms with forces of the Opposition, well—a man can’t serve God if he’s dead, can he? You see, I’m realistic. I’ve seen how the Pit has opened, spawning its imps in the world of man. I can read the writing on the wall. The time of God’s ascendancy is on the wane—just temporarily, of course. He’s testing us, you see—to determine who deserves to live, who doesn’t.”

“I’m afraid this is over my head, Brother Jack,” Mallory started.

“Don’t lie to me, man!” Harmony showed his teeth, even, white, and false. “You’ve seen them! I know it! I can see it in your eyes!”

“Seen who?”

“The imps! The spawn of Satan! The living dead, that’s who!”

4

“I saw them in Beatrice,” Mallory said. “Imps or aliens, they’ve taken over the city. As far as I know, they’ve made no effort to expand their beachhead. You’re the first man I’ve met who doesn’t think I had hallucinations.”

“Satan’s clever,” Brother Jack said. “Oh, I underestimated him. I’ll confess to you that for years I was skeptical in my heart. I spoke the word of God, but in my private thoughts I was an unbeliever. That’s why He loosed Satan on the world, you see. I admit it. I’m the guilty one!”

“I’m sure there were plenty of others,” Mallory said. “The question is, what’s being done about it?”

“No others,” Brother Jack said. “Just me. I’m the one God put his finger on. But I’ll survive. I know it’s His will. It’s His way of testing me.

And I'll measure up!"

"That's fine, Brother Jack. Where is the nearest regular authority? Was Omaha hit?"

"Your coming was just as I predicted," Harmony nodded. "I knew the call would come."

"Do you have a shortwave radio?" Mallory asked.

"You're a hard man to deal with," Harmony snapped. "Very well: out with it! You want me openly to come in with you, am I right?" Sweat glistened on his high forehead.

"Brother Jack, all I'm interested in is locating what government is left, if any, and doing what I can to combat whatever it is that's invaded the country."

"I see you've gotten the wrong impression," Harmony said. "You won't even let a man save his face, will you? All right—let's talk plainly. I'm a realist. When resistance is hopeless, a man has a duty to save his own life."

"Look, Brother Jack—if you have a car I could take—"

"I won souls for Christ—even when I preached empty lies," Harmony stated flatly. "Think what I can do for Satan, when I *know* he exists!"

"I'm afraid you've got the wrong idea, Harmony," Mallory said. "I didn't come here to make a deal with you."

The shiny-haired man slid the desk drawer open, eased out a heavy chrome-plated Colt .45 automatic. His fingers curled around the grip almost lovingly. He weighed it on his palm, then deftly pointed it at Mallory, the butt resting on the desk.

"You can have the others," he said. "They're nothing, expendables. Do as you like with them. But you need me. Strang knows that—otherwise he wouldn't have sent you—"

The door burst open. Deeks entered the room, the crossbow in his hands, his face flushed, his eyes shocked, an Oriental-looking youth behind him.

"You're selling us out," he blurted. "I heard you—"

"You listened, eh? That's too bad, Brother Deeks."

Brother Jack shifted the pistol's aim, raised the muzzle slightly. "Good-bye, Brother Deeks," he said and fired point-blank into the plump man's face.

As the shot roared in the closed room, Deeks spun, fell facedown across the table. Mallory came to his feet, froze as the gun swung to cover him. The Japanese boy made a mewling sound and backed away.

“Now, you spent time with Strang.” Harmony addressed Mallory as if nothing had happened. “You must have seen him consorting with the Fiend. Tell me, is it true Satan takes the shape of a small black boy with a hump on his back and a tuft of red hair like a goat’s beard dangling from his nose?” His eyes were fixed on Mallory’s, his mouth slightly open.

“I didn’t see anyone fitting that description,” Mallory said.

“He has a thousand forms,” Harmony said. “Oh, I’ve seen some of them: in my boyhood he appeared to me as a giant black dog one night; but I drove him away with God’s curse. Later he came to me in the form of scarlet women, painted and perfumed—I knew then that he was stronger than God.” He jerked the gun at Mallory. “Speak up!”

“The ones I saw looked like poorly manufactured men,” Mallory said carefully.

“How do they speak?”

“Very politely—even when they’re killing you.”

“Like the voice of scarlet women.” Harmony nodded. “That was what gave them away. At first I was afraid; I confess the weakness. I ran with the others. Then Satan singled me out and made me halt and turn back. Oh, it was in my heart to do the bidding of the Evil One!” Harmony looked at Deeb, sprawled across the table on his back, his face a red ruin, his feet clear of the floor.

“That one fooled me. He took the shape of a man, but now he’s given it up again.” He had lowered the gun; it hung in his hand, pointing to the floor. Mallory took a step toward him, and the weapon snapped up.

“Don’t make any foolish moves,” Harmony said in a sharp tone. “I was a combat Marine before the Call came; I never qualified below Sharpshooter. You stand back over there, beside Tanaka.”

Mallory complied. The small man was leaning against a bookcase, his hands clutched together, shivering.

“Oh, it’s hard sometimes to hear the voice of God,” Harmony said. “Now, at first I thought you were Strang’s agent; then you went and grabbed for my gun and spoiled it all. Now I just don’t know.”

“Brother Jack—” the Japanese boy started, in a thin whine.

“Shut up,” Mallory said quickly. “Brother Jack’s in no mood to be argued with.”

“Now—you’ve seen I’m in earnest,” Brother Jack said. “You saw how I dealt with Henry. Are you ready to give me Strang’s terms? Satan’s terms?”

“No,” Mallory said. “But I know how to kill the imps.”

Harmony looked at him solemnly along the barrel of the gun. “You know better than that,” he said. “Satan’s minions can’t die like mortal creatures.”

“I killed one. Maybe more than one.”

“That’s your last lie!” Harmony snapped. “But I’ll show your Master I’m worthy. Kneel down!” He thumbed the hammer back.

Beside Mallory, the Japanese lad made a thin sound and started to fall forward. As Mallory swung toward him, Harmony jumped back; his hip collided with Deeb’s feet. The body slid forward, its weight slamming against Brother Jack. The gun went off, and the glass door of the bookcase shattered behind Mallory. Borne backward by the limp body of the man he had shot, Brother Jack caught a heel in the rug, went down backward. His head struck the corner of the desk with a sound like an ax hitting a seasoned oak log. He flopped sideways onto his face and lay still, blood spreading in his glossy hair.

Mallory turned at a sound; Wiss was standing in the doorway holding a crossbow aimed at his face.

“Oh, boy,” Wiss said and licked his lips. He lowered the point of aim to Mallory’s midsection. His eyes flicked past him, back to his face, away again.

“Killed all three, did you? I heard three shots.”

“Two shots,” Mallory said. “Tanaka’s not dead.”

“Yeah,” Wiss said and advanced a step. “Now it’s my turn. Where do you want it? Through the stomach? In the lungs? How about right in the mouth? Open your mouth, you black snake of sin.”

“Then you’ll have to carry them down alone,” Mallory said.

Wiss nipped a chapped hp with long yellow teeth. He looked troubled. He nodded. “All right. Him first.” He cut his eyes toward Brother Jack. His gaze lingered.

“You think he meant it—about leaguings with Satan? That why you shot him?”

“He fell. Hit his head on the desk.”

“Turn him over.”

Mallory did as ordered. Wiss frowned down at the wide, flat corpse.

“I don’t see where it went in.”

“He wasn’t shot. He fired at me. Deeb tripped him up.”

Wiss motioned Mallory back. He came forward to stare down with a fascinated expression at the plump man.

Tanaka groaned and sat up.

“All right, Tanaka,” Wiss said. “You can help.”

Tanaka was speaking softly in Japanese and crying.

“Pick him up,” Wiss said to Mallory. Mallory took the dead man’s wrists, hoisted him into position for a fireman’s carry. As the weight came on him, his knees buckled. He went down hard, the body on him.

Wiss kicked him. Tanaka sobbed. Mallory crawled from under the corpse.

“I’ve lost some blood myself,” he said. “I’m afraid I can’t help you.”

“You can walk,” Wiss said. “That’ll be some help. I won’t have to carry you down.”

“That’s a point,” Mallory said. He got to his feet, feeling dizzy and sick.

“Let’s go,” Wiss said.

With Wiss behind him, Mallory stepped out into a wide, dark hall lined with oversized doors with pebbled-glass panels on which numbers were lettered in old-fashioned style. His feet echoed on the tiles. Moonlight shone through the window on the landing of the stairway. In the lower hall, Wiss directed him toward the back of the building.

“Don’t walk so fast,” Wiss said. “Why be in a hurry?”

“I didn’t kill Deeb,” Mallory said. “Brother Jack did the shooting. I didn’t have a gun, remember?”

“I’m enjoying this,” Wiss said. “This is what I’ve always wanted. Turn left.”

They were in a narrower, darker hall. There were mops and brooms against the wall, a janitor’s cart. Through a half-open door, Mallory saw plumbing.

“It’s hard to fight sin,” Wiss said. “You start out to look for sin, and seems like you can’t find it. They act virtuous to your face, and then behind your back they make their pact with Satan.”

“You and Brother Jack know a lot about Satan,” Mallory said.

“Me more than him,” Wiss said. “You outsmarted him, but you’re not going to outsmart me. You’re going to die. Out that door.”

Mallory pushed against the release bar; the fire door swung outward. He stepped down onto a bricked path lined with garbage cans. The trees stood up stark and aloof against moonlit clouds.

“That way,” Wiss said. “I’ll bury you in the garden. I’ll cover you with manure.”

The cold air cleared Mallory’s head slightly. The urgency of the nausea retreated.

"I'm going to be sick," he said. "Try not to shoot me until I get through." He turned aside, leaned against a tree, and made a retching sound. From the corner of his eye he saw Wiss lower the crossbow. He moaned, put his hands to his stomach—and jumped for the shelter of the trees.

Wiss yelled; a crossbow bolt clattered through dry branches to Mallory's left. He ran a weaving course among the saplings, curving back toward the house. Wiss was shouting, crashing through the brush. Mallory fell, rolled.

Wiss charged past, ten feet away. Mallory waited ten seconds, then rose and started back along his path as silently as possible. When the sound of Wiss' passage halted abruptly, he stopped, resumed his progress when it resumed.

The drive widened at the rear, in front of a converted barn. A dark-colored sedan was parked there, its front bumper against the weathered siding. Mallory came up on it from the left side, opened the door, slid in behind the wheel. The keys dangled from the ignition. He took two deep breaths and turned the key.

The starter groaned; Mallory pumped the gas pedal; the engine caught. He slammed the gears into reverse, backed, cutting the wheel hard, braked, gunned forward, the wheels cutting a swathe through the dry sod. Wiss darted into view beside the house; as Mallory roared past at a distance of six feet, he saw the bow swing up into firing position, tracking him—

Glass shattered behind him. The metal bolt stood quivering in the padded plastic of the right side of the dash. Mallory switched on the headlights in time to swing the curve of the drive. The gates loomed ahead, massive as a portcullis. At sixty miles per hour, the gap closed. At the last instant, Mallory threw himself sideways on the seat. The shock as the hurtling car struck threw him against the right-hand door. He pulled himself upright in time to see one panel of the gate, bent almost double, slide sideways off the hood and bounce away into the underbrush. The car was in a skid, its rear coming around to the right as it left the road. Mallory caught the wheel, steered into the skid, crashed through dry stalks and saplings, plunged down through a ditch, back up again, and coasted to a stop on the road.

Mallory brushed glass chips from his face, wiped blood from his eye. The windshield was smashed; one headlight was gone, the other knocked out of line so that its beam pooled twenty feet ahead of the car. The

engine was still running, with a rhythmic clatter. Mallory's head was ringing with a high, wavering tone, like an idling transmitter. He hitched himself back under the wheel and tried the accelerator. The car moved ahead awkwardly; Mallory could feel the drag of an out-of-line wheel. The steering wheel pulled at his hands.

Slowly, like an injured animal, the car moved off down the road.

Chapter 6

1

Mallory put ten miles between himself and Revelation College before he allowed himself the luxury of pulling to the side of the road. He had suffered a number of minor facial cuts and a painful bruise in the ribs. His injured arm ached with a deep, implacable ache. His head felt hot, his stomach empty. The lump behind his right ear was swollen and tender. When he touched it, pain shot down along his jaw, upward across the top of his skull. The cold wind gusting in through the broken windshield had chilled him to the bone.

"Progress report," he said aloud and was startled at the hoarse, croaking quality of his voice. "Item one: I've gotten clear of Beatrice; I know what I saw there. And I've got Brother Jack's testimony that I didn't imagine the whole thing. Item two—I've found Lori alive and as well as could be expected. Item three . . ." He paused, trying to order his thoughts. It was hard to think. His head hurt, his whole body ached; he needed rest, food, a drink, a surgeon . . .

"Later," he said firmly. "Right now the question is the next move. It'll be dawn in a few hours. Strang's men will be out; they're between me and Omaha . . . I think, I need a road map." He opened the glove compartment, bending the crossbow bolt aside to allow the door to drop. Inside there were worn gloves, which he put on, a crumpled paper cup, a greasy screwdriver, and a much-folded map. The dash lights provided enough illumination to study it. As closely as he could estimate, Strang's headquarters lay a mile or so west of the main road north—too close to risk. The alternative was to skirt wide to the east, then double back.

"Would help if I knew where I was," he muttered through lips stiff with cold. "Have to make a guess. Headed east from Strang's camp. Still headed east—unless the wind has changed . . ." It seemed to be blowing

straight at him now. Couldn't count on the wind. Best bet was to drive on until he saw a route marker or came to a town, then correct course accordingly.

"So that's settled," he told himself. "Unless I run out of gas—or over-heat—or pass out and run into a tree."

The front end was badly out of line; the wheels set up a car-shaking vibration at fifteen miles per hour. The steering was stiff. He could smell hot oil.

"Radiator's probably punctured," he muttered. "Lucky it's a cold night."

He came up to an intersection with a rutted blacktop road, slowed, made a left turn, went on a quarter of a mile before he braked to a halt.

"Why'd I turn?" He mumbled the question; his voice sounded in his ears like that of a stranger, but speaking aloud seemed to help focus his thoughts.

Have to work my way north, he answered his own query.

"No. Wrong. Worked it out, decided to head east, hit main road"

This way, another part of his mind insisted. *Not far now*.

"What's not far?" He shook his head, staring out through broken glass at the weed-choked ditch illuminated by the lone headlight.

The house. Have to get to the house, rest, get warm

Sure, the house . . . funny I forgot about it. Right, have to get to the house.

He started up, drove on another hundred yards.

"Wait a minute," he said and jammed on the brake. The sudden stop jerked his head painfully but also served to clear it.

"Going nuts," he said. "Thoughts all confused." *House . . . old place, stone, high gables, horses in the drive, gas lanterns on tall poles, smell of stables. Home. But not home. Remember it from . . . long time ago. Small boy. Have to go back. Something wonderful there. Waited long time*

"Imagining things," he said loudly and rubbed his face. "Or am I? Is there an Old House? Seems as if it's been in the back of my mind ever since I left Beatrice. Even before. But it's nonsense. Old family manse, I told Lori. Crazy. Isn't any old family manse. She said so. Beside which, I'd be heading back into Strang's lines"

But I have to go there! I've already waited too long

"All right." He laughed raggedly. "What the hell, there's a way to settle it: I'll go have a look, get it off my mind, get back to business. And maybe there'll be food and a bed." He looked ahead along the crooked

secondary road. "But what makes me think this will lead me to it?"

You know the way. It's not far now. Get to the house. Then you can rest.

"All right, Mallory. Maybe it's the still, small voice of conscience. Follow your nose. It can't lead you any farther astray than you already are."

He put the car in gear and crawled ahead along the rutted track.

2

Now that he had given in to the compulsion, Mallory felt curiously resigned; as if he were no longer a lone swimmer in choppy seas, but a passenger on a ship for whose course he bore no responsibility. There might be reefs and whirlpools ahead, but for the moment he could simply cling to the rail and ride. He wondered vaguely how far he had come. Two miles? Three? What would he find at the end of the road? Was there actually a house? It all seemed academic, remote. His job now was simply to steer—and stay awake

The faint *whop-whop-whop* of beating rotors intruded on his thoughts. Looking back, he saw a copter's navigation lights bobbing a hundred yards above the treetops, three hundred yards behind him. A searchlight speared downward, fingering the ground, sweeping closer along the trail of roiled dust.

His reactions were sluggish, clumsy, as he cut his single headlight, wrenched the wheel to the left; the car slammed \ down through a shallow ditch, up again into a ploughed field. There was a clump of trees ahead. He steered for it, felt the wheels losing traction. Something dragged under the car; it wallowed, came to rest, nose high. Mallory jumped out, almost fell, ran, stumbling across the furrows, toward the trees. Under their cover he worked his way up a wooded slope toward the higher ground ahead. The copter circled the stalled car, hovered, then dropped in to land near it. Moments later, it lifted again.

Mallory pushed on, through thick underbrush and interlaced branches. There were shouts behind him. Handlights flicked to and fro through the thickets. Overhead, the copter beat the air, its light raking the hillside. The trees thinned; Mallory scrambled up over a bare outcropping of granite, ran on among twisted pines that gripped the rock with roots like arthritic fingers. There was a faint path here, winding upward, closed

on both sides by dense walls of growth. Mallory heard feet scrape rock close behind him. He plunged off the path, forcing his way back into the brush. He had gone no more than twenty feet when a vertical wall of rock barred his way. He slumped to the ground, gasping for breath. *End of the line*, he thought.

Voices, the sounds of men breaking their way through brush.

“Must of doubled back. You men spread out there, beat the brush for him.”

“Jig two-five,” another man said, in a radio voice. “Let’s have that light over here, a hundred yards upslope and to your right.”

The copter hammered its way overhead. Mallory lay where he was, listening to the sounds of search. He half dozed; after a while the sounds went away. He got stiffly to his feet and began searching for a route past the stone wall.

He found it twenty feet to the left of the pocket where he had sheltered from the hunt. Crumbled stone led up in a stairlike slope. He climbed it, scraped low under tangled berry bushes, and was looking across a weed-grown lawn at the house.

3

It stood high—higher even than he had pictured it. The architectural style was unlike anything he had ever seen: not curlicued Victorian Gothic, but something more massive, more monumental, more ancient and forbidding. He went forward slowly, finding an overgrown flagstone path that led past a worked-stone horse trough where a trickle of water still bubbled over a mossy curve of rock. There were patches of dry stalks here that had once been flower beds. A fallen trellis drooped over a cracked stone bench.

To one side, the remains of wooden sheds sagged in advanced decay. He crossed a graveled drive, barely discernible among the weeds. Pale moonlight reflected from high windows like blind eyes.

A flight of wide, leaf-littered steps led up to a stone-balustraded terrace. At the top, across the broad veranda, a carved door of corroded metal half again as high and wide as normal was set in the granite wall under a semicircle of stained glass. In the center of the door was an ornate latch in the shape of a griffin’s head.

Mallory gripped the ring, turned it; the door swung in, and he stepped

through into a wide, high entry hall with stained flowered walls, tarnished mirrors framed in peeling gilt, a pendant chandelier of antique cut.

And on the floor at his feet, the dead body of a man.

4

Somewhere a cricket chirred monotonously. Water dripped with a slow, patient cadence. Wind boomed under the high eaves. Mallory circled the corpse, lying with one hand outflung, the head turned to one side, long hair, glossy black, curling about the back of the powerful neck. The body was clothed in a long coat of bottle green, tight fawn-colored trousers, shiny black boots which came halfway to the knee. Ruffled lace showed at cuff and throat. He had been dead, Mallory estimated, no more than a few days; the face was hollow-cheeked, greenish pale; but deterioration had not begun.

He went on, into a large room filled with shadows. Starlight gleamed down through high windows hung with rotted drapes on a cracked and curling parquet floor partially masked by the remnants of heavy carpets. Faded wallpaper of baroque design peeled from the walls above dark wood paneling. There were massively framed pictures, portraits of men and women in antique costume. Heavy chairs and sofas were ranged across the room, their horsehair upholstery reduced to tatters through which rusted springs and discolored padding showed.

Mice scuttled away ahead of Mallory as he crossed the big room, went through an arch into a second room, this one lined with bookshelves filled with cockroach-pitted spines. Papers were scattered among the drifted dust across the rotted carpet. Gusts of cold wind filtered in through a broken window almost choked by the foliage of the branch that had grown through it.

A grand staircase led up in a wide sweep to a second floor. The high-ceilinged bedrooms here were furnished in the same ornate style, and were in the same state of decay as the rooms below.

At the back of the house Mallory found a kitchen with high wooden counters, a coal stove, a hand pump beside the cast-iron sinks. A door looked out on a weed-choked garden with paths and a fountain almost obscured by wild-grown shrubs. A tree with a trunk a foot in diameter grew up through the tumbled flagstones of a terrace. Far back, the ruins of a gazebo were visible among shoulder-high growth.

“What does it mean?” Mallory asked himself half aloud. “What is this place? Have I ever been here before?”

He turned and was looking at a high, narrow, brown-painted door set in a wall paneled with inch-wide strips. He tried the big brown porcelain knob. The door swung inward on a dusty landing above a flight of steep wooden steps.

Mallory stood looking down into the total blackness. A dank odor of wet masonry and toadstools rose to his nostrils.

“Hello,” he called. “Anybody home?” His voice gave back a muffled echo. He felt light-headed, unreal.

“Came this far,” he muttered. “Might as well see it all.” Unsteadily, clinging to the worn wooden handrail, Mallory started down the steps. Halfway down he had to stop and wait for the dizziness to pass. At the bottom he fumbled in a pocket, brought out a book of matches. With difficulty he struck one. The guttering light showed him a stone floor, the bulk of an ancient coal-burning furnace, a coal bin behind it, sagging ceiling beams, and at the far side of the cavernlike cellar, a small door of heavy planks bound with iron.

“That way,” he grunted as the match faded and winked out. He lit another, made his way around rotting wooden crates stacked in his path, tried the big iron handle. It turned with a dry rasp of rusty metal. The door swung back to reveal a small room lined with shelves lined with Mason jars. A few of the jars had burst, lay in shards among the tarry remains of their contents.

“Storeroom,” he muttered. “Jams and jellies just like Mother used to make.”

There was a sharp *snick!* as of oiled metal sliding home. A line of light appeared in the end wall, widened as a panel slid back smoothly into the masonry wall.

Mallory was looking into a dim-lit room with walls of smooth gray, a floor of dull-polished black. The entire ceiling glowed with an even white light. Bulky shapes—safes? television sets?—were spaced along a side wall; above them a row of six-inch disks of pale radiance flickered and writhed. He went forward into the room. As he passed the door, a bright point of light winked on in the wall opposite him, dazzling directly in his eyes. He turned his face away; the light blinked off. There was a brief clatter, like the sound of an electric typewriter operated at top speed.

Mallory took a step backward; as he did, a sound on his left made him turn. A rectangular section of wall, three feet by six, pivoted slowly open.

Through the opening a room was visible.

An illuminated ceiling shed a harsh glow on a glittering framework erected over a flat, padded slab on which lay a man so withered that at first Mallory assumed that it was a mummified corpse he saw. But the wizened head turned; dim eyes looked across at him.

“Algoric, thank God you’ve come,” said a voice like the rustle of dry leaves.

5

Mallory wiped a hand across his eyes, but when he looked again, nothing had changed. He took a step into the room; warm air touched his face. His pulse beat heavily in his head; his vision was blurry, indistinct. He crossed to the cot, looked down at the shrunken body cocooned in wires and tubes linking him to the machines around him. He touched a bone-thin arm. It felt dry, cool—but alive.

“I guess you’re real,” he said. “As real as the rest of it. Who are you? What is this place?”

“You’re late, Algoric,” the whispery voice said. “I’ve waited . . . so long. But you’re here at last. I pray it’s not too late”

“Too late—for what?”

“I’m sorry for everything that happened, Algoric. But I’ll try to make amends.”

“What are we talking about?” Mallory demanded. “Are you my hallucination, or am I yours?” He laughed, then leaned against the framework as another wave of dizziness rose over him like black water.

“. . . size of the task force,” the old voice was whispering. “Will they arrive in time? Ah, it’s late, so late. But who could have known. And now . . .” The old man’s eyes focused again on Mallory’s face. A startled expression tightened his sagging features. He raised his head an inch.

“But—you’re not Algoric! Who are you? How . . . ?” He fell back; his eyes went vague. Mallory leaned over the semiconscious man. “Wake up, old man! Who are you? Talk to me!”

The ancient’s face was slack; his lips moved, but no sound passed them. A dangling wire caught Mallory’s eye. It had the look of a disconnected lead. A few inches from its tip was an empty socket of the size to fit the jack. He plugged it in. At once, a dozen indicator lights winked on on the console beside the cot. A soft whirr of pumps started up. An articu-

lated metal arm deployed, lowered a spongy pad to contact with the old man's chest, moved gently over it. There were other muted clicks and hum-mings; the impression was of a complex apparatus going into action. The old man's face spasmed, went slack, his breathing deepened, his thin body twitched and relaxed. Mallory sensed that he had gone into a deep sleep.

"Good idea," he said, feeling the stiffness of his lips, the thickness of his tongue. "Me, too. Talk later . . . if I'm not already dreaming."

Awkwardly, painfully, like a man in a daze, he pulled off his coat, rolled it, lay on the warm floor, and tucked the garment under his head. Total fatigue was like a scythe cutting all the wires that had kept him going for the past thirty-six hours.

6

When he woke, the old man was watching him with bright, feverish eyes. "Ah, you're back," he croaked. "I've been thinking: Algoric sent you—in his place. But where is he? Why didn't he come?"

"I don't know anyone of that name." Mallory got to his feet. The headache was less—merely a dull soreness—but his arm was stiff and painful. His stomach felt like the embers of a coal fire.

The old man looked stricken. His thoughts seemed to wander; he shook his head and looked again at Mallory. "What is the date?"

"February," Mallory said.

The old man groaned. "Time is the traitor," he said. "What passes, out there?"

"Lots of things," Mallory said. "Lets start with the invasion. They've set up their HQ in Beatrice. Alien creatures, imitation humans. Hundreds of them. They've hypnotized everyone in the city. They don't seem to be anywhere else. The country's disorganized, in a state of shock—or worse. Radio and TV dead, no signs of the Army, any kind of organized authority."

The old man made a distressed sound. "Disaster, disaster . . ." Again he seemed to pull himself together with an effort.

"Who are you?" he demanded of Mallory. "How did you come here?"

"That's what I intended to ask you," Mallory said. "This place . . . I had an image of it in my mind—but not as it is; I saw it full of life and light and activity. There were horses, and people in old-style clothing. It

was like a dream that kept pulling at me. I came here—I don't know how. I seemed to know the way."

"I failed," the old man muttered. "How could it end like this? Betrayal, hatred, death . . . and worse than death."

"I answered your questions," Mallory said. "Now it's your turn. Who are you? What is this place?"

"It doesn't matter now, young man. Too late, too late . . ."

"Tell me anyway."

The old man shook his head wearily. "You wouldn't understand . . . or believe me."

"Try me."

"How could you? You know nothing of . . . the other world, the great world."

"I know we've been invaded by creatures that are not of this earth," Mallory said curtly. "What are they? What do they want?"

"Want? You misunderstand, Mallory. They want nothing; they know nothing—not as you and I know and want."

"They wanted something badly enough to invade the planet," Mallory countered.

"No . . . invade is not the correct word," the old man said. "Your planet is not occupied; it's infected. They're not invaders; they're a disease."

7

"The Mone," the old man said, "is a single organism whose being is implicit in a multitude of discrete units. It arose eons ago, on a world of a some distant galaxy.

Perhaps at first it was a simple virus, mindless and bodiless, existing only as a pattern to be impressed on living cells, devouring them, spreading, growing.

"But it is the basic trait of life—even the half-life, pseudolife of a virus—to seek to expand. It is conjectured that in time the Mone came to be the dominant—indeed, the only organized matter on its native world. It—or they—developed . . . not intelligence, but a system of instinctive reactions to situations comparable to the ability of some of your native insects to construct elaborate nests, weave geometric webs, erect traps, store food, herd other insects, navigate, communicate—all without true thought,

as humans know thought. And like other organized matter, it was faced with a choice: evolve or die. The Mone evolved.

“We have no way of knowing the intermediate steps by which the Mone occupied first its native system, then learned to cross interstellar distances—nor the process by which it elaborated its ultimate, sophisticated methods of survival. We do know that when it crossed intergalactic space to reach our Galaxy, it had become a force of fearsome potency. Its encapsulated germ plasm could endure the rigors of cold, vacuum, the passage of time until the warmth of a sun drew it close. Reacting to the gravitational wells of planets, a spore pod would steer itself to a world—and it mattered not on what kind of world it found itself. It was infinitely adaptable, capable of thriving in molten magma, or on bare ice at a degree or two above absolute zero—or in an atmosphere of incandescent gas. In response to exterior conditions, the germinal units would ready themselves; then the pod would burst, releasing a thousand self-sufficient embryonic creatures, equipped to cope with local conditions, however severe—to grow, construct a nest for the Queen Mone, support and feed her until her spawning time. Then—with the planet seeded with multiple billions of worker-forms—the next phase was entered. This time all effort was concentrated on the creation of million upon million of pods, each packed with the seeds of a new planet-infecting force. In six months—or a year—or a century—when the planet was exhausted—the pods would be launched from the stripped world, spreading the plague outward from star to star at a geometric rate. In a million years—or less—the entire Galaxy would be only a dead husk from which all life had been stripped as locusts strip a wheat field.”

“Spores,” Mallory broke the silence. “Viruses. The things I saw were big, powerful. They used tools, spoke—”

“Your chromosomes bear the genetic pattern which determines your form, your abilities. This pattern varies from species to species, phylum to phylum. In the Mone, the only pattern is—adaptability. Earthly species adapt to environment over a long period, by evolution. The Mone has evolved the ability to make instant adaptation of its chromosomes to meet whatever pressures it senses await the new-spawned generation.”

“All this doesn’t explain what’s happened to Gill—to everyone. Why couldn’t I make her understand that something was wrong? And why was my daughter’s room sealed? Why?”

“The Mone uses whatever natural resources it finds.

Workers are needed to construct the nest, to prepare the special foods

and supply the physical needs of the Queen Mone. Here, it seized on a cadre of humans, instilled in its slaves a false image of the world and of their roles, supplied them with false motivations to make them docile and productive. As for the sealed room—if the girl was missing, the parents might best be soothed by deleting her from their memories and eliminating all evidence of her existence. A protective field which creates a sense of illness in interlopers effectively discourages interference.”

“And where do you come in?”

“A Mone infection on a distant world escaped the notice of the Galactic authorities until too late; the cell spored before it was destroyed. Many of the spore pods were tracked and destroyed, but many were lost. An object only inches long, composed of an inert organic material, is a difficult target to seek out in the depths of space. Therefore we established a spherical shell of Watcher Stations on outlying worlds, alert for the approach of a pod, which are detectable at Solar distances by our instruments.

“This is such a station. Two men were assigned to man it—dedicated men, prepared to wait out the long years of the vigil—watching for an event of only remote statistical likelihood, for space is wide, and worlds are many.

“One of the two men was Algoric. I, Gonyl, was the other.”

“Go on,” Mallory said. “If there are alien invaders—or an alien infection—I suppose there could be extraterrestrial undercover agents watching for them. But what went wrong? How did they get past you?”

The old man seemed not to notice Mallory’s question.

“We were intrigued when we realized that this world bore a native human population. We chose this area for its remoteness,” he went on, “near the heart of an almost empty continent. The year was 1827. We felt we had chosen well. The histories of human cultures on numberless worlds led us to predict that a thousand years would pass before the creeping settlement of the land reached us.

“We soon realized our error. We should have acted at once to transfer our installation to a still more remote area: Alaska, Siberia, Antarctica. But—we were normal men. We were reluctant to exile ourselves in a frozen tundra. We rationalized. We accommodated. In the end we welcomed the availability of the society of our own kind. We used our equipment to decorate and furnish our Spartan station in a style aping that of the distant centers of such local civilization as existed, constructed gardens and a road, learned the local speech. We were still young, possessed of limitless

wealth in synthesized gold; life was rich, even here on a primitive planet so far from our birthworld. Our house was filled with music, gaiety, the loveliest of women, the cleverest of men; we had the finest wines, the best of foods; we hunted, we danced, we entertained. And time passed

“Algoric was the first to see what was coming. We had watched the advance of the native culture from the Age of Wood to the Age of Coal in two of your brief generations. Your population had quadrupled, and already the first telegraphs were in use, and the experiments in internal combustion, electric power, and wireless told us that in another few decades your technology would have outstripped the capacity of our initial security arrangements. It was plain that soon it would be necessary for us to dissolve our pleasant way of life, undertake the task of finding a new site, rebuilding our monitor beacon in such a way as to preserve its indelectibility.

“Plain to me, that is. Algoric laughed at me. You see—he had come to love a native woman. He would not leave her. The threat of the Mone, he said, was no more than a fever fancy, a madman’s delusion. Even those who sent us here reckoned the chances at no more than one in millions that we would ever be called on to raise the alarm. He would be a fool to throw his life away for that remote eventuality.

“‘In exile, I’ve built a new life,’ he railed at me. ‘Would you have me leave it behind now to camp on some desolate ice sheet and wait a thousand years in loneliness for that which will never come?’

“I was insistent. He was adamant. In the end—we fought.

“I was a powerful man in those days—but he was more powerful—and he was driven to a frenzy by lust for his native woman. He left me here for dead and, after smashing such of the equipment as he could reach without my help, fled with her.

“But instead of dying, I survived: broken, crippled, shattered—but alive. The machines which would have repaired me, maintained my youth and health, were smashed beyond repair; but I was able in time to reactivate the scanning beacon and renew the vigil.

“I closed the house and, to protect myself from casual intrusion, modified the exterior to present the appearance of neglect and abandonment, erected protective fields which projected an aura of desolation and confusion. Against Algoric my measures were more specific: I set up a tuned band which would affect only his specific cortical pattern, which would drive him mad with pain if he approached within the interdicted distance.

“So the years passed. Twice Algoric approached; each time I heard his

telepathic calls to me, his frantic pleas to be allowed to return. The woman was long dead, his folly turned to bitter ashes. But though my heart was torn, I was adamant. He had broken the sacred oath; I could no longer trust him.

“Then one day I detected a faint echo from deep space. I monitored it, watched it grow until there was no longer any doubt: A Mone space pod was approaching, had in fact passed the orbit of Pluto, and was falling sunward with gradually increasing velocity. In short, the day long-dreaded was approaching. The Mone was here.

“I knew at once what I must do. The no-space transmitter which forms the heart of this station is so designed that it cannot be activated by a single mind. The complex code key which unlocks its mighty forces consists of two complementary, interlocking concept grids, with one of which I had been entrusted. Algoric alone possessed the other.

“Alone, I had detected the approaching menace; but the efforts of both of us were required to alert the Great Worlds to our danger.

“Once we were close friends, Algoric and I. We knew the patterns of each other’s minds well enough to maintain contact over planetary distances. I called to him—and at last he came.

“I knew the risk I was taking, but there was no choice open to me. I dropped my protective barriers, allowed him to enter the station. For the first time in half a century we stood face to face.

“I told him that the past must be forgiven, our differences forgiven. Our duty now was plain: to join together to send the translight pulse which would bring a Galactic force to burn out the infection before it could spread.

“But he refused. Against all duty and tradition of the Watchers, he refused. We had lost enough, he said, sacrificed enough. Now it was too late to save the planet; the Galactic force would arrive to find only the Mone’s abandoned spawning nest, a million empty pod-launching sites perched on the sterile rock of a looted world. And even if the pods had not yet been broadcast, planetwide sterilization would be required to destroy the ripening spore pods. And in that holocaust we too would die.

“Instead, he babbled, we should use the capability of the no-space transmitter to escape from this doomed world to a place of safety. There were a thousand planets where we could disappear into the population mass, regain all the benefits of the Great Civilization that we had given up when we volunteered so long ago.

“I refused—as he must have known I would. He demanded that I

deliver to him my portion of the code symbol, and when I would not, he raged, begged, wheedled in vain. In the end he would have killed me—but I laid hands on a hidden weapon, and as he struck me down, I shot him.

“I fell; he did not, though I think my shot struck home. I lost consciousness, and when I reawakened, he was gone. My head was clearer then. Too late, I saw the folly of what I had done: Algoric gone—alone; and myself, dying. Who then would stand between the Mone and a helpless world? But perhaps he would return. With great difficulty I managed to deploy the life-support cage and place myself in it, as you see me now. I called to him; there was a faint response, dim and far away. I called again; again and again, as I summoned strength. Sometimes I sensed a response, sometimes nothing. And I waited.

“And now—instead of Algoric, a stranger.” The old man’s head slumped back; his skeletal hands twitched as if to clutch at some vanished opportunity. “Algoric,” he muttered. “If I could but have known”

“Algoric’s dead, Gonyl,” Mallory said sharply. “You and I are still alive. What can we do?”

Gonyl made an animal sound of despair. “Nothing! Nothing! Human weakness, criminal weakness. And yet . . . could you have known Riane in her youth”

“Riane,” Mallory said. “It seems to me I’ve heard that name before.”

“Tall, graceful as a willow, eyes of that strange, pale blue, hair black as Zenith. A stronger man than Algoric would have counted a world well lost for her. And yet, had my own faith been stronger”

“I remember now.” Mallory frowned thoughtfully. “In the dream the stories Uncle Al used to tell me—” Mallory broke off, his face tight.

“The dream—this house—and Uncle Al. The clothes he wore”

“Yes, yes?” Gonyl was staring up at him, perplexed. “What . . . ?”

“Old man,” Mallory said, “I have a hunch my imaginary uncle and your friend Algoric were the same man.”

8

“I think I begin to understand,” Gonyl said. “The house you’ve described seeing in your ‘dream’ is of course this house—as it was half a century ago; as it was when Algoric had last seen it. His appearance to you was of course a telepathic contact.”

“Why? How?”

“There must have been a reason,” Gonyl said. “Algoric was not a man given to caprice—” He looked at Mallory, startled. “Of course! That’s the likeness I saw! You have his eyes, his mouth, his bearing!”

“Are you trying to tell me that Algoric was . . . my father?”

“Not your father—but your grandfather, perhaps—or your great-grandfather! Of course! No wonder he took an interest in you, visited you in the mind if not in the flesh—”

“Why not in the flesh? God knows I could have used a relative—”

“Riane must have aged and died long, long ago. His family would have grown to adulthood—while he aged not at all. In the end, it would have been necessary for him to ‘die’ or to disappear, to be believed dead, never to reappear. But he could have maintained knowledge of his descendants; could have learned of it when you were orphaned, have seen to your care—and established a mind link with you in infancy, before the pattern of acculturation made such contact impossible.”

“Could have, yes. But why?”

“Why not? Algoric was a man, like other men. But . . . “

“But what?”

“There must have been a reason. And that reason must bear a relationship to your presence here, now! He had told you of this station; you sensed my call—my need of you!” Gonyl’s expression was one of dawning hope. “He abandoned his post—but perhaps he did not entirely forget his duty. It’s possible that he selected you to carry on if he should fail; what use to lead you here, unless you brought with you the thing I need?”

“All I brought was myself,” Mallory said. “And it looks as if that’s not going to help.”

“Of course you’re not consciously aware of it—but have it you must—buried in your mind, waiting for the time when it would be needed. And the time is now.”

“You’d better spell it out, old man—”

“The code pattern, Jeff Mallory! The missing half of the key that will unlock the transmitter. You have it—you *must* have it!”

“Sorry. I wouldn’t know a code pattern if it crawled up my leg.”

“It would be deeply buried, inaccessible to any ordinary probe. But—you can uncover it.”

“If I can, I don’t know it.”

“Find a chair, sit here beside me, close enough that I may touch you. Then—close your eyes, relax your body. And remember, remember”

Leaning back in the big wooden chair he had brought down from the kitchen, Mallory listened to the whispering voice, letting his thoughts rove back, back

It was night; the lights had been dimmed in the hall outside the big bedroom where he lay in his bed, one of four in the high-ceilinged room. The others were already asleep; he could hear their soft breathing in the dark. But he lay awake, watching the moon through the branches of a leafless tree outside the curtained window. It had been a cold, wintry day; the afternoon ball game had been canceled, and there had been music appreciation in the library instead, under the watchful eye of the tutor. And afterward, at dinner, Miss Wincher had read aloud another chapter of David Copperfield. It made him unhappy to think about David Copperfield. It was pleasanter to think of Uncle Al. Perhaps Uncle Al would come again soon; tonight, even

"Yes," the whispered voice murmured. "Tonight . . . Uncle Al will visit you"

Uncle Al was standing by the bed, a big, tall, wide figure, with long hair like Edgar Allan Poe's; but his face was not like Poe's. His jaw was square, his smile merry, his eyes dark and brilliant. There were ruffles in the opening of the velvet-collared coat and more ruffles at the cuffs. A heavy gold watch chain crossed the flowered silk of Uncle Al's vest, and rings sparkled on his fingers.

"Ah, Jeff, lad," he said, in the deep rumbling voice that was so soft it hardly disturbed the silence but could have been heard across any distance. "Where shall we go tonight?"

"To the house, Uncle Al!"

"Right you are! Let's be off"

He was drifting beside Uncle Al. Uncle Al was strolling unconcernedly along, smoking a great black cigar, just as though there were solid ground under his feet instead of open air. The sky was full of moonlight, and far below, the earth was like a game board spreading to the horizon, set out with toy houses and roads and forests. Then they swept higher, sailing down through great moonlit cloud-canyons, soaring like birds, with no more effort than a tilt of the hand for steering.

The house stood on a hilltop, blazing with light. There were carriages on the curved drive; glossy horses pranced, snorting mist from their

nostrils. Men in high hats and capes and women in bright gowns crossed the wide veranda, entered in through the open door under the jeweled fanlight

They passed through the wall, not bothering with the door—a trick he had always meant to ask about but never had. Then they were in the room where the magic machine rested on its platform, a thing of lights and planes and glittering complexities.

“There it waits,” Uncle Al said. “In vain—we hope. And yet—someday they may come. And they’re villains, Jeff lad. We mustn’t let them carry out their schemes, eh? No one but you and I know about them, Jeff; you and I and one other. That’s our secret, you see, the one we must never tell.

“Now, these scoundrels we watch for—they always send their calling card ahead. It’s not a thing you or I can see, lad. But the machine can see it. And when it does—if it does—why, then—it tells us! And then—we know what to do, eh, Jeff?”

“I’m not sure, Uncle Al. That part’s hard. It’s not as much fun as the rest. It makes my head hurt”

“What, a bright lad like you, Jeff? A lad who can fly, and walk through walls, and share the secret of the machine? Nonsense! You can do it, boy! Try! With me, now: first we picture the primary matrix, thus”

It was like remembering the whole multiplication table all at once; like thinking of every move in a chess game at the same time; like looking at the parts of a jigsaw puzzle laid out on a table and seeing in one glance where each part fit every other part

“I can’t, Uncle Al! The first part slides away when I try to make the next piece!”

“Slowly, lad, one segment at a time. Make it, build it, fix it in place; then go on to the next . . . like this”

It was like balancing a chair on two legs on a high wire, like catching mist in your hands. There was no one in the world but himself and Uncle Al; no walls, no roof, no sky, no space. Only the bright, intangible abstractions, the elusive configurations that slipped aside, dissolved, shifted into new shapes. But, urged and guided by the deep, friendly voice, he tried, and tried again; and at last the parts began to fall into place, their shifting and flowing tamed; suddenly the matrix flowered about him, as beautiful and complex as the anatomy of an orchid diagramed in light.

“That’s it, Jeff, lad! Good! Good! Good! Now hold it! Don’t let it slip away . . . while we move on to the secondary pattern!”

Thoughts were coral-shapes cast in lead, soft and gray and impossibly heavy. He pushed and tugged at them with fingers of smoke, while eons passed. And one by one, he intertwined form with intricate form, erecting a structure of concept that overlay the glowing matrical pattern as flesh overlies bones. He was tired—so tired! It was a task that had gone on forever, that would never end. Somewhere, far away and unreal, there was an easier, softer existence, remote now as forgotten dreams. But for him there was only the ever-accelerating, outward-growing mosaic that seemed to swell now of its own dynamic growth-urge, completing itself like a living creature that grows from embryo to maturity under the relentless pressure of genetic compulsion.

And at last it was complete. He gazed, bemused on the blinding beauty of the fifth-order Galactic code complex, listening as Uncle Al gave him his instructions

Then blackness descended over him, washing him down, down, into grateful Nirvana.

10

It was a long struggle back to consciousness. For a long time he tried to weave the thin, insistent voice into a dream in which he drifted, without thought or care, over a rosy landscape spreading far below. But this wasn't Uncle Al's comforting rumble; this was someone else, some intruder who would drag him back to face bleak reality. But he wouldn't go. He had earned his rest—

“Wake up, Jeff Mallory!” the voice crackled. “Wake up!”

He opened his eyes. For an instant, before the last of the dream concept dissolved, he saw the room as a curiously temporary arrangement of energy quanta in the form called matter, shaped as an environment for the curious protoplasmic aggregations known as human beings

Then there was a shifting, the ceiling was only a ceiling, the walls just walls. And the old man who looked at him with burning eyes . . . what was he . . . ?

“You have it!” Gonyl said. “I saw it in your face!”

“Maybe,” Mallory said blurrily. “I saw things—remembered things I hadn't thought of in years. Things I wouldn't have believed I could ever forget.”

“Now—we must act quickly! Wheel me across to the rectangle you see

incised on the floor, there.” He pointed with a trembling finger at the spot.

“Not so fast, Gonyl,” Mallory said. “Give me time to collect my thoughts.”

“I can spare no time now, Jeff Mallory. Wheel me to the platform!”

“You’re in a little too much of a hurry, Gonyl. I want—”

“To perdition with what you want,” Gonyl spat the words. “Must you force me to extreme measures?” The impact in Mallory’s brain was like a silent blow from a hammer made of ice. Light and darkness whirled chaotically; through the maelstrom, Gonyl’s voice cut sharp and clear: *“While you dozed, I took the precaution of establishing a control pattern over your brain, Jeff Mallory. You will do as I command you. Now!”*

The blindness cleared; Mallory’s head rang with a high, insistent humming. His fingertips felt numb, his limbs remote. He found himself standing, moving to the wheeled cot on which the old man lay, turning it, rolling it across to the indicated position.

“Now!” Gonyl’s voice spoke inside his head; a firm and resonant voice, as the feeble quaver might once have been. The platform stirred underfoot. They were dropping down through a black-walled shaft into darkness. Abruptly, light blossomed around them as the platform came to rest at the side of a gray-walled passage.

“That way,” Gonyl commanded. Numbly, Mallory wheeled the cart along the corridor to the left, emerged into a circular chamber empty except for a black drum at its center.

Above the squat black cylinder a tiny mote of light came into being. It grew brighter, expanding into a dazzling sphere of glowing mist which solidified, glazed over, became a mirror-bright sphere eight feet in diameter which rested on the pedestal at the center of the room. Gonyl uttered a strange, croaking sigh. Again Mallory felt the touch of the old man’s thoughts among his own: *“Now, Jeff Mallory!”*

At once the key pattern formed in his mind, met and matched the counterpattern

The polished surface of the sphere blushed over as if a breath of moisture-laden air had touched it. Patterns of color flickered and darted across its face. A point of utter blackness came into existence at the center of the side they faced; it dilated, spreading swiftly outward until only a glowing rim remained to encompass a disk of blackness sprinkled with sparkling points of light, like a circular window looking out onto the night sky.

“Place me inside,” Gonyl ordered.

“Now, Jeff lad,” Uncle Al’s voice spoke clearly in Mallory’s mind.

It was as if a door had opened, flooding his brain with a crystalline light. In utmost clarity, he saw the contours of the abstraction that was his mind-field, saw how it was gripped in a web of thought-force, saw how and where to touch it

And was free.

“All right.” He addressed the withered mask of amazement and dawning fear that stared up at him. “I’ve heard all your lies, Gonyl. Now tell me the truth.”

Chapter 7

1

Gonyl raged. Then he wept. In the end he babbled: “Ah, you’ve taken advantage of me, a poor, weak old man, and it isn’t fair, it isn’t fair! But then, all my life I’ve been a victim of circumstance, driven willy-nilly by forces outside myself, by the willfulness of others. Listen, Jeff Mallory.

“The no-space transmitter can be used in more than one fashion: it will remove me—and you as well—to a place of safety, far from here. There, I will make my report. The planet will be sterilized, robbing the Mone of their prize, and—”

“You plan to run out, in other words. Isn’t that what you accused Algoric of?”

“This world is doomed! Had we acted in time, we might have saved it—but that time has passed. We can do nothing now! And as for myself—I’m dying. Your arrival was a miracle—the only small stroke of fortune that’s come to me in all my long exile. But once on the other side I can live again, restored to full vigor! What will be accomplished by my remaining here to die, sick and alone?”

“The holes in your story show, old man,” Mallory said. “Algoric was the villain of the piece, eh? He wanted to run out, but you were true blue.”

“I was faithful to my duty—”

“Is that why you killed him?”

“But—as I said—he escaped—”

“His dead body is lying in the front hall, Gonyl. There’s a strange thing about that corpse. It’s dressed in old-fashion-ed clothes. And he was

still young—and you aren't. I think *you* were the one who was locked out, Gonyl. I think he let you in because you swore you came to help—and after you got inside, you shot him—perhaps by accident—and then realized, too late, that you were still trapped because he'd locked everything in the station against you!"

For a moment Gonyl's face twisted as if torn by conflicting forces; then he uttered a snarling laugh.

"Very well! What does it matter now? You've guessed a part of the truth—but I robbed Algoric of the sweetest fruit of his folly! I fled—and took his woman with me! She bore his child and died—so his victory was a hollow one! But all that is past, long past. Into the transmitter, come, a whole new world waiting, of a glory you can't conceive!"

"I suppose he called you, as soon as he detected the Mone's approach. He thought that now, with the enemy on the way, you 'd be willing to bury the hatchet, do the job you came for. But you were still thinking of nothing but your own skin."

"Lies!" Gonyl howled. "And while you evolve these fantasies, our moments of opportunity dwindle away like wine from a broken glass!"

"I think in that last moment, when he knew he was dying, he called to me," Mallory went on. "That's what brought me out of the coma I was in, brought me here. Now you're ready to use me to help you escape, and never mind the fate of six billion human beings."

"You said . . . six billion humans? Jeff Mallory, you don't know—you haven't yet grasped the situation—"

"I've grasped enough of it to know that as long as there's one forlorn chance of stopping this cancer before it's too late, I'm going to take it!"

"But—Jeff Mallory—there is no human race to save. Surely you know! The first act of the Mone pod on picking a breeding site is to broadcast a killing gas which wipes the planet clean of organic life except in the protected area of the nest. The people of your city of Beatrice live—as mindless slaves of the Mone. All the rest, Jeff Mallory, are dead!"

It seemed to Mallory that he stood for a long time, stunned, his thoughts groping over the shattering concept of a murdered planet, of cities filled with corpses, of deserted farms and airports and silent factories and drifting ocean liners—groped, unable to come to grips with so vast a disaster.

“. . . now you see why we must make haste to save ourselves,” Gonyl was babbling. “Join with me, Jeff Mallory; I’ll show you wonders to make the proudest capitals of this drear world seem no more than the wattle huts of savages!”

“All dead,” Mallory said. “All but my hometown. They’re still alive; there’s still a chance. A few thousand people . . . enough to start again . . .”

“Their minds are gone!” Gonyl shrieked. “They died, too, in a more ghastly way than the billions who coughed once and knew no more! Death will be a mercy to them—”

“Not while I’m alive,” Mallory said—and staggered as a phantom blow struck at his brain, this time with massive power. It was as though a steel glove had gripped his mind, was crushing it, blanking out all thought except the command that rang like a trumpet in the turmoil. He felt himself driven back, back, felt his grip on reality dissolving; vagrant memories flashed before his waning consciousness—the walled-up door to Lori’s room; the pale tower rising in the city; Sally’s upturned face; the wild eyes of Brother Jack; the Old House, standing dark and silent in the night—flashed and were gone.

One image lingered, dim and insubstantial. The figure of Uncle Al, tall and commanding in the moonlight that streamed through the window.

“You know what to do, Jeff lad,” he said gently. *“I’ve taught you . . . and you learned well . . .”*

Mallory rallied then, gathered himself, with a quick, decisive thrust broke through the enveloping shell, turned on it, shattered it into a thousand fragments.

Gonyl’s thin wail of despair rang in Mallory’s ears. He saw the ancient limbs jerk, sending the withered body over the edge of the cot to slam against the floor; saw the claw-hands reach out to scrabble at the threshold of the goal he had sought for so long; saw the skeletal arm fall

limp, the skull-head drop to rest against the floor.

“Fool, and worse than fool,” Gonyl whispered. His eyelids fluttered, came to rest half open over glazed corneas. Looking down at the dead man, Mallory sensed that his last words had been directed not at Mallory but at himself.

3

It was all clear now, the entirety of the message so long ago impressed on the sleeping brain of a child by the man who had called himself Uncle Al: Algoric, agent of a vast and distant civilization to which the highest cultures of Earth would seem as primitive as the first rude hearths of Neanderthal. And yet, to Algoric this world had been more than a pawn in the game of Galactic war. He had loved a woman here, loved her well enough to give her up in the cause of his duty to her planet. And after she had gone, thinking him dead, he had followed her in his mind, had known of the birth of her daughter; and after her death he had watched the development of the child, had seen her grow to womanhood, marry, and bear a son in turn.

A son named Geoffrey Mallory.

From his place of exile Algoric had reached out with his mind to touch that of the infant; had visited him in dreams, walked with him through enchanted lands of light and shadow; had shown him the great Galactic civilization, taught him the history of the long war with the creatures called Mone, revealed to him the secret of the station, taught him its uses, the keys and codes that would unlock its powers.

And more: he had informed him of the nature of the renegade Gonyl, warned him of the man's hidden strengths and fatal weaknesses-and had prepared a trap.

Without both portions of the code complex, the no-space transmitter could not be activated. If the day came when one of the robot sensors in trans-Plutonian orbit screamed its alarm, Algoric knew he would have no choice but to call Gonyl back, permit him entry into the station. Perhaps, in the face of the evidence of the threat he had denied could ever exist, he would undergo a change of heart, forget his oath of vengeance, let down his guard, and join with Algoric in transmitting the warning signal. Algoric had no choice but to trust him. It would be necessary for him to open his mind, drop all defenses, to join in the creation of the complex

mental pulse which alone would unlock the transmitter. And if in that moment Gonyl chose to strike-

He would meet disappointment.

With utmost delicacy, Algoric prepared the booby trap within his own mind, setting up the pattern of mental forces that would, at the first hint of treachery, fire a killing pulse into his innermost ego-center. Instead of looting Algoric's unprotected mind of its secret, Gonyl would find himself linked mind to mind with a corpse.

And in that moment of total disorientation, before Gonyl could break the numbing contact with death, Algoric's final command would imprint itself on the other's mind, unknown and irresistible.

And having completed his preparations, Algoric had buried the entire gestalt under a hypnotic command, leaving Mallory with only the superficial conscious memory of the dream visits of his "imaginary" uncle.

Then he had waited. The years had passed; Mallory had grown to man's estate, taken up his career, with only an occasional fleeting recollection of the shadowy dream figure of his childhood. Until the day when Algoric, dying, sent out the call summoning Mallory to the station.

Even then, Algoric had withheld the final stroke. It was possible that in the eleventh hour Gonyl might recover his lost sense of the duty at which he had failed. If so, he would link with Mallory to transmit the warning message. If not—if, instead, he used this final opportunity to attempt to loot Mallory's mind of the Algoric-symbol—then the over-riding command would come into effect.

To Mallory: the order to strike, take the pattern from Gonyl's mind.

To Gonyl: the command to deliver up the prize without a struggle.

Standing alone in the transmitter chamber, Mallory looked with wonderment on the dazzling concept-structure that rose in his mind on command: the unified Galactic command-code, both halves joined in a fusion that was more than the sum of the parts.

He reached out along the intertwining lines and planes of thought-stuff, touched the transmitter control; instantly, the disk narrowed, closing in on itself until the original silvery globe rested on the squat pedestal. Another touch, and the black portal opened wide again.

The utter simplicity of the device fascinated Mallory. A touch—so—and the globe would fold in on itself, its latent energies dissolved in a single shaped pulse of no-space oscillation that would flash across half the Galaxy to record the alarm, pinpointing its location on a minor world far out in the Galactic Arm.

A different touch—so—and the energy configuration would re-form itself, become a matter transmitter of limited range using no-space energies to thrust a material pulse across space at light-speed—a pulse consisting of the entity which was Jeff Mallory. He would sense no lapse of time, though years would pass before the quantum bundle impinged on the receiving station on an artificial planet a tenth of the way to Galactic Center.

There he would deliver the news of the Mone investment of another world. Too late, then, to salvage the native population. A crew would be dispatched at once to deal with the tainted world—and Jeff Mallory would be alive, a free citizen of the glittering Galactic society.

It interested him to note that he had not the slightest impulse to avail himself of the latter opportunity. Uncle Al's instructions had been simple and imperative: relay the warning which would be instantaneously delivered and instantaneously acted on. In hours, the special alert crew would arrive via no-space. If they were too late—if the Mone had already spawned—it would be necessary to mind-bomb the entire planet. If not, it would be sufficient to dissolve the Mone nest and sterilize the planetary surface for a hundred miles around the center of infection. Insofar as Mallory knew, the spawning had not yet taken place. If he acted swiftly, most of the planet would survive

Mallory looked at the gleaming sphere which waited for his command to send the alarm flashing at superlight-speed across space. He reached out and switched it off. It fell in on itself, dwindled to a blazing point of brilliance, and died.

“You counted on me, Uncle Al,” Mallory said aloud. “But I'm not a Galactic; I'm a poor, instinct-ridden primitive. You left me with two choices. I can't take either of them.”

4

Mallory left the house two hours later, after searching it from attic to subcellar. He had turned up nothing that might be useful as a weapon against the Mone; but he had found a pair of good boots—of Galactic make—a warm coat, food.

In early evening gloom he made his way back down through the dense-grown shrubbery, emerged on the unsur-faced road he had followed coming in. The searchers were gone; no lights moved anywhere

in the broad valley spreading below him, faintly visible in the fading light. His present position, as well as he could estimate by dead reckoning, was some fifty miles northwest of Beatrice. He ^t off across an open field toward a distant line of trees, impatient at the slow pace, wishing for a car. Time was running out—might have already run out. Hundreds of billions of spores, Gonyl had said. Mallory scanned the skies, wondering what appearance such an outpouring of alien seed would present. A gray cloud, spreading over the stars? A murky overcast, rolling forward like a fogbank at sea?

But the sky was clear, swept clean by a bitter wind. Dry cornstalks, unharvested, blanketed the ground, blown flat with their burdens of ripe ears by the winter winds. A doomed species, incapable of reproducing its own kind, now that the hand of man was gone. Next year a hardy crop of weeds would spring up all across the empty plains of the continent; succeeding years would bring new varieties, and in half a century the old grasslands would have reclaimed their own. The wild cattle and horses grazing there would burgeon enormously, and the timid bison, brought back from the brink, would again darken the plains with their numbers. And the gaunt timber wolves, emerging from the remote wilds of the north, would run in packs, pulling down the weak and the lame and the aged and the very young. And it would be as if man had never been.

And even that picture, Mallory reflected, was an optimistic one, presupposing that plant and animal life would somehow survive the invasion, and/or the Galactic counterattack. Hundreds of billions of creatures, matured from the broadcast spores, would blanket the world like a plague, building toward the critical numbers that would trigger the next broadcasting of seed pods to race across space to infect the next ring of worlds. Was there any stopping of such voracious fecundity? Was the battle in vain, doomed before it was joined?

He didn't know, would never know. Out there—across light-years, across ages, the war had raged. A war—or a vast Galactic pest-control program. It was a thought that seemed to reduce all human struggle and aspiration to the minuscule level of the buzzing of bees in a hive. How humbling to the vaulting spirit of earthly man if he found himself swatted in the overkill of a Galactic flit-gun. A road ran behind the line of trees. Mallory crossed it, traversed a patch of dark woods, came upon a dirt track leading in the correct direction. He tramped on. About midnight he paused to rest under a tree before an empty farmhouse where a gutted convertible squatted on flat tires. An hour later he encountered a stalled

car in the road, the badly decomposed corpse of a man slumped behind the wheel visible through the cloudy glass. He told himself that there was no point in opening the door and trying the starter; the battery would be long dead.

Three miles farther, in front of a deserted gas station, he found four cars. One, an elderly Ford with a manual shift, gave a faint groan as he tried the starter. The road had a gentle downward grade at that point. With difficulty he manhandled the vehicle out onto the apron, jumped in, coasted downhill, let out the clutch. The engine fired, sputtered and caught.

Mallory covered twelve miles before running out of gas. He left the car on the shoulder, walked on into the outskirts of a lightless town announced by a faded sign as Beaver Crossing. He passed empty houses, the dry leaves drifting the street crunching underfoot. There was a sidewalk beside the main street. His dim reflection paced beside him in the dusty windows of abandoned shops. A block of buildings had burned; the acrid odor of charred timber still clung to the blackened remains of collapsed buildings.

There was a small automotive repair shop in the next block. As Mallory paused to cast a speculative eye over the half-dozen vehicles parked beside the closed garage, two men in khaki uniforms with the shoulder patch of Strang's army stepped out from a doorway and aimed rifles at his chest. One put a flashlight on his face.

"It's about time," Mallory said. "I was beginning to think you'd never make your move."

5

One of the two men was a stranger to Mallory; the other was a tall, big-wristed fellow he had seen during his stay in camp. The latter held the light on him while the other frisked him awkwardly, declared him clean.

"You made a mistake hanging around here, boy," the familiar one said. "Sarge will be pleased to see you again. He was kind of put out when you left without saying so long."

They prodded him along to a dusty jeep parked around the corner, drove at breakneck speed along bumpy back roads that brought them up to the encampment gate in half an hour. The dirt streets were full of armed men carrying packs and rifles, being lined up and counted off by

tense-looking NCO's. There were floodlights lit beyond the camp, along the edge of the pasture. Mallory heard the rumble of big engines warming up.

The jeep made its way through the throng, turned down a side way between dark cooktents, pulled up before the barbed-wire enclosed stockade.

"I don't have time for this," Mallory said. "I have to see Strang, fast."

"Not tonight, chum; the colonel's busy tonight. What we got to do, we got to lock you up and get you off our hands. There'll just be the one man to watch the compound—Kudnik, got a sprained ankle—but he's damn good with that ought-three-oh. His order'll be to plug you if you just look at the fence. Come on, out!"

"What's going on?"

One of the men caught Mallory's arm, hauled him out of the Jeep. "Tonight's the night we hit Beatrice, Bud. The Chinks'll think it's World War Four. They won't know what hit 'em."

"Don't waste time, Gus," the other man said, giving Mallory a rough shove toward the guard shack. Mallory half closed his eyes, feeling out gingerly for the mind-glow of the man; he sensed it, studied it, then probed gently

"We got orders . . ." the man was saying; his voice faltered; he came to a halt, stood uncertainly, as if not sure in which direction to go. Mallory turned his attention to the other man, was caught by surprise as he saw the gun coming swiftly up. He struck—

The man dropped the gun, fell forward on his face and lay without moving.

Mallory turned quickly to the first man, who was blinking his eyes dazedly, shaking his head.

"You were going to take me to the colonel," he said urgently. "No time to waste."

"Yeah-sure," the man said blurrily. "Come on." Without a glance at his fallen comrade, he led the way toward the main house.

6

Strang stared hard at Mallory, motioned to a chair. "Well-I hope you had a nice stroll around the countryside, Mallory," he said in tones of heavy sarcasm. He narrowed his eyes.

"See anything interesting out there?"

"Enough. Strang, you've got to call this raid off!"

"Oh? Anything else?"

"Plenty. Among other things, I found a man who's seen the Mone—the aliens."

"Anybody I know? Where is he?"

"He's dead."

"Oh; too bad," Strang said sardonically. "Well, in that case I'm afraid I'll just have to go ahead—"

"That's not all, Strang: I know what they are now," Mallory said.

Strang sighed. "I was hoping you'd be over that one."

"They're called the Mone," Mallory was saying. "They're a life-form of sorts; about halfway between organic machines and what we think of as living creatures. They aren't precisely what we'd call intelligent; their actions are directed by a kind of superinstinctive pattern—like insect behavior, but a thousand times more complex, with a few dozen million years of evolution behind them." Strang slapped the desk with both hands. "Damn it, man, knock off this crank talk! I don't know what you're trying to prove, but it's not working! You're no more crazy than I am! I need every good man—"

"There's a time element involved, Strang," Mallory went on, ignoring the interruption. "Their pattern is to pick their spot and build in effect a nest—using local labor to help. When everything's ready, their queen, or brood sow, or whatever you want to call her settles down to spore production. The whole hive is directed toward feeding and supporting her while she gestates a few hundred billion germ cells. When the time is ripe, they're broadcast. That's what the tower is for. The spores are microscopic; they're fired all the way into the stratosphere and spread out to blanket the planet. In a few weeks, they've settled in, found food supplies —"

"That's enough!" Strang roared. "By God, Mallory, I promised Lori —" He broke off, took a deep, calming breath. "I've had a talk with your daughter—a fine young woman, in whom I have implicit confidence—and I gave her my word I'd give you every opportunity to show me that you deserve a place on my staff. I need officers, Mallory! I need—"

"You need to listen to me, Strang." Mallory cut him off. "I came here to tell you what I've found out and to enlist your cooperation. I—"

"Came here, hell! You were marched in here at gunpoint, at my orders! You cost me valuable gasoline and man-hours beating the brush

for you!”

“If I’d wanted to stay lost, do you really think I’d have walked right up to your picket line? Start thinking straight, Strang. I came back here, as I said, to tell you something. Suppose you listen before you waste the pitch on me?”

“I’m not interested in your ravings, Mallory. I was willing to let bygones be bygones, for Lori’s sake, but—”

“The spawning could take place at any time, Strang; any hour, any minute. Once that’s happened, it’s all over. If even one percent of the spores survive—and they have a fantastic survival rate—in a few weeks there’ll be billions of them infesting every square inch of the planet. They’re tough, strong, not intelligent, but effective in their own way—and they have just one objective: breeding more of their kind. They—”

“All right, that’s enough!” Strang yelled, coming to his feet. “You’ve taken this line, and you’re stuck with it! Fine! If you’d rather swab pots and pans than help me plan strategy—”

Both men turned as a side door to the room opened. Lori came in, looking pale but determined in a tailored khaki uniform.

“Dad—I’ve been listening to what you’ve been saying. I . . . I can’t believe you’re . . . insane. So there must be some other reason for it. I don’t know what it is—I don’t want to know. But I’m appealing to you—”

“Wait, Lori. I’d like to take the time to convince you you ought to listen to me, that what I’m telling you is true, to go into the matter of proof, but I can’t. I came here because I want help in what I’m going to do —”

“What *are* you planning to do, Dad?”

“I’m going into Beatrice and do what I can against what’s there. A few good men with guns would help.”

Lori’s face was tense, wooden. She turned to Strang.

“I’m sorry, James,” she whispered. “I was wrong. I withdraw my request; I release you from your promise. Do . . . whatever you must.” She turned quickly and reached for the door—

“Wait,” Mallory said softly. The girl grasped the knob, pushed the door open . . . and paused.

It was like reaching out with a gentle hand to the softly glowing intricacy that was a living mind, touching it delicately . . . so . . .

Lori turned, a faintly bemused expression on her face. Not looking at either of the two men, she went to a chair, sat down carefully, folded her hands in her lap. Mallory went to the open door, closed it on the curious

face of the sentry posted outside.

“I’m glad you’ve decided to hear me out, Lori,” he said. “I’ll make this short and to the point, Colonel: I’m going into Beatrice. I want your army with me—all of it—armed and briefed for a hell of a fight.”

Strang snorted, but before he could speak, Mallory went on: “Nobody will get sick, Colonel. There may be a bout of nausea as we go through the outer protective field, but it won’t be fatal. Once in the city, no civilians are to be molested. The enemy won’t be hard to identify: they’re alien; you’ll understand as soon as you see one—”

“You’re raving, Mallory. I’m hitting Beatrice, yes—but not with infantry. I have half a dozen tow planes and more cargo gliders than I need—and plenty of high explosives. I’ll fly half a dozen sorties over the town and pound it flat.

Then I order my armor in. The Chinks won’t know what hit them—”

“Colonel, I’ve told you the city is full of innocent noncombatants—”

Strang’s hand reached for the intercom button on his desk. Mallory struck quickly, without thinking—

Strang’s face went chalky white; he made a strangled sound and fell sideways from his chair. Lori uttered a horrified cry; Mallory whirled as she came out of the chair, her eyes straining wide, her mouth ready for the scream—He touched her with a swift, controlled thought; she sank back into the chair, sat awkwardly, her face slack and amazed. Mallory bent over Strang; the unconscious man was breathing hoarsely, his face flushed. Mallory lifted him into his chair, then probed delicately.

He saw the point of impact, an area of dimness in the surrounding glow. With a gentle precision he reactivated the energy flows, saw the stunned portion of the man’s mind begin to warm back toward consciousness

Strang stirred, raised his head, focused his eyes on Mallory. Lori moaned softly.

“Listen to me, both of you,” Mallory said in a flat, clipped voice, looking from one to the other. “You’ve just encountered something outside your experience. Accept it, recognize the fact that there’s something here you don’t understand. Your picture of reality was wrong in one respect—it could be wrong in others!”

“How . . . how did you move that fast?” Strang croaked. “It was like . . . like a snake striking.”

“I haven’t moved,” Mallory said. “Tell him, Lori.” Her expression was stricken. “He . . . didn’t move at all, James. You just—collapsed. I . . . I

thought—”

“He’s all right,” Mallory said quickly. “I’m sorry, Lori. I had no choice.”

“Who . . . *what* are you?” Mallory’s daughter stared at him with an expression of horror. “I felt something . . . inside my skull . . . !” She clamped her hands to the sides of her head.

“I’m your father, Lori,” he said harshly. “I wish I had time to take you along slowly, explain it all to you in detail, coax you to understand—to trust me. But I don’t. Just face the fact that there’s more to what I’m saying than a maniac’s fancies.” He turned to Strang.

“You’re a military man, Colonel, a realist. When the first A-bomb hit Hiroshima, the Japanese might not have understood what happened but they couldn’t ignore the results. I’m asking you to accept the fact that I know something you don’t. I’m asking you to take me on trust, give me the men I need—”

“You’re crazy,” Strang said, making an effort to pull himself together. “Crazy men sometimes have superhuman strength; maybe they have superhuman speed, too—”

“I told you—Lori told you—I hit you with my mind, not my fist, Strang!”

“All right—suppose you did . . . what you claim. What’s that got to do with sending my troops into a plague area?”

Mallory leaned on the desk with both fists. “There’s no plague. There *is* an occupying force. At the present moment there are only a few hundred of them—the workers who protect and feed the Queen Mone. We can take them, Strang—at least we have a chance! If we don’t hit them now—today—it may be too late!”

Mallory saw the change in Strang’s expression; he reached, touched lightly; Strang lurched backward, uttered a gargling groan, clapped a hand to his head. Mallory turned to see Lori on her feet.

“Lori! For God’s sake don’t push me!”

“No—not God’s sake! I don’t know what this is—what terrible power you have—but—”

Strang was struggling to his feet.

“Wait, damn it!” Mallory said urgently. “Hear me out!”

Lori moved toward him; he brushed her mind lightly; she staggered, caught herself. Strang had come around the end of the desk.

“He can’t handle both of us at once,” he said in a low, taut voice. “Lori, get out of the room, call—”

Mallory touched her again as she started for the door; she went to her knees. He hit Strang as the man charged him, stepped aside as he fell.

“I can handle you, Strang,” Mallory said. “By knocking you out. But that won’t help. I need you conscious—both of you!”

“Looks like—standoff . . .” Strang said between clenched teeth. He was on all fours, shaking his head. Mallory went to Lori, lifted her.

“Please—I’m begging you. Listen, then judge.”

“I . . . all right, Dad,” Lori said in a whisper and pulled herself away. “I suppose we haven’t any choice.”

7

“All right,” Strang said fifteen minutes later. “I’ve listened. What I’ve heard confirms my conviction that you’re out of your mind.”

“Wait, James.” Lori spoke up. “What Dad says does explain some things—if it *were* possible—”

“But since it isn’t,” Strang cut in harshly, “we can—”

“How do you know it isn’t, Strang?” Mallory broke in. “Or do you know? Aren’t you just guessing? Damn it, think like a tactician! If the opposition comes up with something brand new, do you deny it—or deal with it? Chinese Communists, eh? Holed up in Beatrice, Nebraska, waiting for you to bomb them out! Does that fit what you know of the realities of war?”

“James—couldn’t you . . . send someone? To look at the city, fly over it in a glider, maybe, take pictures. If there really is a tower, as Dad described it—”

“There’s no time for that, Strang,” Mallory said. “You’ll have to take it on faith.”

“And that I won’t do. Can’t do!” Strang snarled. “Suppose—for the sake of argument—there was something to your story. How do I know these . . . aliens of yours won’t wipe us out on sight with some kind of Buck Rogers death ray? These men trust me, Mallory. They’re my command, I’m their leader. You talk about tactics: you expect me to walk into an ambush, blind, not knowing what kind of firepower the enemy’s got?” “I’ve told you the consequences—”

“And I’ve told you ‘no!’ damn it!”

Mallory nodded. “All right,” he said. “I wish I could take over your mind and force you to issue orders—but I’m not that good. Maybe I will

be some day—if I live; I haven't begun to explore what I've got." He turned to Lori. "I'm sorry, Lori. Sorry I couldn't make you understand. Maybe someday you will." He went to the door, looked back at Strang.

"Don't try to stop me, Colonel. Under pressure I might hurt someone. I just don't know enough about it to control it—"

"Where are you going?" Lori blurted.

"Where I said I was going, Lori."

"Alone?"

"It looks that way."

"James—you can't let him! He'll die . . . and if he *is* right . . ."

"How can I stop him?"

"You can give him some men—a few men. Something. You have to do something, James!"

Strang looked across at Mallory.

"Would one man help?" he growled.

Mallory nodded. Strang punched his intercom key.

"Tell Brozhny to come in," he said flatly.

They waited in silence. In less than a minute there was a tap, the door opened to admit the Russian lieutenant. Strang stood.

"You're in temporary command," he said. "Hold the attack until I come back—"

"James—you're not going *yourself* . . . ?" Lori burst out. "It's too dangerous!"

"What do you want me to do, girl—send another man to take my risks for me?"

"But, James—you're the leader—"

"Vass can handle it." Strang turned to Mallory. "How close do you have to be to see the tower?"

"Five miles, maybe."

"All right: five miles. And if there's no tower—then you forget this story of yours. Agreed?"

"And if there is?"

"Then possibly I'll have a little rethinking to do."

"Then you'll go a little farther?"

"How far?"

"Far enough to see proof."

Strang nodded, caught the Russian officer's eye. "If I'm not back by sundown tomorrow, it's all yours. And Vass—when you take the bombers in—if you see a tower-hit it first."

“As you wish, Colonel.”

“All right, Mallory,” Strang said, “let’s go have a look at these little green men of yours.”

“Not little,” Mallory said. “Not green. And not men.”

Chapter 8

1

Sally, her right arm heavily bandaged and carried in a sling, and Lori, stiff-faced but tearless, stood by silently as Mallory and Strang stowed their rifles and supplies in the Jeep.

“Don’t look so downhearted,” the colonel said heartily as he strapped into his seat behind the wheel. “We’re just going to take a look. If we see anything, we pull back and regroup, as the saying goes.”

“Be careful-please,” Sally said.

“Good luck,” Lori said.

Strang started the engine, waved, and with a scatter of gravel, gunned off down the winding drive. Once on the road, he opened up, driving astraddle the faded yellow centerline.

“Mallory, I’ve been thinking about your story,” he called over the buffeting of the wind. “Trying to put my finger on all the logical flaws in it. Funny thing is—I can’t find one. Damned ingenious—once you get past the basic premise. Accounts for everything. It worries me a little, Mallory. You being nuts is a lot easier for me to handle than an invasion from space.”

“If you don’t see what I told you you’d see, I’ll go back and enlist for the duration,” Mallory said curtly. “In the meantime, let’s let it go at that.”

For the next half hour Strang drove at breakneck speed along the secondary road, slowing only when necessary to skirt a stalled car or tank. They passed a sign reading BEATRICE-10 MI. Mallory took deep breaths to quiet an unease in his midriff that was rapidly growing toward burning nausea. Strang was frowning fiercely. He drove on two more miles, then slowed.

“I don’t like this, Mallory,” he said. His tanned face was sallow-pale, and sweat beaded his forehead. “Damn it, man, the air is poisonous; it’s making me sick to my stomach.”

"I told you about this effect," Mallory said. "It's not plague, Strang; it's a protective field, designed to keep out any interlopers who survived the killing and escaped the hypnosis."

"You've got an answer for everything."

"Is that supposed to prove I'm wrong?"

"Damn it, man, you've *got* to be wrong! Otherwise . . ."

"Drive on, Colonel. Prove I'm wrong. We ought to see it any time now; maybe around that next bend we'll have a clear view—"

"Sure—you'll point and say, 'There it is!'—and I'll take a look and there won't be a damned thing there."

"You'll see it. Sally told you they could see it on a fair day from the farm—"

"They saw searchlights, that's all."

"Colonel, quotes, you've got an answer for everything," Mallory said sardonically.

"Sure—but *my* answers make sense." Strang gunned the Jeep savagely ahead.

The vehicle topped a low rise of ground; ahead there was a cluster of gas stations at a crossroads; beyond were scattered houses, the beginnings of the first outlying suburb of the city. The Jeep slowed; Strang gripped the wheel, his face taut, staring toward the misty green column rising above the roofs across the plain. He braked to a stop, unstrapped, stood; he unslung the binoculars from his hip, adjusted them, stood for half a minute studying the scene. He lowered the glasses, resumed his seat. His tongue touched his lips.

"Yeah," he said abruptly. "Let's go take a little closer look, Mallory." He eased the Jeep into gear and drove on, more slowly now, scanning the scene as he went.

2

Strang halted the car in the shade of a stand of leafless sycamores beside an elderly, sagging house just outside the City Limits sign.

"It's quiet," he said. "Damned quiet; and no corpses." He climbed out of the Jeep, stood with his-head cocked, listening to the utter stillness.

"All right, you see the town," Mallory said. "And no Chinese Communists. Now let's get out."

"Damn it, Mallory, you don't expect me to go back and tell Brozhny

I've bought your whole story on the basis of a building that maybe looks a little different than what you'd expect to see in a prairie town. Let's take a little walk."

"This isn't a good idea, Strang. This is enemy territory."

"I want to see all there is to see."

"All right—but remember what I told you: if you have to use that gun, aim for the navel: for where the navel would be if it was human."

They walked along past the empty house, an abandoned gas station.

"It all looks so damned normal, Mallory," Strang said, an almost pleading note in his voice. "All but that damned tower . . ." "You'll even see lawn sprinklers working," Mallory said, "and milk bottles on front porches. They're trying to create a normal environment for their workers, and they don't know what's important; like a boy putting a grasshopper in a bottle with six different kinds of weeds—"

"Hold it!" Strang's hand shot out to block Mallory. "Listen . . ."

Far away, at the limit of audibility, there was the sound of an engine running raggedly, as if it were being started up after a long period of idleness. "Time to go," Mallory said, speaking softly. "Aliens," Strang said. "Flying saucerities from another planet who settle in a small town, take over our shapes and our houses and our cars and start a factory. Nuts!" He said the last word loudly, almost a shout. "I don't believe any of it, Mallory! Come on; let's find the mayor or the chief of police or whoever the hell is in charge here and find out what's going on." As he started forward, Mallory caught his arm.

"Wait a minute, Strang; I brought you here to show you something, not to get you killed. The city's occupied by the enemy—can't you get that into your mind? Now, let's get out of here and come back loaded for bear—"

"Mallory, by the grace of God it looks as if this city lived through the Chink attack—and if you think—"

"I think it's time to go back, Strang."

"I haven't seen enough, Mallory—" He broke off. There was the sound of an engine approaching swiftly from a side road. "Behind the signboard—fast!" Mallory rapped. "Wait a minute," Strang demurred. "Maybe—" Mallory sprinted for concealment; after a moment, Strang followed him. They lay flat, watching as a white-painted bread truck came into view, slowed, swung the corner, coming toward them. It stopped in the center of the street a hundred feet away. Two men stepped down, stood attentively, as if listening.

“Those are men, not monsters,” Strang hissed. “I want to talk to them, find out—”

Mallory caught his arm as he started to rise.

“If you saw them up close you wouldn’t think so. And we’re not going to get that close.”

Mallory turned at a sound behind them. A tall man in a gray coverall was approaching across the lot, walking toward them with a curious, shambling gait.

“You get your wish,” Mallory said. “Stand fast. Maybe we can bluff our way through.”

Strang eyed the oncoming figure, fingering his rifle.

“For God’s sake, Mallory,” he said in a low voice. “The fellow’s as human as I am—even if he does walk as if he had two artificial legs.”

“He has,” Mallory said flatly. “Don’t say anything—just be ready.”

Strang made a disgusted sound, got to his feet, his eyes on the stranger. Mallory stood beside him, watching the figure advance. It stopped ten feet away, stood in a curiously lifeless stance, body poised at an awkward angle. At this distance the doughy textures of skin and garments were obvious. The face was a mask painted with flat colors on porous rubber.

“Mother of God,” Strang whispered.

“Why are you not at your benches?” the simulacrum inquired in the unctious tones of a television pitchman and without waiting for a reply advanced on Strang. The colonel took a step back, set the butt of the rifle against his hip and fired. The shot was a deafening *blam!*, a spurt of pale flame. The impact of the bullet half spun the creature; it regained its balance, resumed its advance, a pit the size of an olive gaping high in its chest.

“It will be necessary to give you pain,” it said. Mallory brought his rifle to his shoulder, fired, rode the kick, fired again. The effigy stumbled, fell face forward with a sound like a mattress striking the ground. Strang aimed his rifle at its head; Mallory caught the muzzle, thrust it aside.

“That way,” he snapped and thrust him ahead. They sprinted across the open field, between two garages, through the gap in a hedge to emerge in a narrow alley running behind a warehouse. The white vehicle was visible at the corner, coming up rapidly.

“They must have detected us as soon as we got into their screens,” Mallory said as they ducked back. “We walked right into it.”

“Not human,” Strang muttered. His face was a strange, blotchy color.

“My God-like a rag doll—walking and talking, those eyes—”

“We’re within a block of the Jeep,” Mallory said. “We’ll let this car pass, then run for it.”

Crouched in deep shadow beside the house, Mallory felt a wave of dizziness pass over him; for a moment the scene faded, as if a transparent curtain of sparkling black silk had dropped down around him. Mumbling voices seemed to clamor from a distance with a strange urgency.

With an effort he squeezed his eyes shut, shook his head.

He took a deep breath, gathered his fading consciousness, focused it, *pushed*

He was on all fours, listening to a distant humming that faded, died, as color washed back into the scene. An engine was idling nearby. Footsteps sounded, coming closer.

“Strang,” Mallory whispered, “get set; as soon as he’s past, we duck out and run like hell”

A shadow fell across a patch of sunny lawn; a man in Western costume complete with cowboy hat and holstered guns paced past their hiding place; his footsteps receded.

“Let’s go,” Mallory came to his feet, glanced back as Strang didn’t move. The colonel stood against the wall, the rifle in his hands pointing at the ground.

“Strang—snap out of it,” Mallory whispered urgently.

Strang’s eyes had a glazed, out-of-focus look. Mallory caught his arm. Strang blinked at him vaguely. “Release me,” he said tonelessly. “I must . . . my Work”

“Strang—they’ve gotten to you! Fight it, man! Throw it off!”

Strang pushed at him, struggling to get past; his movements were uncoordinated, clumsy. Mallory caught his wrists.

“Strang—remember Lori? Remember your army, waiting for you to come back and lead the attack?”

“The Work waits”

Mallory felt the dizziness touch him again. This time he pushed it away more easily. With a sudden wrench, Strang tore himself free. He straightened himself, brushed at his khaki shirt.

“Well, I have to be getting along,” he said briskly. “It’s Time, you know. We’re all needed”

Mallory half closed his eyes, concentrating, reaching out

He sensed the other’s mind-glow, dim and cramped, locked in a web of blackness. Gently he probed, found an interstice, slipped inside.

“Strang! Wake up!”

Mallory sensed faint stirrings of alarm, of half-under-standing, half-recognition: *“Mai . . . Mallory. Can’t . . . think. Like . . . drowning in tar . . . cold . . . hurts”*

Mallory opened his eyes. Strang sagged against the building, his face chalky-pale, his mouth open. He took a shaky step and went on his knees. Mallory heard returning footsteps. The car engine was coming closer. He *reached* again, seized Strang’s mind, fitting himself to its unfamiliar contours; he found the motor center, made Strang totter to his feet . . .

A dummy made of cheap plastic lunged into view six feet away; it pivoted, the paper eyes staring fixedly, blankly. This time the mental blow was sharp, precisely aimed. His counterblow lanced out at the gleaming pinpoint that was the other’s mind-field, clashed against alienness, absorbed a brief, shocking pain, then held and clung. Mallory was peripherally aware of Strang stumbling back against the wall, of the pseudoman standing frozen in midstride. He thrust harder, searching for entry through the other’s defenses, found a line of juncture, jabbed—

Light exploded in his mind: he was in a vast room lit by a greenish light, filled with an alien stench, alien sounds.

The space was almost completely filled by a vast spongelike structure of translucent cells and filaments and tubes—like the interior of a human lung seen under high magnification, the thought came to him. All around the central mass, men and not-men hurried, involved in incomprehensible tasks. Mallory sensed an air of extreme tension, of time stretched to the breaking point, of events swollen to bursting . . .

It is the Time, the awareness came into his thoughts. *Now existence rushes toward fulfillment in the fruiting of the spore body . . .*

With a violent effort Mallory wrenched against the paralyzing contact with the Mone thought-field. There was a sense of tearing, of a bubble bursting, a vessel smashed, of life-force seeping away—

The not-man before him settled into a boneless squat, the head dangling backward, the hands flat, palms up, fingers fully extended. In death all humanity drained from the puppet, leaving it a thing deflated of any semblance of life.

“My God,” Strang said. “What . . . what was that . . . how . . .”

“It’s too late to go back now, Strang,” Mallory said swiftly. “Time has run out. The Mone is about to spawn-in minutes, maybe—or even seconds . . .” As he spoke, Strang jerked as if a rope had been pulled. He took an awkward step, shuddered, then stood straight.

“Now we must go to our benches,” he said carefully, looking toward the great tower soaring above the rooftops.

The sound of the vehicle engine was close, idling. Two not-men appeared, came toward them, ignoring the dummy slumped in the path.

“Now you must go to your benches,” the smaller, thinner one said in the voice of an earnest young pharmacist recommending a patent tranquilizer.

“Yes,” Mallory said in a flat tone. “Now we must go to our benches.”

Led by the not-men, with Strang striding confidently beside him, he walked out to the street and headed toward the tower.

3

The downtown streets had the same half-derelict look they had had a week before; there were a few more papers blowing along the sidewalks; a few more spring weeds had sprouted in the cracks in the pavement. Their footsteps had a hollow, echoic quality.

It was cool in the shadow of the tower. The gate in the wall opened as they came up. Beyond it, the unnaturally flat ground was as hard and grassless as a much used school playground. There were a few not-men here, moving with an air of compulsive haste. Off to one side, a man lay on his face, arms under him. From the color of his neck it was apparent that he was dead. None of the not-men seemed to be aware of the corpse.

They passed through a rounded opening in the base of the tower into a curving chamber that reminded Mallory of the interior of an immense seashell. The walls were a translucent, nacreous green, flaring up and over, bending away until they were lost in green gloom. There was an acrid, kelplike odor in the muggy air, a persistent murmur of sound as of a restless crowd in an auditorium beyond closed doors.

The two not-men who had conducted them here separated, one moving off to the right, the other continuing toward a smaller passage opening in the curve of wall. Strang unhesitatingly followed the latter; Mallory took the cue. The route led downward in a gentle spiral. There was no floor as such; in cross section the passage was nearly circular. A narrow drift of dust and debris formed a ridge along the centerline.

The light grew dimmer, the sounds louder, the odors more pungent. The passage opened out into a wide room cut into a maze by a system of waist-high partitions that extended out of sight around a central core of

dull black-green. There were hundreds of people here; Mallory saw familiar faces, drawn and haggard in the sickly light. Abruptly, their guide halted. Two figures were approaching, oddly colorless and amorphous.

At close range, Mallory saw that they were faceless, hairless versions of the not-men he had seen above ground; rather than mimicking the appearance of clothing, their bodies were smooth, featureless, a uniform dull gray in color.

Mallory extended his awareness cautiously, contacted the pinpoint brilliance of the mind-field of the not-men who had led him here, the brighter, more complex emanations of the newcomers. He was aware of a swift, flickering interchange among them, then of a tentative probe at his own mind. For a moment there was a sense of uncertainty; then all three aliens turned abruptly and walked away. With the air of one who knows exactly where he is going, Strang stepped through an opening in the low barrier wall. Mallory followed.

Inside he stopped, caught Strang's arm. He closed his eyes, willed his consciousness outward. The glow that was Strang's mind-field was almost obscured by an enveloping blanket of grayness. He stripped it away; Strang staggered, caught himself, looked around with an expression of bewilderment. His eyes fell on Mallory.

"We're inside the tower," the latter said quickly. "You've been unconscious. How do you feel?"

"Godawful," Strang muttered. "Dreams . . . then . . . nothing"

"We're all out of time. We have to try to get to the spawning chamber. I'm guessing that will be in the center. We'll play it by ear. Come on."

He went on along the narrow passage. Strang followed.

A low shelf lined the inner surface of the partition here. At intervals of a few feet, men and women were posted—genuine men and women, but dull-eyed, slack-featured, thin and pale, their clothing in various degrees of neglect. It appeared, Mallory saw, to be an assembly line of sorts; there were heaps of small objects resembling carved beans before each worker, which the latter were busily stringing on wires. None of them looked up or paid the slightest attention to the newcomers. They turned through an opening in the low wall, followed another aisle lined like the others with toiling, blank-eyed men and women. Mallory recognized a face: a dentist who had once filled a molar for him. A complexly intertwined rope was coiled on the counter before the man among scattered beans, some of which had spilled off onto the floor. Mallory reached out, plucked the

work from his hands. The man hesitated only a moment; then he plucked a coil of the hair-fine black wire from the disorder, seized a bean, threaded it onto the wire.

“Dr. Foyle,” Mallory said in a low voice. “Can you hear me?”

Foyle gave a violent twitch; the bean fell from his fingers. He looked wildly at Mallory.

“It is Time,” he mumbled and turned back to his work, grabbing for a new bean with an air of frantic haste. Mallory reached carefully to touch the other’s mind; the pseudoglow was barely detectable, submerged under multiple layers of inhibiting antithought. Delicately, Mallory penetrated the maze, touched the paralyzed ego-center. At once the man’s hands froze on his work.

“Foyle—I need your help,” Mallory said softly. “I need information. Where is the spawning chamber? How can I get to it?”

The former dentist’s head jerked; he put his hands to his head, made an ugly noise.

“Get out . . . got to get out . . . get away . . . get . . . filthy thing . . . out of my head . . . !” Foyle’s voice rose on the last words.

“Quiet!” Mallory whispered. “I want to help you.”

“Late. No time. She’ll spawn now . . . in a matter of minutes . . . must . . . complete” Foyle grabbed for the beans.

“Where is she? How can we get there? What can we do?”

Foyle seemed to respond. He stared at Mallory. “Big room . . . Great Queen . . . God, the urge to let go . . . yield to it . . . loyalty . . . live for Great Queen—”

“Where is she, Foyle?”

“Must . . . complete genetic package . . . response . . . environment . . . modification. Almost ready . . . pressures . . . nutrients”

“How do we reach the Queen’s chamber?”

“She’s . . . almost ready. Need . . . all genetic data. These . . . among . . . genes. I’m building chromosomes. They’re like . . . tapes, fed into her . . . into it! The horror . . . the beauty. Strange. Torn two ways. Must add my contribution to adaption . . . best chance for survival . . . second generation—” A hoarse, gargling sound came from his mouth; he made an abortive movement as if to rise, then fell forward over his bench. At once Mallory thrust to the center of his fading thought-glow, saw it collapsing inward under the unbearable pressure, saw it dwindle, wink out.

“He’s dead,” Strang said.

They resumed their prowling along the curving aisle. Mallory reached out to scan the minds of the humans as they huddled over their work, met only blankness cocooned in fields of negative energy. Once a pseudo-human passed them, hurrying in the opposite direction. It was only a half-hearted counterfeit; the face was a blob, the garments vaguely outlined. Mallory felt the pale heat of its mental aura brush him; but he held his barrier steady, and the contact was past.

The aisle dead-ended at a vertical wall of a gray, papery material. Strang examined it.

“It doesn’t look very strong. Take a chance on kicking it in?”

There were no not-men near. Strang felt over the surface, pushed at it, then swung his boot. The barrier split. Although there were workers busy at their benches within six feet of them, none showed any awareness that anything unusual was taking place.

Strang hammered the material back, went to all fours and crawled through. Mallory followed.

They were in a long, narrow space through which ducts of lumpy and irregular shape led, some branching upward, others down. There was a steady, drumming sound as of the flow of dense fluids driven by busy pumps. The far wall of the chamber was a glossy dark brown. The pipes that passed through it made no visible joints. They went close and tested the strength of the wall. It was as solid as armor plating.

“We have to get past it,” Mallory said.

“We won’t make a hole in that.”

Mallory was examining a duct two feet in diameter.

“Check the input end,” Strang said.

They traced the pipe back; thirty feet upstream it made a right-angle turn to rise vertically, passing through an aperture in the ceiling.

Strang set himself; Mallory stepped on his back, reached, caught a handhold and pulled himself up. The duct ended at a manifold, where four smaller pipes came together. Mallory tested them; there appeared to be a structural weakness at the point where the tributary lines entered the plenum chamber. He wrenched at one; it yielded slightly but did not fracture.

He lay beside the hole, lowered an arm; Strang jumped, caught his hand, pulled himself up and through. Mallory took a position on one side of the duct, Strang on the other. They pushed, pulled, alternately, timing their pressures to the natural period of the pipe. The amplitude of the oscillations increased; with a ripping sound, the material parted at the

point of juncture; dark green fluid gushed forth, splattering on the floor.

They set to work on a second duct, tore it free, then a third. The last of the four came away easily, tearing the top of the plenum out with it. The floor was ankle deep in olive-drab muck which flowed down through the aperture through which they had entered, splattering on the floor below.

Slowly the level in the plenum sank.

“We can’t wait,” Mallory said. “I’m going in.”

“I’ll wait two minutes and follow you,” Strang said.

Mallory lowered his legs into the viscous sump. The fluid was warm, lumpy, like thin gruel. He took a deep breath, released his grip; the fluid rose around him, washed up over his face as he submerged.

He sank slowly; the inside of the duct was smooth. He counted the seconds silently. At twenty-eight, his feet struck a curving surface; he bent his knees, slid down and around the right-angle turn. It was another thirty feet to the barrier wall. Mallory clung for a moment, wondering whether he should attempt to swim back up the vertical shaft and start again, head-first; but he knew as soon as he visualized it that it would be impossible. He pushed ahead into the horizontal section feet first, paddling awkwardly.

By thrusting alternately against the side walls, he was able to accelerate his progress. The fluid was moving more rapidly now; he sensed that the duct had narrowed. He had lost count of the time. Surely it had been more than a minute now; his lungs burned; a rising blackness obscured his thoughts. In a moment he would have to breathe; but first, another few yards; another few feet; one more foot—His shoulder thumped the side of the duct; abruptly, a swift current was sucking at him. He locked his throat, concentrated his waning control on the single concept of *not* allowing his lungs the convulsive filling they craved—The support dropped from beneath him, the pressure was gone; he fell, struck, was sliding across a smooth floor, snorting to clear his mouth and nostrils of the cloying reek as of stale bread multiplied a thousand times. He came to rest on his face, groping for traction on the slippery surface. The air was steaming hot, filled with duckings and gurglings as of bubbling tar. It was difficult to breathe; Mallory coughed, spat pasty nutrient material from his mouth, cleared his eyes. The space in which he found himself was almost totally dark; only a faint glow from an obscure source showed him a vast, swollen, spongy mass that he had seen before, in a dark vision gleaned from an alien mind.

He reached out, sensed for a moment a play of pseudo-light in patterns of not-color across a convoluted surface of pure mind-stuff.

Then an impact like an ice avalanche struck him, smashed him into dust, whirled the dust away into timeless infinity.

4

He drifted somewhere in total blackness, afloat on a sea of nontime, nonspace. Far away, like memories of a forgotten childhood, lights and sounds moved with the bustle and clamor of great events reaching crisis: but not here. He was alone, paralyzed, without senses or sensations-

Except for the agonizing awareness of total defeat.

Like a man falling through darkness, Mallory reached out, groping for contact—for any point of reference with which to relate himself.

And sensed a hint of texture, an impression of structure, like the grain in wood. Pressure counter to the grain met total resistance; but if he could reorient himself, reach out parallel to the laminar polarity of the enveloping inhibitory fieldWith all the power remaining to him, Mallory thrust—and broke out into a roaring cacophony of sight/smell/sound/touch: a blended kaleidoscope of multiordinal sense impression that sleeted at him like interlaced blizzards of color, pitch, texture, stench.

He could perceive a great, pulsating glow that spread from zenith to nadir, aswarm with clustered, hurrying points of vivid white and other lesser but more variegated brilliances that stirred sluggishly, more distant from the nucleus of the array.

In the flow and churn of pure energy below/beside/ around him, he perceived an evolving pattern of interlocking complexity building inexorably toward completion and consummation. Like a driver on a multilane freeway, he assessed the shifting, jockeying flow of intermingling forces which maintained the developing but ever-balanced equation of support for the overflow of the Mone's energy-dynamic.

He sensed the vast energies flowing there, saw how they drew on the supportive structure provided by the lesser mind-fields of the ancillary Mone-creatures; recognized the vast intellectual potential created by the linkage of lesser brains to create a superbrain of a capability that was the product, not the sum, of the constituent parts.

He scanned the lesser, dimmer individual thought-nexi which had been excluded from the compound mind, recognized them as the stunned, controlled minds of the human workers. By comparison with the concentrated brilliances of the not-men, they seemed diffuse, unorient-ed.

Unharnessed.

In the instant that the concept formed in his mind, he knew what it was that he must do.

Chapter 9

1

Mallory visualized his physical body, lying dead or dying on the feeding-cell floor; it required a major effort to reorient his thinking to the limited dimensions of a physical brain, an organic body, to trace back along the tenuous linkage that bound him to the inert flesh, to shape himself again to conform to a matter-energy shell. There was an instant of pressure, of constriction-

Pain struck at him as if he had plunged into a ladle of molten metal. His lungs heaved; his heart gave a convulsive leap. His hands felt thick and numb; his limbs were cast in lead; his vision was cloudy and blurred. Slowly, normal sensation seeped back into his tortured body.

After half a minute's breathing—deep, gasping breaths as though he had run a mile at top speed—he was able to roll over and sit up. His wrist-watch told him that he had been unconscious for just over three minutes.

Strang lay sprawled on the floor six feet away, awash in the greenish slime that still oozed from the duct. Mallory touched his mind; only a faint, diffuse glow indicated a lingering residual vitality in the individual cells. He touched the extinct ego-center, channeled energy to it. After a moment he sensed a weak response. He persevered, felt the mind quicken under his touch. At once he expanded the mind/mind interface, creating a point-by-point correspondence, linking his mental field with Strang's. There was no need now for verbalization. In the moment of contact, the Strang mind absorbed in instantaneous gestalt the status-dynamic which Mallory presented. As swiftly and completely as a fluid shapes itself to a container, Strang's mind and Mallory's interpenetrated, locked into mutual balance, became one.

The result was astonishing—as if a floodlight had been lit in a dark room. Mallory was simultaneously aware, on multiple levels, of a multitude of forms and relationships and entropic flows that wove a network encompassing the time-space locus in which he existed; of a precise set of matter/energy interlocks that was the Mone; of his own impingement on the greater pattern; of the potential implicit in the unorganized play of

random energies which flickered peripherally to the central reality-matrix. In immediate instinctive response he extended his newly augmented sensitivity to the next adjacent human mind-field, probed through the inhibiting control layers to the inner ego-core

Awareness of a woman's self-picture flooded into his mind; all the memories and complexities of a full human existence were comprehended in a single polyordinal ge-stalt. For a fractional instant he sensed her startlement at the strange touch invading her identity, the beginning of a flash of atavistic fear; then he had shunted aside her feeble ego-assertion reflex, added the computational and conceptualizing circuitry of her mind to the Mallory/Strang duality.

Again the level of illumination rose; new vistas of ever-expanding, ever-convoluting mind structure slid into focus. With new sureness, the compound mind touched half a dozen more brains in swift succession, adding their powers to the growing complex. The seventh mind broke like a bubble; its colors faded, dissipated, were gone. The Mallory overmind reached farther, two more minds were added; the tenth resisted violently, fighting like a drowning man against submergence; impatiently, the newborn thought-creature that had been Mallory overrode the fragile defenses, engulfed the central thought-node.

He paused, assessing his new self-awareness, sensing the expansion of his capabilities to encompass the hundredfold increase in computer capacity. For the first time now he was able to integrate the entirety of the Mone mind structure and of his own relationship thereto. The shock of what he saw rocked him to the basic suture of the initial Strang/Mallory union.

My God—I'm like a chip in a millrace compared with that . . . I The thought flashed and was dismissed in the immediacy of his reaction. He launched himself outward on all fronts, sweeping in numbed human minds, spilling out the resident egos as rudely as a starving man shelling oysters, erecting a defensive mind structure with frantic haste. He felt only a remote pang—a ghostly echo of a forgotten emotion—as he recognized the identity of his last acquisitions: Gill . . . Randy . . . Maria

His outward sweep complete, he paused, consolidating his position. The Mone mind-array seemed to have shrunk somewhat; it no longer loomed like a planet; but it was a mountain to his boulder. He saw the truncated force-lines that had been sheared by his sudden action, recognized the developing Mone reaction pattern, computed the force and direction of the counterstroke, reoriented himself, marshaling his

defensive capabilities—

His universe burst in an explosion of white fire.

2

Space/time re-formed itself around Mallory. The flow of mighty energies roared past and through him like an explosion without end. Out of the chaos he abstracted those qualities from which he was capable of formulating a conceptualization.

And was face to face with Strangeness beyond his ability to comprehend.

The mind/face of the Mone.

In a single glimpse which scanned back down the endless avenue of time he saw the dim beginnings of this incredible being; the long, slow evolution of form and structure, the advent of neural responsiveness, the birth of mind, its growth and flowering into a mighty fountain of intellect. He observed as the Mone, achieving direct mental control of the mechanics of genetic and heredity, formed itself for expansion, launched itself on the ages-long campaign of destruction-absorption of competing intellectual species which ended in its sole and undisputed possession of its home Galaxy. He was witness as the great intelligence pruned itself, perfecting the purity of its cerebral function, trimming away the extraneous physical bodies which housed the multitudinous facets of its communal personality. The time came when the Mone—a race implicit in a single, integrated Galaxy-spanning thought complex—found itself faced with entropic death. Having mastered its environment too perfectly, it faced sensory deprivation of a degree commensurate with its frustrated abilities. Unless new challenges, new spectra of experience, could be found, it was doomed to wither, lose coherence, wink out of existence.

The Mone integrated the data, arrived at an inescapable conclusion. In order to retain even an attenuated continuity of awareness, it would be necessary to divest itself of the invulnerability of its total victory. It must resume the trappings of physical life, reenter the lists of life-competition.

But it was the sole surviving life in its galaxy, all other forms having been either annihilated or absorbed along the evolutionary paths. The neighboring galaxies must serve as the arena for the next evolutionary advance of the Mone.

Stimulated to a new outpouring of creativity comparable with the vast

accomplishments of its youth, the Mone created an infinitely flexible *modus operandi*: it selected suitable inert minerals, shaped them into vessels capable of the long voyage, stocked them with thought-absorbent material of complex structure on which were impressed the cerebral patterns basic to the Mone identity, and launched its intellectual offspring in a vast seeding which radiated at light-speed from the home galaxy.

And in that instant comprehended a basic truth of the Universe: that having spawned, it must die. The primordial intelligence which had become the Mone knew for one infinitesimal—and eternal—increment of time the basic axiom of existence: *That which once was is eternal; that which is to be has always been.*

Then it existed no more.

But deep in intergalactic space, each individual repository of the Mone pattern knew and recognized the extinction of the ancestor-mind and drew from his knowledge a new awareness of the depth of its commitment to the continuity of the parent concept.

Space is vast. One by one the original spore pods, each receding from all its fellows at a noncomputable velocity which was the sum of light-speed plus light-speed, dwindled out of the awareness-range of the others. Alone in immensity, each fractional simulacrum of the original, faced for the first time with the fact of solitude, reoriented itself—and reached the identical conclusion:

Each was the sole, lone repository of the galaxy-devouring force that was the Mone life concept. On each devolved the ultimate responsibility for survival of that-which-must-not-die.

Eons of utter solitude ensued. Mallory was present when at last a star swam close, its gravitational field reaching across dwindling space to awaken the response pattern of the pod. He followed it, with it participated in the planetary approach, using, by encoded instinct, the versatile organo-mechanisms designed and created for this moment. He experienced the entry into atmosphere, the gathering of data, extrapolation, reaction: the selection of a precise landing point—a vacant lot in the inner suburban area of the city of Beatrice.

Now, ensconced on a world inconceivably distant from that which gave it birth, the Mone identity proceeded with that-which-must-be-done. The football-sized pod, buried beneath a heap of brick rubble, released the precautionary poisons designed to rid the planet of possible competitive life-forms—forms capable of physically competing with the embryonic Worker-forms when they first crawled forth to grow to swift

adulthood.

Within seventy-two hours the wave of death had passed around the globe, vectored not only by natural atmospheric forces but carried by the swift craft on which would-be escapees had fled, carrying their fates with them. Doomed airliners had crashed as their crews succumbed to the killing mold, but the deadly spores survived the impacts, were spread again, renewed from each new center of infection.

For a week the local life had survived, fighting back blindly with all the weapons at its command. The killing agent had been identified, a counter-acting substance devised, emergency programs put in effect for mass production of the antitoxin.

The last organized resistance had been the release of a counterphage which spread total destruction over a ten-mile-wide patch of scorched earth surrounding the research station at Point Charlotte, Virginia. Two hours later, the Mone had reoccupied the area.

Within the inner circle at Beatrice, twelve hundred and fifty-one brain-stunned natives had been imprinted with the necessary data to enable them to provide the requisite additional labor for the preparation for the secondary seeding; in a band around the city approximately fifteen miles in width, some hundreds of native survivors existed, free. A sense-barrier was erected to bar them from the nest area; and the work went forward.

Supervised by the pseudohuman constructs created for the purpose—designed to mimic the native workers in order to create the minimal adjustment-gap—the impressed workers first erected the tower which housed the birth channel through which the tailored seed of the Mone would be ejected at supersonic speed to enter the jet stream and spread over the world. Then they had been reprogrammed to process the specific nutrient molecules required by the growing spore body and at last, in the final phase, to assemble the final genetic increments which would determine the prespawning imprinting with which the myriad offspring would be endowed to best fit them for their task: the construction of the sites from which a new wave of spore pods would go forth to infect the Galaxy.

The maturation of the seed had proceeded smoothly. The precomputed statistical determinations had been satisfied. Imprinting was almost complete; the moment of release approached, when the voracious instinct-appetite would be sated at last. And in this penultimate moment, a curious phenomenon had blossomed on the Mone existence-horizon.

For long billionths of a second, the great Mone mind had failed utterly to comprehend what was taking place. And then, with a blinding insight that rocked its cosmic image to the core, it had understood:

It was not alone.

For the first time in all the inconceivable eons since its inception, the Mone had encountered an intelligence coequal and external to itself. The impact of that realization coursed through all of its vast data-collecting and-collating capacity like a storm, upsetting the basic theorems of its existence. For an immeasurable instant the great mind teetered on the edge of dissolution.

And in that moment, Mallory struck.

3

Like an overstressed dam that collapses when a single vital pebble crumbles from its base, the immense complexity that was the Mone over-brain began to disintegrate. The far-flung sensory and manipulative fabric split, broke apart, withering back on its sources; the inner network of regulatory and sustaining field circuitry, bereft of input, went into oscillation, dissociated itself into its primitive components, and self-destructed. The ego core, stripped of all sensation and power, closed in on itself, encysted, winked out of existence.

In a silence that seemed to reach to the end of infinity, the Mallory mind-construct hovered, straining outward, sensing the nearby star-crackle, the remoter hiss of the neighbor Galaxies, the pervasive tone of the Overgalaxy.

He/it withdrew from the brink of mind-shattering emptiness, shaken and awed. In haste, he/it irised in on the source point, shrinking back and down, compressing, dwindling, fleeing

Pressure, pain, the return of physical sensation.

Mallory sat up, got unsteadily to his feet.

Strang groaned and stirred; Mallory squatted beside him.

“Wake up,” he said, hearing his own voice as an echo from a time and place more remote than the farthest star. “Wake up, Strang. We’ve won.”

4

Mallory and Strang found the exit passage from the inner chamber,

made their way out into the workroom and a scene of pandemonium. Over four hundred men and women, released abruptly from the tight mental control that had held them for over three months, with no memories of the lost days, had reacted in their individual ways. Some sat mute and numb; some had made frantically for the nearest exit; a few had become hysterical; others had attacked the not-men who wandered, mindless, among them, had torn them into bloodless fragments.

Mallory searched through the crowd, failed to find Gill or the children.

“Maybe they’ve gone home,” Strang suggested.

They left the tower, ignored by the gaunt, ragged, mad-eyed crowd now streaming away across the barren courtyard, staring incredulously back at the tower that had apparently sprung miraculously from the ground overnight. In the street they heard the first screams of those who were beginning at last to understand the full scope of the disaster that had befallen them. A man in the remnants of a gray business suit stood as if stunned before the gutted ruin that had been his newly expanded department store; a woman sat on the front steps of a house, sobbing, holding a moldy doll in her hands. A hollow-faced teen-aged boy walked unsteadily down the center of the street, talking to himself. Gill was lying facedown on the sidewalk leading to the front steps of the house. Mallory turned her over gently. She was breathing—barely.

“We’d better get her inside,” Strang said. His voice seemed to Mallory to come from far away.

“Yes,” Mallory said. He lifted her, carried her up the steps, into the gloom of the curtained living room, along the passage to a bedroom. Strang checked her pulse.

“Not good,” he said. “Damn it, we need a doctor, Mallory.”

“Everet,” Mallory said. “Get him.” He jabbed at the man’s mind, implanted the information that Everet’s house was three doors away. Strang was staggered by the impact of the invasion of his brain. He looked at Mallory with an expression of amazement tinged with fear.

“What—” he started.

Get him! Mallory commanded silently. He turned back to the unconscious woman, probed more delicately at her mind, found it closed and shuttered against him. He stood by the window and looked out unseeing at the street.

Distantly, he was aware of Strang’s movements; he observed as he encountered the doctor emerging from his house, instrument kit in hand,

monitored the conversation.

“Doctor—a woman—Mrs. Mallory. She’s in a coma, pulse weak, respiration way down; cool to the touch. I think she’s dying—”

“Later, sir. As soon as I can. There’s a young fellow—badly cut up. Fell into glass. Bleeding like a stuck pig. And John Bates—broken leg, I think, and probably internal damage—”

“It’s just a few doors down, doctor. Can’t you—”

“As soon as I can, I say! A boy’s dying—”

Mallory thrust through, implanted a command. Everet broke off in midsentence, turned, started toward the Mallory house. Half a minute later he entered the room. He glanced at Mallory, went to Gill’s side, examined her quickly.

“She’s in a bad way,” he said. His voice was ragged and cracked.

“Restore her to health,” Mallory said flatly. “She’s needed.”

“Of course I’ll do what I can.” For a few minutes Everet worked swiftly, preparing and administering two injections. He listened to the woman’s heartbeat, shook his head solemnly.

“I won’t lie to you, Mallory,” he said. “I’m afraid we’re going to lose her. There’s no response. She’s sinking.”

Mallory stood at the bedside; he touched Gill’s mind, noting the feebleness of the glow. He reached in—deep into her brain—found the fading spark that was her life.

She stirred faintly in response. He sensed her recognition of him.

“Gill—you mustn’t die,” he said.

“I tried, Jeff,” she said. *“For your sake, and the children’s, I tried to go on. But the weight was too much, I had to let go”*

“Live!” Mallory blasted the thought at her. *“Live!”*

“Mallory—are you all right?” Strang’s voice rasped at him; he struck it aside, clinging to the fading contact with the diminishing mind-glow.

“Here, Mallory—what are you—” Everet started. Mallory smashed out at the old man, all his attention concentrated on Gill.

“You have to live,” he thundered at her. “Live, Gill!”

He sensed her silent cry of pain, her recoil from the power of the mental blow.

“No . . . no more . . . you’re not . . . Jeff . . . Jeff is gone . . . all gone . . . nothing left”

And then there was no response from the gray vacancy like cold ashes that occupied the point where the last spark of Gill’s life had winked and died.

Strang and Everet stared at him as he turned, pushed past them. Two small, white-faced people met him in the hall. It was a long moment before he recognized them as Randy and Maria.

“Your mother is dead,” he said tonelessly and went past them and out into the street.

He walked but was unaware of walking; the sun sank; twilight fell. Here and there the glow of firelight shone through windows. The power had failed at last. A cold wind blew along the dark street.

He came to an open field; moonlight shone down whitely on dead grasses, a leafless tree. Stars glared down impersonally from the deep black sky. Without warning, a wave of desolation swept down like a tidal comber and smashed the breath from his lungs.

“Alone,” he groaned. “Oh, God, so alone” He felt that he was drowning in a bleakness more terrifying than the prospect of death. He fell to his knees, impaled on torment like a worm impaled on a thorn.

A soft voice spoke. “Jeff—please, Jeff” Sally came to him, knelt beside him, put her hands on him, held him to her. He pushed her away.

“Jeff—I only meant—”

“You think I’m weeping for Gill?” His thoughts raged, unspoken, unspeakable. *“You’re wrong. It’s not that at all. It’s not humanity I weep for—or anything human”*

“Jeff—you look so strange—”

“You don’t know, you couldn’t ever understand. No human on earth ever could understand. For one moment—for one tiny instant I held the Universe in my hands—and looked across that vastness of space and time . . . and beheld another mind that was my equal.

“And what did I do? Did I meet it, join it on that level beyond human comprehension? No—no, I didn’t. It lowered its defenses to me—and I killed it. It’s not Mankind I’m mourning. It’s the Mone. “

Out of darkness, a shaft of light, dazzlingly pure, lanced to the center of Mallory’s consciousness.

“Man, I still live,” the voice of the Mone said. “Now can we speak together?”

It was a conversation held without words, in a timeless place of pure thought.

“I did not know, Man. This does not excuse my crime, nor bring back that which is lost. Yet I would make amends.”

Mallory strove to penetrate the word screen, achieve again the one-to-one rapport that he had known in the moment that he had confronted the Mone’s naked mind; but he found the barrier impenetrable.

“No, Man—you are not yet ready to exercise the full powers inherent in your destiny,” the Mone admonished him. “I blundered when I failed to correctly assess the mental capacity of your race on my first approach, and again when I too quickly opened myself to you. There are powers here which would rend this planet to dust if not controlled.”

Angered, Mallory struck harder—and found himself gently seized, held.

“Man—you are a young species, inexperienced, still close-linked to the material flesh. In your hour of crisis you showed those qualities which will one day make you great; but you have much to learn, a long apprenticeship to serve before you evolve so far along the trail as to know the true function of mind, the true glory of thought.”

Mallory would have protested, but the Mone went on.

“Your world has been cruelly depopulated of your kind by my heedless act; but the remaining genetic pool is large enough to restore your numbers in a few short millennia. I will provide an adequate number of life-artifacts-like those you destroyed in your frenzy, but of functional form—to assist you during your period of rebuilding. Your cities are in the main intact; an empty but fruitful planet awaits you. And perhaps in your rebirth you will escape the errors that marred your first rise as I glimpsed them when our minds met. And as the years of your primal age pass, I will watch over you, guard you from dangers without and within, until I have expiated the evil I unwittingly did you. Then I will pass on my way. Perhaps someday—ten million years from now—we will meet again as friends and equals among the galaxies.”

“Wait!” Mallory hurled the plea with all the force of his compound mind. But before the echo of the thought had died, he had forgotten it. For a moment longer, as his briefly held powers slipped away, he clung to the lingering sense of something sublime, glimpsed once and never seen again; then that vision too was gone.

And he was only a man, crouched against the earth that had brought him forth.

He wept for Gill and put flowers on her grave. March came, and clear skies. The strange, faceless beings who had emerged from the tower—curiously, no one feared them or recoiled from their appearance—toiled day and night to restore and rebuild, to farm the abandoned acreage outside the city, to operate the power generating plant and the water system, to staff the hospital. Vines grew up around the tower, and wild flowers sprouted along the wall that was crumbling rapidly away now. The six hundred and twenty citizens of Earth learned to live again, to pick up the fragments of old relationships, to begin the long process of building new ones.

On the first day of April, Jeff Mallory and Sally were married in a ceremony attended by the entire population of the world. They held carnival for a day; then they picked up their tools and returned to the task of forging the future of Man.

The End