

Dean Koontz – Time Thieves

[Released as "Ace double" with Susan K. Putney – Against Arcturus]

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[Original typos hasn't been corrected]

"Mr. Mullion," one of the triplets said, looming up twenty feet away as Pete followed the smooth railing.

He stopped, his heart racing, but he felt a break in the rail as he did so. He edged forward a foot or two and felt around with his boot until he discovered a step. In a moment, blood pounding in his temples, he was halfway down toward the lower level, taking two risers at a time, no matter what the danger of a fall.

He heard the mechanical man start after him as he set foot on the cement floor.

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**TIME  
THIEVES**  
**by Dean R. Koontz**

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**TIME THIEVES**

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**DEDICATION:**

To my favorite book pushers:  
Nancy, Merle and Lou

**AGAINST ARCTURUS**

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# I

*First, there was a purple-black emptiness the texture of moist velvet, clinging to him like the pulsing membranes of a living heart. Shimmering against this darkness was a face (God's face?) which had no eyes. No eyes at all. Its mouth was only a slit in its flesh behind which concentric rings of gums wriggled, though they showed no teeth. An eight-fingered, pale hand reached for him where he lay on a pure, white dais that floated in the currents of the endless night. He tried desperately to draw away from the clammy grasp. But he could not. Then:*

He was sitting in his Thunderbird inside his garage. The engine still thrummed powerfully, filling the place with its dull echo. He stopped that and sat staring through the windshield at the dozen or so garden implements racked against the wall. Outside, in a neighboring yard, children played; their laughter came to him through the grimy window in the right wall. It was the perfect suburban scene—except that he had no idea how he had gotten here and where he might have been coming from.

Pete Mullion worked for Porter-Mullion Advertising in Grantsville. He was a photographer and design man, while Jerry Porter was the business head who made the company show a profit every year. But if he had been returning from work, what was he doing dressed in blue jeans, a tattered blue work shirt and sneakers? These were the clothes he wore when he drove up Old Cannon Mountain to work at the cabin.

He looked in the back seat and found a thermos and a picnic chest. Inside the cooler, the remains of a boxed lunch Delia had packed for him looked strangely unappetizing.

Apparently, he had been to the cabin, either painting or clearing brush. Problem solved. Yet . . . why couldn't he remember having been there or making the return drive home?

He turned around and caught sight of the dashboard clock. It read two o'clock in the afternoon or morning. One was too early, the other too late. Yet the clock had never been more than a few minutes wrong since he had bought the car more than a year ago. He looked out the window and saw afternoon sunlight. Here it was late July with much work to be done if the cabin were to be ready for the archery season this fall. If he had gone to the cabin to work, he should have stayed until dusk.

He felt uneasy.

For the first time, he realized how hungry he was. His stomach growled, and he had those slight nervous tremors a man gets when he has not eaten all day. But what about the empty picnic cooler? Didn't those scraps in it prove he had eaten not long ago?

For a time, he sat very still, as if the expenditure of energy itself was the thing which restricted his memory. He had seen a hundred television shows that dealt with amnesia, but he could not remember a single piece of advice those actor-doctors had given those actor-patients.

At last, there was nothing to do but go in the house and see Della and find out when he had left and where, he had been going. If it were to the cabin, they would have to retrace his steps and see what he had done. Was there an accident somewhere behind him? Had he struck some-one and then blocked the incident from his mind? Had something happened which was too difficult to face but quite easy to forget? Quickly, he got out of the car and examined it, but he found no marks on the deep green paint. Somewhat relieved, he went into the house through the connecting garage door.

“Della!”

He called several times but received no answer. After a quick check upstairs and down, he was certain that she was not about.

In the kitchen, he made a sandwich of coldcuts and poured a glass of milk. While he ate, he tried to puzzle it out on his own. Saturday morning always began at eight o'clock unless there had been a party the night before which had kept them up later than—

Saturday morning?

He put down his sandwich as an unpleasant thought occurred to him. How did he know that this was Saturday at all? As far as he could tell, it could be any day of the week. What had yesterday been? Wednesday. He was surprised that he knew. But he could clearly remember yesterday's work. He had done a series of photographs of that Beecham girl who had the cute rump which Graham Textiles wanted to grace their underwear ads in all the trade journals. It had been a long session, and despite Janet Beecham's cute rump, she was a witless girl who seemed to do half of everything wrong. Today, then, was Thursday, the end of the month with no picture session scheduled. Larry had been assigned the last bits of design, and Pete had decided to take the day off to work at the cabin.

He took a few more bites of the sandwich now that he seemed to be getting on top of things. By the time he had finished, however, he could still not remember anything more than the day of the week. He rinsed the dishes under the hot water and stacked them to dry.

As he turned away from the sink, he saw the day-date calendar next to the message board on the wall.

The calendar said: *Monday, August 10, 1970.*

He stood there for a long while, looking at the date, not comprehending at all. How could it possibly be two weeks later than he thought? He would have been missed in all that time. They would have come looking for him. Della would have been hysterical, even though her mask of cool self-assurance seldom cracked. Then there must be something wrong with the calendar.

As confident as he pretended to be, the fear remained, burgeoning inside him. Suddenly, the entire kitchen seemed alien, as if he were in someone else's house and not his own. The quiet of the rooms was deeper than it should have been. His skin goose-pimpled, and he had to laugh aloud to break the paralysis that had overtaken him.

He turned to the message board, and he stopped laughing. Across the top of the board was written: "Della, Chief Langstrom called with news. Give him a ring when you come in. Cheer up, huh?" The message had not been written by Della or anyone else he knew, though it was a distinctively feminine hand.

This time when he went through the house, he noticed the changes. His clothes had been shoved back in the wardrobe; a strange woman's clothes were there instead. In the bathroom, there was a second set of makeup utensils complete with a new tin of powder and brushes. There was a third toothbrush.

He felt weak, ill. And he did not know exactly why.

Downstairs again, he looked up the number of the police station and dialed it. When a healthy baritone voice answered, he asked for Langstrom and was told the boss would be back in an hour. Just as he dropped the phone into its cradle, the back door opened. Della stood there, her mouth open, her eyes wide with surprise.

She was a beautiful woman in the prime of her loveliness, just turned twenty-three. Her black hair was worn long and framed a face that was freckled and pug-nosed. Large green eyes and a generous mouth finished the smooth and masterful canvas. Her breasts were high and full, her waist narrow, her legs almost too long. She wore a light summer dress which accentuated all these perfect lines. He could not help but feel a moment of pride, even in circumstances such as these, and he wondered if her pride matched his.

"You," she said. Her voice was hoarse, cast at him like an incantation.

"Me," he said.

Her face paled.

"Della, are you all right?"

"You're alive." It was said quietly, gently.

"Looks that way," he said, grinning.

She ran across the kitchen, her sandals clacking on the tiles, and she was in his arms. But not for comfort, not to be kissed. She pummeled him, striking his shoulders with her small, fisted hands. Her face was furiously red and contorted, her lips strained back from white, even teeth.

"What the hell!" he shouted, trying to fend her off and not managing it very well.

When she had no more energy to use against him, she took two steps backwards and glared at him, green eyes flashing. "Where were you? You can't just stand there and pretend that you haven't been gone for twelve whole days!"

"Twelve days?"

"Damn you!"

She kicked his shin.

And then the fear in him became outright terror. Twelve days. He felt his knees weaken. He was trembling all over.

## II

It had been twelve days, though she said that it had seemed like a great deal longer. He had gone up to the cabin to do some painting. When he had not returned by midnight, she had taken the other car, the VW, up the winding road that eventually reached the summit of Old Cannon, to see if anything had happened to him. When she had not found him there, she had thought they must have passed each other on the main highway between Old Cannon and home. When she returned home, however, he was still not there. And when she had no word of him by four in the morning, she called the police.

"Who's the girl staying with you?" he asked. They sat on the living room floor drinking coffee, waiting for the doctor whom she insisted he must see.

"My sister Barbara moved in the day after you were missing."

He set his cup down. "Why did you attack me out there? You should try out for Golden Gloves."

Both his shoulders were lightly bruised.

She blushed a little. "You disappeared for almost two weeks. No sign or message. I worried about a car accident, half a hundred other dreadful things. Then I walk in here, on the edge of a breakdown, and you're standing there smiling as if nothing happened. I guess—well, I guess I thought you'd been with some other woman. The thought passed through my head more than once, actually."

He reassured her, with hands and lips, and then he reassured her some more. But before anyone could be too assured, Dr. Billings had the gall to interrupt as he peered through the front screendoor, chuckling. "If it's free, you're losing a good chance of making a fortune from admissions."

They pulled apart and looked up at the familiar, gray-haired, rotund physician who had delivered Pete into this world and had saved Della from leaving it a year ago when her appendix had burst.

"We couldn't get much of an audience if we tried," Della said. "There just aren't enough of you dirty old men left around these days."

Billings came inside. "True enough. And isn't the world less colorful without them?"

"Just because you saved her life doesn't mean you have a perpetual license to seduce my wife," Pete said, assuming a tone of mock anger.

"Seduce her?" Billings asked, as if taken aback by such a suggestion. "Good God, man, even if I managed to seduce her, the most I could accomplish at my age would be some very innocent hand-holding!" He winked at Della who winked back and went to get them some coffee.

"You seem cheerful enough," Billings said, turning to Pete and placing his black bag on the floor. He sat down next to his patient, not without some grumbling.

"I'd be a deal more cheerful if I knew what I've been up to these last twelve days."

"Della calls it amnesia," Billings said.

"Della isn't a doctor. But it looks that way." Briefly, he explained his return home and all that he could remember before the blackout.

"Nothing else?" Billings asked.

"Just before I woke up, in the garage, I had a—night-mare. I was being watched by someone without eyes."

It sounded absurd and beside the point. Yet Billings said, "Can you remember more of the dream?"

"I was floating in blackness on a white bed. Someone was trying to touch me, and I didn't want them to. That's it."

At that moment, Della returned with coffee and chocolate chip cookies.

"I rang Chief Langstrom," she said. "They thought someone had spotted the Thunderbird abandoned in the northern part of the state. Says he's glad you're back and hopes things work out."

"Will things work out?" Pete asked Billings.

"Maybe—maybe not." Billings blew on his coffee to cool it. "Amnesia is a strange illness, a great deal



more common than most people think. In a moment, I'll check you over for bumps. But I doubt it was caused by a fall of any sort. More than likely, it was mental or emotional pressure that sprang it on you."

"Our marriage is fine," Pete said. "Business is going great guns, though not so much it keeps me overly busy. On top of that, I'm just not the worrying type."

"Should he see someone?" Della asked. They all knew she meant a psychiatrist.

Billings sipped his coffee. "Perhaps. But I'd wait a few weeks first, see what happens. It may very well all come back, bit by bit. Most amnesia victims eventually recall the things that happened in their blank period."

"If I don't?" Pete asked.

"If you can't recall a single\* thing in two weeks, you may be subconsciously repressing the memories. Then, a psy-chiatrist would be a good idea."

"Until then?" Della asked.

"I'm going to give you some sleeping pills, Pete. In case you have insomnia, which is often an aftereffect of this thing, they'll help you get the rest I'm also prescrib-ing. Don't go back to the office for a week. Go out to dinner, see a good movie or two, try to loosen up as much as you can."

"That's all?" Pete asked. Since Della's siege in the hospital, he had acquired an unnatural dread of having to go there himself.

"Well," Billings said, rising as he finished his coffee, agile for his years, "maybe you could add one thing to that list."

"What?" Della asked.

He set his cup on an endtable and grinned. "Make some rousingly active love before you go out to dinner tonight." He chuckled at their embarrassment.

"Dirtier and dirtier," Della said.

"And old and older," Billings ammended. "With the age comes the degeneracy, you know."

He took a packet of sleeping tablets out of his satchel and wrote directions for their use. He gave Pete a thor-ough examination but found nothing wrong outside of the bruises on his shoulders—which were Della's doing. After a final cup of coffee, he repeated his suggestions-love and dinner at a good restaurant—and kissed her on the cheek and left.

They took both of his suggestions. The first was far more satisfactory than the second. Indeed, the dinner seemed a bad idea once they were in the restaurant and had steak and potatoes before them.

"You're nervous," Della observed. "If you're worried about meeting someone you know, just tell them what happened. Amnesia isn't something to be ashamed of."

"That's not what's bothering me."

"What, then?"

"See that man two tables over: pale, shock of black hair, long nose?"

Della turned and looked unobtrusively at the man. He was tall and lean. His hands were long and slim and handled the utensils with a swift grace not unlike the manner in which a magician dealt with the tools of his trade. He was neither handsome nor ugly, but bland. His features seemed a bit too rounded for a man so thin, but they aroused no uneasiness in her.

"What about him?" she asked.

"I've seen him before."

She looked again. "Not me. You sure?"

"Positive."

"Well, through the agency, then. You meet too many people to remember who they—"

"Not him. I never met him through the agency."

"Forget him," she said. She tried to sound light, but there was something in her husband's preoccupation with the stranger—coming on the heels of his amnesia—that alarmed her. Each of them cared for the other far more than they were able to admit aloud. She did not want to lose him, even for twelve days, ever again.

But he could not avoid glancing at the stranger from time to time. The man left shortly before they were fin-ished with their dessert and coffee. Only a minute or two after his departure, Pete said, "I have

it.”

“Have what?”

“Where I've seen him before.”

“And?”

“Sometimes during the last two weeks, during my amnesia.” He laid his napkin down and got to his feet. “I'll be back in a minute.”

He hurried across the room, through the wide archway and into the cashier's foyer.

Della put down the chunk of steak on her fork and picked up her goblet of wine. She had only sipped a third of it all through the meal; now, she finished it off in three long swallows.

He returned.

“Something?” she asked.

“Nothing.” He sat down, frowning. “He was gone by the time I got out there. The cashier said he paid with exact change. He wasn't anywhere in the parking lot.”

She reached across the table and took his hand. “Don't worry about it, huh? The fact that you recognized him and knew he was from—from that blank period, that's a good sign. Maybe, like Doc said, it'll all come back, slowly.”

They finished the meal without dawdling. At the cash register, Pete had some trouble figuring out how many bills he needed to pay the tab. He kept trying to give the cashier too much, and when she gave him his change, he was certain she had shorted him. Della did not like the looks of him, harried and distraught.

She tried to make the evening as light as possible. They took Barbara's clothes back to her apartment where they had a drink or two. He had always enjoyed talking and kidding with Barb before, but he was too much of an-other mind tonight. At home again, Della came close to him in bed, warm and soft. She persuaded him, with little trouble, that they should repeat Billings' first piece of advice. Afterwards, content and sure that he must be too, she fell asleep.

But he remained awake. He stared at the ceiling a long time, wondering. Two weeks minus two days.

...

Where had he slept all that time? Who had given him a bed and food to eat? He had left home with three dol-lars in his wallet, and that was what he had returned with.

Credit cards. Of course. He could have slept in motels and eaten in restaurant with his credit cards. The thought was immensely comforting. Next month's bill would tell them where he had been. He sighed and relaxed a bit, leaning back into his pillow.

Why? That was the major question remaining.

Why had his mind rejected reality; why had it run loose and blind for twelve days? He loved Della; there was no conflict between them that he might wish to escape. He liked to think they were not just in love with each other, but that they also *liked* each other, something rare in most marriages. They had seldom argued, even with Della's strong will. The business? He had not been lying to Billings when he said it was fine. What else, then? He was apolitical—or liked to think he was—and could not have been unduly disturbed by the state of the nation. He had long ago decided that politicians would have everyone in their graves ahead of time, either by ignoring pollution or fostering wars. His duty was to live his own life and to hell with having children and planning on a future. Maybe it was not a gallant attitude, but it led to fewer hassles and more chance at happiness in the end.

Sleep would not come.

He slid to the edge of the bed and put his slippers on. Perhaps, if he found a book and read for an hour or two, all would be well. He stood and was passing the single window in the room when he saw the man standing under the willow tree on the lawn, watching the house.

He stepped quickly to the glass only to find the lawn quiet and uninhabited when he got there.

Della turned, mumbled and settled into sleep again.

He remembered the nightmare: the face without eyes, the many-fingered hand reaching for him. . . .

But this watcher had been someone else, for there had been nothing inhuman about him. He was certain it was the same, tall, lean man he had encountered in the restau-rant earlier in the evening.

### III

They drove out of town Tuesday morning, nestled in the airconditioned comfort of the big car, a picnic lunch packed in a cooler on the back seat. The day was bright, with but a few puffy clouds that scudded across the top of the sky under the lash of a high altitude wind which did not make itself felt down here. Pete turned on the radio; the music and the passing landscape combined to settle both of them and to make everything seem fine and good and uncomplicated.

Except for the stranger who had been standing by the willow tree last night, watching. . . .

He had not told Della about that. It was not that he feared she wouldn't believe him. They were too close and knew each other too well to mistake sincerity for joviality. And there was nothing, surely, he could gain by lying to her. Neither was he frightened that she might think his mental problems were more severe than mere amnesia. The only reason he kept quiet was that he hated to make her tense and uncertain. She had been through more than he had, for she had been on the edge for twelve days, whereas he had been asleep all that time—or as good as.

The sunlight dappled the road ahead, making its way through a heavy canopy of elm trees that lined both sides of the road.

The road began to climb the mountain. The way grew more difficult as they broached the foothills and curved up the slopes of Old Cannon. To either side, the neatly kept ranch homes which had been tucked quietly between the trees began to thin out until, at last, there were no more of them.

"Anything yet?" Della asked.

"Nothing. It looks normal. I seem to remember passing it that Thursday morning."

Abruptly, the even surface of the road gave way to less well-paved patches of cracked macadam as state jurisdiction faded to that of the county.

A yellow, canvas-roofed dune buggy of Japanese manufacture roared by them on its way down the mountain. Pete recognized the grizzly, white-haired, white-bearded giant behind the wheel as Tom Murdock, who owned a cabin upslope of them. Pete thought of stopping him and asking if he had seen Pete that Thursday. He decided against it. Despite the fact that amnesia was nothing to be ashamed of, he would not flaunt his shattered memory until it became absolutely necessary.

They took Jagger's Curve slowly, the only way it *could* be taken if one wished to get all the way around it. When the car was on even road again, Pete drove into a small picnic area and stopped the car. He turned in his seat and looked behind them, through the rear window. Jagger's Curve was silhouetted against a blue sky.

"What's the matter?" Della asked. She followed the direction of his gaze but could not see anything out of the ordinary. "Did you remember something?"

"I don't know."

On an almost subliminal level, however, he was certain that he had. But consciously, he had nothing more than a vague fear associated with that wide, acute twist in the roadway.

"It's silly," he said, "but the minute we entered the curve from the other side, I was uptight. I wanted to jam on the brakes and turn, right there in the middle of the bend. Then we were past it and I felt sure I never went any farther than Jagger's Curve that Thursday morning."

She waited, then said, "Where else could you have gone?"

He turned front and stared through the windshield at the picnic table and the wire trash receptacle. "I don't know. I wouldn't have made a turn in the middle of a curve like that. So I *must* have come clear around before I changed destinations—though I definitely don't remember making it this far."

"Your imagination, then," she said.

"Perhaps."

But he did not believe it. He felt as if something rested within him, some gloved hand which clutched

any sur-facing memories from those twelve days and forced them down again. It was as if someone had gone to great lengths to be certain that he didn't remember.

That was paranoia. He best avoid it, or he would find himself in even more trouble.

He drove on. The remainder of the ride to the cabin was uneventful, though the certainty persisted that he had not come this far on that Thursday morning.

The cabin had three rooms: kitchen, living room and bedroom. It was built of logs on a single floor. The rear corner had been expanded with a bath addition which he intended to cover with half-log artificial siding to match the rest of the place. It was set on a slope above the road, and it looked out on the same breathtaking scenery that had accompanied them since Jagger's Curve. They parked by the front door at the top of the tortuously steep driveway and went inside.

"But you *were* here!" Della said, delighted at her dis-covery. "You did some painting!"

The white plaster had been only half covered with beige paint before. Sometime within the last two weeks, the living room had been finished. It was a good job. He had apparently taken his time with it.

"I don't remember doing it."

He tried, to be analytical and speak clamly, but the panic rose in him again. He felt trapped, abruptly re-duced to primitive fears and animal intuitions that threat-ened to guide his reason. He *knew*, without any facts, that it was dangerous to be here. He had to fight down the urge to bolt for the car and get off the mountain.

"You'll remember soon enough," she said. She knew that it was necessary to make him think she believed that, to offer her own certainty as an anchor.

They prowled the cabin, but they found no other sign of what might have transpired to spark his amnesia. The paintbrushes were washed clean and racked with his typical care. The cans of beige paint were firmly tamped shut to keep the contents from drying out.

Why couldn't he remember any of it?

She forced a smile as she saw that his fear was as strong as ever, and she said: "Well, let's do some work! Maybe some exercise will help settle your nerves. I'll lay some tile in the bathroom—and maybe you can clear some of the brush away, downslope, toward the road."

"I guess we've nothing better to do," He saw the dismay she tried to conceal between flickerings of a tentative, strained smile, and he knew that it wasn't any good, this transmitting his uncertainty to her. He kissed her then and made enthusiastic noises about getting the cabin closer to completion.

He fetched a sickle from the tool rack and tramped through the ragged clearing he had already cut, to the shaggy perimeter of the lawn. There, he set to work hacking down the shoulder-high brush between the trees.

The work did have a therapeutic effect. He soon re-moved his shirt and settled to the enjoyment of his mus-cles working in rhythm. Every time he stopped to survey what he had accomplished, he felt better. It was as if each chopped weed, each torn and dismembered bush, made him less hollow and more sure of himself, made those two lost weeks far less important than they had seemed at first.

Peter Mullion was a man less bound by tradition and a need for security than most. He had never buckled down to a nine-to-five job in his life, and he never intended to, even if the now prosperous ad agency should suddenly fold. In the early years when the agency wasn't making much money, he had simply adjusted his living standard and didn't worry much. Money had been put away for a nicer house, travel next year, for books, rec-ords and art. They had modest investments. But as for a retirement fund—well, he felt that the sooner a man started saving for old age, the sooner his apathy toward the present set in.

Yet, there were limits to his casualness. Missing two weeks of his life was beyond those limits. If he did not discover what had happened to himself, he would never be at peace.

Thinking slowly brought the panic back.

The faster he swung the sickle, the greater the panic became. It was a vicious circle: he could only escape fear through the monotony of manual labor, but manual labor gave him time to think—and thinking brought him di-rectly back to the fear.

He chopped harder, trying to lose himself in the exer-tion.

But the fear swept his mind, the bristles of that dark broom digging deeper every time it arced.

The sickle, blurred by the furious rate of its arc, struck the trunk of a locust tree. The impact made his arm so numb that his fingers opened and dropped the blade into the high grass where he lost sight of it.

Pete sat down, exhausted, breathing hard. He felt centuries old. Chin on his chest, he made soft whooping noises as he drew breath and tried to settle himself.

*I am not going mad, he thought. I will not. I cannot! I won't!*

But he was not so sure.

He had read, somewhere, that the mad never suspect they are mad and that only the rational man wonders about his sanity. Wasn't that evidence of his sanity?

As he recovered his breath, he began to feel that he was being watched. It was such a strong sensation that it either proved an incurable paranoia or was based on fact. His first reaction was to turn and see if Della had come down from the house in response to his berserker spell, but he saw that she was not there. He looked about the periphery of the clearing, and he moved just swiftly enough to see the mountain laurel rustle to his right, as if someone had parted it slightly in order to look at him and had dropped back out of sight as soon as he had begun to turn his head in that direction.

Paranoia. He couldn't give in to it. There was nothing there; he had not seen anything at all.

But before he could convince himself of that, he heard the footsteps of someone moving stealthily away through the weeds farther down the slope. Twigs snapped, and the sound of thorns snagging clothing and ripping free was also clearly audible.

He stood and tried to see that way. The laurel grew taller there in the flush of a spring that flowed through the culvert beneath the road. He could see nothing but the swaying of brush as someone forced a way through. Abruptly, even that stopped.

"Hey!" he called.

There was no answer.

He pushed into the brush. In moments, he found signs of the watcher's passage: broken grass stems, snapped laurel branches, disturbed earth where the sod had been shredded, as if the watcher had weighed a great deal or had, more likely, been wearing climbing boots with spiked soles.

He ran faster, his breath still short from his workout with the sickle. He felt as if he were gaining on his quarry, and he was trying to think what to do when he saw the man—when fingers grasped the right hip of his jeans and brought him to a halt.

He whirled, a hoarse cry caught in the back of his throat.

What was there? *No eyes, split mouth, staring out of darkness at him. . . ?*

He fisted his hands and flailed out as he came around, but he found that there were no fingers, after all. Instead, long thorns snagged his belt and jeans. In a moment, he had freed himself, whimpering uncontrollably, and ran on.

The signs of the watcher's passage ended in an unbreached wall of vegetation. Pete cautiously examined the land on all sides, but he could find no hiding place. He pushed on toward the highway, scratching himself on the thorns, catching small, brown burrs in his jeans. He found no one when he was in the clear. He crossed the road and looked down the second shelf of the mountain's slope. Nothing. It was as if the watcher had vanished in the middle of the woods.

He headed back to the cabin. Della came out the front door as he started up the porch steps, almost colliding with him. "There's something here I want you to see," she said. She seemed preoccupied, and she did not notice his condition.

Inside, she took him to the bathroom door and pointed to the living room wall near the doorway where she had accidentally bumped a carton of floor tiles against the newly painted section. There was a scar on the beige paint which allowed the plaster to show through.

"Don't worry about it," he said. "I can touch it up when—"

"It's not that," she interrupted. "Don't you see *why* it scraped so easily? Touch it, Pete." She was frightened, though he could not see why. Her normally rosy complexion had grown chalky.

He ran his fingers across the scar and found moisture. There was damp paint on his fingertips. The surface had solidified and seemed dry, but its true nature could be betrayed by a thumbnail. It was not

completely set.

“How long does it take the stuff to dry, Pete?”

He looked at her, then looked back at the wall. His head felt loose. It would fall off any minute and roll across the floor. He scratched the back of his neck, but that made him shiver, and he stopped.

“Six hours,” he said at last.

“Which means you might not have been up here at all that Thursday. This had to be painted last night, while you were home sleeping—by someone who wanted us to think that you'd been here that day.”

“Why?” he asked.

Neither of them had an answer.

He tried three other places around that half of the room and found the same thing every time.

His legs felt weak, and his spine seemed to shiver, but at least he was not going mad. If there were other people involved, if there were some point to all this, if it was not just his imagination, perhaps the world was still solidly beneath his feet.

“Get the picnic cooler,” he said.

“What?”

“I'll start the car; we're getting out of here.”

For the first time, she noticed his scratched and bleed-ing chest, the red welts along his arms where thorns had done their work. “Good lord! What happened to you?” She touched the blemishes tenderly. Her long, tan fingers were cool.

“Later,” he snapped. He was gruff with her, but he could not help it. He couldn't deny the urgency which had possessed him. “Hurry!”

Outside, the trees had taken on a sinister, malevolent appearance. The upward regions of the mountain housed demons, the lower regions warlocks, things in the cover of the greenery which amused themselves with tricks played on mere mortals.

By the time she hurried outside with the hamper, he had already started the car and had come around to open her door. He took the lunch from her and shoved the styrofoam container onto the back seat. He helped her in, closed her door and ran around to the driver's seat.

“What are you so frightened of?” she asked, not fully comprehending even the little bit she had seen.

“I was watched while I was in the woods. Maybe the same man who was in the restaurant last night—and who watched our house from the lawn.”

“Watched our house?”

“In a minute,” he said, turning his full attention to the car.

They left the cabin and Old Cannon more swiftly than was prudent, considering the winding roads and the precipice always at hand on their right. He did not even take time to go back and recover his shirt where he had taken it off and dropped it while cutting brush. He had the feeling that, if he went back there, he might leave Della waiting in the car with the picnic hamper for ever and ever and ever. . . .

## IV

The following afternoon, Pete got gas and oil in the car and ended up in an argument with the attendant over the change from a twenty dollar bill. He was certain he had been short-changed and was embarrassed and further angered to find that he had not been. Feeling like an ass, he screeched out of the station lot and almost struck a northbound Chevrolet.

That night, he sat by the bedroom window, in the dark, while Della tossed and turned and slept and pretended to sleep.

But there was no strange man watching the house. At times, he was all but certain that he had seen a flicker of movement by the hedge or down along the curb where scattered oak trees offered some degree of shelter. But a closer look never revealed anything out of place.

Once, having fallen asleep with his head on his arms and his arms on the window sill, he came awake, snuf-pling with some undefined fright. He snapped his head up and looked onto the lawn. He would have sworn that, in that first instant, there had been a face pressed against the glass, looking in at him. But there was nothing out there except the night, the wind and the occasional pulse of fireflies. No one could have moved so quickly, in just a fraction of a second. It had to be part of a dream.

Eventually the morning came.

Wednesday was uneventful. He wanted to return to the cabin and prowl around it some more, but he could not build up his courage for that. Instead, they passed the day together and spent the evening at the movies. There, Pete bought three bags of popcorn when they were only two of them to eat it. They laughed about his absent-mindedness, but the incident put him on edge.

He only watched the lawn for a short while that night. Again, the stranger did not appear.

On Thursday, *he* was the stranger. At breakfast, he drank Della's orange juice as well as his own, but he could not remember drinking more than a single glass. As the day progressed, this confusion of numerical perception continued until, eventually, he became so confused with the minutest bits of day-to-day living that he doubted his sanity.

At Porter-Mullion's building downtown, on his way to check in at the office for a few minutes, Pete could not find the proper floor. In the elevator, at the board of buttons, all the numbers seemed to be the same. He pushed a few at random, but they did not take him to the proper floor. He thought of pushing each one, in turn, until he was where he wanted to go, but the moment he had pressed one button, he could not remember which one it had been.

He felt like an idiot, having to ask someone to get him to the proper floor. He got out of the elevator the fifth time it opened on a hallway, and walked to the stairs. He had no idea whether he was nearer the roof or the lobby, but he decided to walk up, checking each floor for the Porter-Mullion offices. If he didn't find it going up, he could find it on his way down.

He had gone up five floors, but he could not remember how many there had been. Sometimes, he was sure it had been five. Other times, he was positive it was ten. Again, it might have been no more than one. At some point in his exhausting journey, he found himself going down, though he could not remember having reached the last flight. He looked up. Stairs twisted out of sight, musty, dimly lit, smelling of old pine and floor wax. He shrugged, turned and continued downward. When he rounded the bend and looked down the next flight, it suddenly seemed endless. As far as he could see, steps followed steps, thousands upon thousands of them, dwindling in the distance. He swayed as vertigo took him, and he thought he would fall to his death down those thousands of steps.

He looked at his watch to see how long he had been here.

There were four watches on his arm.

He wiped at his eyes.

There were still four watches, all precisely the same, large-faced with a luminous dial. They all read

ten minutes past twelve. He had been on the stairs for forty-five minutes, at least. Or perhaps two hours. It was even possible that he had been on the stairs for less than a minute. He looked away from the watches. There were only three of them now.

The steps before him divided before his eyes. Where there had been a flight of twelve, there were now twenty-four.

And now, forty-eight.

He leaned against the wall, raising a hand to shield his eyes.

There were a hundred fingers on his hand.

He started to scream . . .

. . . and unlocked his front door, walked in and closed it behind him.

The aroma of freshly brewed coffee filled the air of the living room. Della sat in the large, yellow recliner, sipping coffee from a ceramic mug. She was wearing a housecoat that fell only to mid-thigh, and she was enormously appealing.

“What's for supper?” he asked.

She watched him for a long, long while, as if she were unable to speak, “You were gone for three days, this time,” she finally said. “You disappeared again.”



## V

All things considered, the Emerald Leaf Motel was not the sort of place he would have chosen to spend three days. First of all, it was only thirty-one miles from home. And though it was clean enough, it was so sterile and secluded that it would have bored him to tears inside of a single afternoon; it had been designed for the tourist passing through, not for those with time to kill.

Yet he had stayed here.

The memory of those three days was curiously bright on his mind. He got out of the Thunderbird, fished the room key from his pocket, and led Della to Room 34. The door opened onto a small, unlit room that smelled predominantly of clean sheets and bathroom cleanser. He flipped on the light, revealing a pleasant chamber, with a television, a made-up bed, desk and chair, and a coffee table.

They searched the desk drawers and even under the bed, but they found nothing curious. There was nothing out of the ordinary in the bath.

"The maid would have straightened it, changed the sheets and all," Della said.

He nodded, distracted by the shimmering visions of those three days.

"You remember it?" she asked, though she had asked the same question a dozen times before. She wanted to say, instead, "Why?", but she knew that was a question for later.

"I remember it too well," he said.

"Still?"

"Yes. It's such a strong memory that it interferes with everything else, makes my mind wander. It hangs there—" He turned and looked at the bed. "I remember how comfortable it was. I slept on the right side, as if you were on the left, and that amused me at the time." He walked into the bathroom. "No stopper for the tub, just the shower. I remember that too. And the first shelf of the medicine cabinet is rusted along the edge." He opened the mirrored door and proved his statement.

"And you didn't do anything but stay here, in your room?"

"I watched television."

"You never do."

"I know, but I did this time."

"Where did you eat?" she asked.

She looked around the room while he tried to remember. The place was so impersonalized, without a single article of his own, that he might never have been here. Perhaps no one had ever been here. There was not even a cigarette burn on the surface of the desk.

"I can't remember eating," he said at last. "I must have gone out to restaurants."

"Maybe the desk clerk will know."

He looked around the room once again. "Let's go see him."

The 4:00-to-midnight shift clerk was a small, balding man named Leroy Simmons. The only distinguishing feature of his bland white face was a small moustache. And even that was so thin that it might have been drawn on with a pencil. He looked up at them, blankly, then offered Pete a tentative smile.

"Can I help you with something?" He shifted his gaze, nervously, to Della, considering her. Pete had evidently signed the register without a "Mr. and Mrs." preceding his name.

"Yes," Pete said, wondering how to phrase everything he had to ask. "Do you remember when I checked in?"

"Three evenings ago, wasn't it?" Simmons asked. He pulled the guest register to him and flipped through the pages of duplicate copy, perforated sign-in cards. "Here it is. Thursday evening at 6:20." Again, he looked at Della, certain she was the center of some trouble about to descend on him.

Pete thought a moment, then forced a smile. "It seems I've had a bit of amnesia," he said. "From a

war wound. It happens now and again.”

Simmons looked startled. His little mouth drew up in a tart bow, circled by the black line of his moustache. “I see.”

“I was wondering if you might help me reconstruct those days I was here.”

“I’m only on duty evenings,” Simmons said.

“As best you can, then.”

Simmons played with a black and gold pen that was chained to the top of the formica counter. “What do you want to know?”

“Did I come here during the evening? To buy a paper or magazine or anything?”

“Twice,” Simmons said, “A paper both times.”

Pete frowned. He could not remember having read a paper. Considering how brilliant were his memories of the rest of those three days, that was an odd omission.

“Did we talk about anything?” he asked.

“The weather,” Simmons said. “Pleasantries.” He blushed, an unpleasant change on the pallid, round face. He looked as if he were ready to burst. “You’ll excuse me if I don’t remember exactly what was said. So many strangers go in and out, and the talk is always the same.”

He had nothing else to tell them. At last, Pete took out his checkbook and said, “How much do I owe?”

Simmons looked startled. “You paid for three days, when you came in.”

Pete looked in his book; he could not find a stub to verify what Simmons had told him.

“No, you paid by cash,” Simmons said. “It was unusual. You insisted on paying me then. You said you might have to leave in a hurry and you didn’t want to chance getting caught in a line at the desk if you had to depart during a rush hour.”

Outside, on the concrete veranda before the office, Della breathed the golden, late afternoon air and said, “Well, he threw a little light on the situation, anyway.”

“None at all,” Pete corrected.

“What?”

He took his wallet from his hip pocket and opened it. There were two fives and two ones in the money clip. “I had twelve dollars Thursday afternoon, in these same denominations. I remember that clearly. I think this is the same twelve. What did I pay him with?”

“I don’t understand—”

“That makes two of us.”

To their right, a maid pushed a cart of cleaning tools along the wide cement walkway, stopped before the open door of the maintenance room and pushed her equipment inside, wiped her hands on the dust rag at her waist, then threw that after the cart. As she closed the door, Pete approached her.

“Excuse me,” he said.

She looked up, wide-faced, perhaps Spanish or Puerto Rican. She had been pretty, once, twenty years and a hundred pounds ago. The years had worn her down while building her up, and her dark eyes looked at him suspiciously out of the layers of fat that cushioned them.

“Yes?” she asked.

“Have you been cleaning Room 34 these past three days?”

She squinted her eyes, an act that made them all but invisible. “I didn’t touch anything,” she said.

“I’m not accusing you,” he said. He took a five dollar bill from his wallet, folded it and held it out to her. “I only want some information.”

She looked at Della, down at the five, up at Pete, then down at the five again. She took the money and stuffed it in one of her uniform pockets. “What do you want to know?”

“Have you noticed anything unusual about number 34? Anything at all, no matter how insignificant it might seem.”

“The bed is never slept in. And the towels are never used. I don’t believe anyone’s even in there—though they say someone’s renting it.”

Della stepped forward now. “Haven’t you seen my husband in there, or hanging about the hotel

somewhere, waiting for you to finish with the room?"

The maid looked him over as if he were an interesting fungus that had sprung up in the center of the veranda. "Never seen him," she told Della. She seemed more at ease talking to a woman. "And he wouldn't have had to hang around somewhere waiting for me to finish with his room, 'cause it hasn't taken me even a minute the last three days. I just walk in, check that the bed is empty, look at the towels, run a dust cloth over the desk and leave."

"Have you said anything to Mr. Simmons about it— about the empty room?" Della asked.

"I said. But he wouldn't listen. He just stares at me, kind of like I'm not there. Then he says, like he didn't even hear me, 'It's none of your concern, Hattie.' I had to ask the afternoon man whether there was anyone there, and he told me there was."

Pete had been only half paying attention to the conversation. And now, as Della put another question to the maid, he lost interest altogether. Over the heavy woman's shoulder, a hundred and fifty feet down the veranda, a man stood in the doorway, half concealed by the shadows, watching the three of them. His pale face was all that was visible, and only part of that. But he was instantly recognizable as the man who had watched the house, the same man they had seen in the restaurant that night when he had come home from his first lost journey.

Only seconds after he realized they were being watched, Pete saw the stranger draw back, as if he knew he had been seen.

Della asked him something.

He pushed away from her and the maid and ran along the breezeway, keeping the stranger's room at the center of his line of vision. If he looked away, even for a moment, he would never be able to distinguish one room from the next when he looked back.

The watcher slammed the door.

In the next moment, Pete was there, pounding loudly and shouting to be let in. When he got no response, he tried the knob and found that the door was unlocked. He pushed the crimson panel inward and stepped into the room.

The room was unoccupied.

He crossed to the closed bathroom door and pulled that open. The bathroom was unoccupied as well. The window was open, but it did not appear to be large enough to permit a grown man escape.

When he turned around, Della and the maid were standing at the open doorway to the main room. Della's face was unnaturally white, her lips drawn together until they almost disappeared, bloodless lips against bloodless skin. The maid just looked angry.

"Whose room is this?" he asked the heavy woman before she could reprimand him for forcing his way into a room that wasn't his.

"How should I know?" She covered the pocket where the five dollars lay, effectively sealing it from him with one pudgy hand.

He pushed past her and went back to the motel office. "Who is occupying Room 27?" he asked, reaching for the registration book.

It was on the top sheet of card duplicates. The name of the occupant was listed as D. J. Mullion.

"Who?" Della asked.

He could hardly speak. "You," he croaked.

She took it from him and looked at her initials. "It's not my handwriting though. And it says the room was rented—an hour and ten minutes ago. I was with you then."

"What did he look like?" Pete asked Simmons.

"The man in 27? Well, he was tall. And thin. Sharp nose, like a beak. That's about all. He wasn't one of those people who leave any sort of lasting impression."

"What kind of car did he come in?"

"A VW," Simmons said, reading from the register. "There's the license number."

Pete looked at it. He wanted to rip the ledger apart, to scream and kick at things. As calmly as he could, he said, "He gave you the license number of my Thunderbird. He probably lied about the VW part of it as well."

Simmons stood up, his stool rattling on the tiled floor. "I better go check the room," he said. His bland face was creased with a frown. "See if he stole anything."

"Do that," Pete said.

Then he and Della were alone in the tiny lobby, listening to the banshee roar of the trucks on the distant high-way. The air seemed flat, the darkness beginning to press the light from the room.

"Do we have to stay here and wait for him?" she asked.

"No."

"Then let's get away from here, Pete. Please."

"You think I'm crazy, breaking into a strange room like that? Telling wild stories about strange men watching me from dark doorways, all of that? I know it sounds—"

His voice trailed away, for he realized that he was talking much too fast, that he was not communicating anything but his own panic.

Color had returned to Della's face. Now some of it drained away again. He took time to notice how beautiful she was, even when her face was pasty with fear.

"I don't think you're crazy," she said. "I saw him too, Pete. I saw him, just before he closed the door on you."

## VI

Pete discovered the new complications when he woke from a bad dream Monday night. All that day, he had been tense, expectant. When nothing out of the ordinary transpired, the tension broke loose in a nightmare and sent him scurrying down imaginary alleyways, running from his own shadow and from things far worse than that.

The dream ended as he sat straight up in bed, unable to breathe, his stomach cramped with pain. There was perspiration dripping from his jawline. The sheets around him were soaked.

But something was wrong.

For a long while, as his chest heaved with his labored breathing and he gripped the edge of the mattress with his right hand in order to still the dizziness that bothered him, he could not place the source of his annoyance. Della still slept. The clock hummed; the soft green glow from the clock-radio face was the only source of light. But something was definitely wrong; there was something in the room which did not belong here, which had never been here before.

As his pulse slowed and the dizziness abated along with the memory of the nightmare, he realized that he could hear voices, soft, murmuring voices speaking close at hand. He could not see anyone in the bedroom, and nothing about the furniture seemed out of place to him.

He rose and crept, quietly, to the window. The lawn was empty and still, the town quiet. He could not see anyone lurking about the willow or the hedges. There was no movement among the oak trees by the curb. Certainly, there was no one close enough to be heard.

Apparently, there was someone in the house, more than one someone, and the best he could do for a weapon was a handsized dumbbell with twenty pounds of weight on it. He hefted it and left the bedroom.

The whispers continued, barely audible strings of words which only occasionally were clear enough to understand. “. . . twice in one week . . . only then . . . what am I going to ... isn't . . . where . . .”

It was not sufficient to be sensible, and the clarity of it did not increase as he went from room to room. He thought that it was a woman's voice, though it was more neuter than anything else.

In fifteen minutes, he had cautiously inspected the house, and he had not discovered any intruders.

Still: whispers.

He stood in his den, by the large walnut desk there, holding the dumbbell as if it were a talisman. Slowly, it occurred to him that he was not listening to a voice; he was not hearing these words with his ears, but in some altogether strange fashion that sent a chill along his spine.

“If he thinks he can . . . never . . . even if she . . . there shouldn't be ... could kill him if ... damn, damn, damn . . .” The voice became softer until it was not a voice at all, but the distant, lonely weeping of a woman. Definitely a woman.

But who?

He stood there in the dark, “hearing” the sobs of the woman, unable to decide what to do.

In time, he put the dumbbell down and sat in the black leather swivel chair behind the desk.

The running commentary began again, though it was now as distant as the crying, too far away for him ever to catch a single word of it.

His head lowered so that his chin rested on his chest, he tried to close out all stimuli except that ghostly voice. He closed his eyes now that he felt secure in his own home, and he placed his hands over his ears—an act which did nothing to dull the murmur of the eerie voice.

The voice grew distinct again; it was most definitely a woman's voice, soft and musical. She sounded as if she might be in her early or middle thirties. Indeed, he was struck with the notion that the voice was familiar, though he did not know where he might have heard it before.

“. . . money . . . he'll pay . . . then see . . . who . . .”

The voice seemed to emanate from his left, though there was nothing in that direction but a

floor-to-ceiling bookcase. Nonetheless, he swung his chair in that direction, keeping his eyes closed and his hands pressed flat to his ears. When he faced the bookcase, he found that her voice was clearer than it had been. He was catching whole phrases and some short sentences instead of random words.

“Hank, you sonofabitch!” she moaned, voicelessly.

That was followed by the soft, barely audible sobbing sounds.

But that line had been delivered with such ferocity, such depths of emotion, that he knew immediately who he was listening to. Next door, in an eight room Tudor house, Henry and Annie Faydor lived with one child, seven-year-old Robbie. Annie was a vivacious blonde, thirty-one or two. It was Annie he had heard.

He listened, his throat dry.

In time, the chaotic sobbing noises died and words trickled back to him again. He listened, tuning more closely to what she said. It was a long, sad tale about Henry—Hank—and his unfaithfulness. She alternately considered killing him, merely divorcing him, or even taking him back and forgiving him. She rambled over the horrid details, fascinated by his faithlessness, but mostly giving way to the dominant train of thoughts that took most of her attention: “I’m going to take him to the cleaners, get him for every dime, the house and the car, fifty percent of what he earns from now on, until no woman would have him and he’ll be fighting like hell to make ends meet!”

He let her whispers fade into the background until he could only hear bits and pieces again. He was disgusted with himself for eavesdropping as long as he had.

He sat in darkness, Annie Faydor’s whispers like muzak for lonely people. It took him ten minutes to come to the decision he knew he had to make. He picked up the telephone on the desk, pulled out the 50-number personal directory in the base, and dialed the house next door.

The phone rang eighteen times.

Finally, she answered it. She was surly, for she evidently thought it was Henry. He let her say hello three times, until he was certain she was Annie and that she was home. Then he hung up. Until she had answered the phone, he could pretend that there were many explanations to the eerie, whispering voice. But once he knew she was home, and once he was able to compare her voice to the whisper that constantly accompanied him now, he could not excuse the phenomenon. He had been reading her mind.

Annie Faydor’s whining complaint against her perfidious husband and against the world in general was getting to be a distinct drag. He attempted to snuff the entire thing out of his mind and be done with it, but he could find no way to stop the input.

Then there was a second voice, speaking to him in a whisper as the first had. It was vague and unimaginably distant, but it swelled in volume as the seconds passed. He forgot Annie and focused on this upstart.

Though it grew as clear and as loud as the Faydor woman’s whisper, it made no sense. It was a jumble of words and *feelings*, polysyllabic tonal chains that sometimes were recognizable as English and sometimes were nothing more than murmurs, groans and sighs of happiness.

It took him more than five minutes to identify the sleep-laden thoughts of his own wife. She wasn’t dreaming, but she was thinking in a random, restful manner that indicated the human brain didn’t relax completely, even when its body was slumbering soundly.

He smiled at the rounded comfortableness of her thoughts and made to shut off their contact.

He couldn’t do it.

The sweet, gentle tide of Della’s memories undulated over him, through him, saturating him as they grew in volume and intensity. He was beginning to find the thought of sleep irresistible. His eyes fluttered, and he yawned and stretched.

Then, as the whispers swayed and crashed together, he was fully awake, listening to Annie Faydor bitch about Henry—while Della’s unconscious ramblings coursed as a backdrop to the carefully constructed catalogue of infidelity.

And there were others.

He opened his eyes.

The den was deserted.

He closed his eyes and listened and felt the others surging toward him. In minutes, they were on him, over-whelming him, pouring forth a mixture of bitterness and happiness, fear and trust, hatred and love. He recognized some of them as neighbors. Others were utter strangers to him, invading the sanctity of his mind.

“Go away!” he heard himself croaking at the empty room.

They remained, as he had known they would. They chattered and laughed, hissed and cried. Here, a mother agonized over the pregnancy of an unwed daughter. Here, a businessman worked over his balance sheets. Here, a teenage boy popped two bennies and leaned back in his chair, waiting for the surge of excitement he knew would claim him. Here, bare legs tangled in love.

He stood and pushed the swivel chair away from him. It fell over, backwards, but made little noise on the thick blue carpeting.

More whispers arose in the distance and rushed to-wards him. He had opened up a floodgate of thought-projectionists, and the deluge was about to take him.

Here, a man named Harry had drunk too much and was leaning into the bathroom sink, wondering if he should or could be sick. Here, a woman lay in a dark bed-room, alone, watching the patterns of automobile lights on her roughly plastered ceiling. Here a bitter argument over money. Here, a baby is crying in the night and a woman is padding along the corridor to its room, her slippers making soft animal sounds on the hardwood floor.

He took three quick, wobbling steps away from the desk, into the center of the room. Each step became a challenge of heroic proportions. He now had to con-sciously will each set of muscles to do their part. By the time he was three steps from the desk, he stopped, for he had begun to wonder where he was going.

His moment of doubt allowed the tide of strange thoughts to overwhelm him once again. It was almost a physical battering now; every joint in his body ached.

“Let me alone,” he said.

But they didn't.

“Help.”

But there was none.

His mind was filled with a thousand consciousnesses now, though none of them were aware of him. As one or another of the consciousnesses became momentarily dom-inant, boiling to the surface of that mental cauldron, he was swept away into another body, behind another pair of eyes. He knew that he was only reading the very vivid conscious thoughts of those people in the nearby blocks of town, but he felt as if he were actually teleporting into other bodies.

He was a man named Bill Harvey, sitting at his white formica kitchen table, reading one of his son's comic books and sipping warm milk in hopes of shrugging off insomnia as he—

—became a man at a window, looking through the slats of a Venetian blind that the woman beyond had care-lessly left open. His name was Dunsy Harriman, twenty-seven years old, employed as an apprentice baker, un-married, guilt-ridden. He pressed his face against the cool glass to see her and—

—was abruptly Peter Mullion, clutching at the door of his den, desperate for the corridor beyond.

It had occurred to him that, if he could somehow reach the garage and the car, and if he could drive without killing himself, the thoughts might dwindle in volume as he put space between himself and the minds that pro-duced them.

In the corridor, he fell.

—and was, abruptly, a man named Leonard, lying on the yellow tile of the bathroom floor, listening to his heart explode, feeling himself die, thinking that sixty-seven was much too young, much too young, much too, much too—

—and Pete pushed the floor away, stood there in the hall and tried to think.

On the horizon of his mind, he began receiving the output of at least ten thousand more minds. If the others had descended on him like bees, these came like locust. They blackened the sky, swarmed down, filmed over him, and carried him away in the static-laden cacophony of all their hopes and dreams, miseries' and jubilations.

There was quiet, then.

He had been lying on the hall floor for more than half an hour; the last ten minutes, he had been conscious. All the whispers were gone, except for the closest one, Della's. He had not tried to rise; his legs were still weak and trembling. Instead, he listened to Della's innermost ramblings, and he taught himself how to delve into the hidden corners of her mind, down into the subconscious where the most interesting fragments were to be found. He began to know her better than ever before, and he felt his chest grow tight with the emotion generated by this new intimacy.

In time, afraid that he could not take any more of this psychologically shattering experience in his first session, he eased her sleep-threaded thoughts out of his conscious mind. It was easy to control the input now; it was as if he had always known what methods to use. Della's mur-murs faded into silence. While he slept, his mind had evidently learned how to channel the inpouring mental images. In the blessed silence, he struggled to his feet and went quietly upstairs, where he changed into jeans and a work shirt.

In the kitchen, he wrote a message on the blackboard lest she wake up, find him missing, and be frightened that amnesia had again taken him. He opened the back door, stepped into the garage, went from there to the rear lawn, then walked out to the street.

He was anxious to test his new powers. The longer he could keep himself occupied with them, the longer he could put off wondering where they had come from.



## VII

For an hour, he wandered the streets of the town, hesitating before certain houses and calling forth the thoughts of their inhabitants. The longer he explored the minds of others, the easier it became, until he was soon able to contain another person's thoughts without yielding his own grasp of reality and without being forced into a small corner of his own mind. This gave him the opportunity to think about the telepathic talent that he had acquired. He was naturally led to a series of questions, all of them unanswerable, which kept running through his mind like a tape loop, over and over again. How had he acquired this ability? How was it connected to his periods of amnesia? Did the stranger who had been catching him have anything to do with it? Was it connected to the eerie sense of time-space distortion which he had undergone a few days ago in the stairwell of the Porter-Mullion building? Would this strange new ability lead to another bout with amnesia, as that distorted time-space sense had?

Now, he explored the mind of a nine-year-old boy, fascinated by the unbounded realm of fantasy he found there. In such a mind, all things were possible, all dreams recognizable, all goals within grasp. Simultaneously, he considered the tape loop of questions, so occupied between the two endeavours that he was not aware of the first stirrings of the alien mind which had intruded into his. At first, there was only a sudden calming influence, a sense of barrenness. Then the hard, clean mind weighed him down. He felt cold and hollow, drained by the contact. The child's thoughts ebbed. The alien consciousness flowed, filling his horizons until it commanded all his attention.

He looked about the dark streets. Arc lamps glowed at intervals; the branches of elms cast weird shadows on the sidewalks. Still, he could see that no one else was about.

Tentatively, he examined the odd consciousness. It was a mind of sorts, though not like any he had pried open before. It was smooth, completely featureless. It was a dazzling white, though it did not glint with light. It was cold, like a ball of compressed frost.

He insisted on finding a chink in it. He could not.

"Who are you?" he asked.

It did not reply. He was certain that the lack of response was not indicative of a lack of ability. Whoever this was, he did not want to respond, aware that silence would continue to give him the upper hand.

"What do you want?"

If it wanted anything, it did not say.

He enveloped it with mental fingers and found a thin filament of thought trailing away behind it. He tested the strand and found bright images that made little sense in their severe compression. This cold mind was somehow joined to another consciousness. Pete permitted his telepathic probe to float outwards upon this tenuous thread, building speed until, abruptly, he had plunged into a mind that he had not been expecting at all.

He looked out at the world through two amber patches that registered light in the highest and lowest spectrums and sensed heat and cold as well.

His eyes somehow translated sound, for he had no ears.

He worked his toothless and lipless mouth and felt rows of gums wriggle like bloodless snakes.

He raised an eight-fingered hand and touched some control in a board before him.

That was all he could endure. Instantly, he fled back-wards to the first, featureless mind that contained no thoughts of its own. From there, he settled completely into his own body and thrust the alien consciousness from his mind. The alabaster sphere dwindled and was gone.

Ahead, on the sidewalk, a tall man appeared. He was dressed in black slacks, a dark shirt and dark topcoat. As the man approached, Pete could see that it was the same stranger who had been watching him the past several days.

“Who are you?” he asked again.

He received the silence that he had expected for his answer.

They were only a hundred feet apart now.

Pete tested the stranger's mind and encountered the white sphere and the cold, the apparent absence of men-tal processes. There was only the filament, stretching back to the eyeless creature, and he did not want to follow that a second time.

He withdrew his psionic fingers.

Fifty feet of sidewalk separated them.

The stranger's hands hung at his sides. He had no weapon in them. And though his manner was relaxed and not particularly threatening, he seemed to radiate danger.

Five feet away, he stopped, his ghastly white face ex-pressionless. He nodded and said, “Good evening, Mr. Mullion.”

He had the voice of a television newscaster. If he had been gravel-throated, rough and mean, he would not have been so frightening. This voice was unsettling.

“Don't be frightened, Mr. Mullion.”

“Why shouldn't I be?”

“It isn't going to hurt.”

“What isn't?”

“Whatever we decide to do with you, Mr. Mullion.” Smooth voice, cool voice, its tones fatherly and reassur-ing. “We will make it just as painless as possible.”

The stranger's face remained expressionless.

Pete felt the white, spherical mind entering his own mental perimeters once again, slowly swelling until it threatened to completely dominate him. The thread be-hind it had become a string; the string swiftly grew into a cord; the cord became a taut cable. From his distant control perch, the eyeless being had begun to exert more influence with the stranger in dark clothes. In turn, it was using the stranger's mind to influence Peter Mullion as well. Now, relentlessly, images of contentment and peace poured across Pete's consciousness, spilling over all the sharp edges of his fear and coating them.

The stranger did not smile. Neither did he frown. In-deed, at such close range, under such trying circum-stances, his face looked far more like a clever rubber mask than like human flesh. Though it was exceedingly well executed, the mask's age lines and laugh lines looked unreal, as though sculpted in minutes rather than years.

The eyeless creature, working from its distant lair, be-gan to radiate a desire for sleep, along with the images of comfort and contentment. Pete felt heavy, as if boul-ders lay across his shoulders. He was capped with exhaus-tion, jacketed in weariness. He wanted to drop to the pavement, curl up and sleep, sleep. . . .

But his fascination with the blandness of the stranger's face made him hold on just a moment longer—just long enough to reach out and grab at the man's forehead, along his hairline, in search of the mask's edges. He could not find an edge. But in a second, he felt the flesh give more than flesh ought to. His fingernails slit it, tearing it from hairline to eyebrows.

The emanations of sleep ceased.

The stranger stepped back, reaching up to touch the wound. There was no blood whatsoever. But beneath the plastic flesh, there was the dull sheen of burnished steel, smooth and featureless.

## VIII

It did not occur to him that he might have any other option but flight. Turning away from the thing in front of him, taking advantage of the confusion which he had caused, he leaped over a low, well-trimmed hedge, onto the lawn of an enormous, many-gabled Victorian house. The street would have been too open; here, shadows already half-concealed him.

He turned and looked back. The stranger had disappeared; he was not on the sidewalk, and he had not come in pursuit. Perhaps he had circled half the block to the alleyway, with a mind toward cutting off Pete's escape at that point. But that seemed unlikely, for it would have been easier to make a direct pursuit.

Then the thing had gone for help. Its false face had been damaged, increasing its risk of discovery by other citizens. It had gone back to get repaired and to send reinforcements.

Back where?

That question froze him. He stood in the shadows, breathing heavily, listening to the night sounds, trying to imagine where the thing had come from. There was only one logical source: the eyeless, toothless creature sitting before the bank of controls, the beast from his dreams.

Cautiously, he continued across the lawn, his indecision broken. He kept to the shrubbery and the shadows by the house and reached a walk that led to a garage and, then, to the alleyway in the middle of the block. He paused by the wall of the garage and looked both ways down the side street. Finding both directions deserted, he chose to go left, where there were more operable street-lamps. Until he had ascertained a bit more of the change in his circumstances, he did not want to return to the house. The house would be watched.

He walked half a dozen blocks west, along tree-shrouded residential streets, then turned south toward the business district where he hoped he might find other people about. None of the stores were open at that hour, though Halberstrom's Restaurant was moderately busy, as it was twenty-four hours a day. He walked across the street to a small park that faced the restaurant and sat down on a slat bench to think.

He could not hope to handle the situation until he knew more about those behind it—which meant that, if possible, he was going to have to try to probe through the mind of that eyeless beast who had plagued his night-mares for these last few weeks. The dark stranger now seemed to be a machine; that would explain the false face, the steel beneath, the lack of mental processes in its own "brain". Opening his psionic curtain, he allowed the minds of those around him to gush in upon him. He sorted them out swiftly, searching for a string of mental images that originated in the alien creature who had controlled the mechanical man.

After several minutes, he found a white, spherical mind approaching his own. It wormed through the layers of his consciousness, looking for a grip. As before, the eyeless creature behind it began to radiate images of rest and sleep.

Frightened, Pete shoved the others out of his consciousness and looked about the small square. Coming down the walk to his right, two identical strangers, dressed in dark clothes and stamped from the same mold as the first one he had incapacitated, waved at him, as if in greeting.

He got up and stepped toward the curb.

Across the street, another of the robots stood before the restaurant, hands in overcoat pockets, watching him. When it knew that it had been seen, it stepped off the curb and started across the road.

Pete rounded the bench and walked briskly into the small park, heading for a windbreak of lilac bushes. When he reached these, he risked a glance backwards. All three of the things had entered the park. In the shelter of the trees, away from the streetlamps, they gave up their pre-tense of a casual stroll. They ran now, covering the ground between them and their victim.

He ran along the lilac wall until he found a break in it, pushed through, scratching himself on a few scraggly branches, and continued his flight. Now and again he felt them probing along the shell of his mind, trying to determine his destination and what he might do next. He found that he could effectively seal them out behind an imaginary obsidian wall that rose to touch the sky of his mental landscape. At least he had that edge on them.

The east end of the park fell away into a macadam parking lot behind Gridd's Department Store. He crossed the smooth plain, listening to his feet crack too loudly on the pavement. He was certain they were still behind him; he did not take the time to look.

The pedestrian walkways between Gridd's and the office building next door was only wide enough for two people to pass. When he broke out of the confining walls of the two buildings, he was on a deserted thoroughfare. He paused just long enough to hear them enter the far end of the walkway, then he angled across the four-lane highway as fast as he could move, into the dark mouth of yet another back street.

He could still feel their probing fingers sliding along the shield he had erected to contain his thoughts. Even if they could not gain access to his mind, they could track him merely by maintaining this minimal contact. Unless he could put a great deal of distance between himself and them—or in some other manner break that mental hold—he would never be able to elude them for good.

He followed the alleyway for four blocks until he came out in a small, brick-floored courtyard which was fronted by three warehouses forming the better part of a circle. Three other alleyways lead off in darkness. He chose the one on his right and ran half a block along the green, corrugated metal wall of the warehouse, then up the stairs he found leading to the second floor of the building.

At the top of the iron steps, set in the warehouse wall, was a metal fire door with a nine-inch-square glass window embedded in its center. The glass was double thickness and surely connected to an alarm somewhere. Just the same, he braced himself against the platform rail of the landing and set about kicking the chest-high window to pieces. He finally managed to break it. Glass tinkled on the floor inside, but there was no alarm. He reached through the square, careful of the few jagged shards remaining, found the fire latch on the panel, threw it and pushed the door inward.

The burglar alarm went off then.

He stepped back and looked down the alleyway. The triplets were hurrying along, looking purposeful. They would be on the stairs in a few seconds. Wiping perspiration from his face, he went into the warehouse, despite the alarm, and closed and re-bolted the door.

No lights burned in the warehouse. The moon and distant streetlamps shone through the broken window in the fire door, but that only seeped a few yards into the room. He moved quickly into the darkness, aware that the longer he stood in the light the longer it would be before his eyes had adjusted to the gloominess in the rest of the building.

He fell over a crate, striking the wooden floor with his shoulder. The pain in his skinned legs and bruised arm was so sharp that he might have lain there for several minutes, rubbing his flesh. But he didn't. He heard the triplets on the stairs, their hard-soled shoes clanging against the iron. Cursing, he got up and stumbled deeper into the dark. He walked with his arms ahead of him, trying to avoid another fall.

Perhaps a hundred feet into the chamber, he came up against the other wall. He could see no more than ten feet ahead, and then only the barest outlines of things. Keeping one hand against the wall, he walked toward the back of the building.

The triplets fumbled with the fire latch, at the door. It snicked open.

He reached the rear wall without encountering stairs. He turned and hurried back the way he had come, following the cold metal toward the front of the warehouse. The alarm had stopped. That was, he knew, only because the police had switched it off from headquarters and were on their way. He wasn't sure if that was good or bad.

"Mr. Mullion."

He almost stopped when he heard the newscaster's voice, but he caught himself and continued to follow the wall.

"We are not here to harm you," the newscaster said.

He walked.

“You won’t have the slightest notion of pain, Mr. Mul-lion. Let us assure you of that.”

He reached the front of the room without making a noise that could give him away. He found a railing and emptiness beyond, a discovery which indicated they were on a second-floor storage loft which overlooked the main floor of the warehouse. Somewhere, there had to be a way down.

“Mr. Mullion,” one of the triplets said, looming up twenty feet away as Pete followed the smooth railing.

He stopped, his heart racing, but he felt a break in the rail as he did so. He edged forward a foot or two and felt around with his boot until he discovered a step. In a moment, blood pounding in his temples, he was halfway down toward the lower level, taking two risers at a time, no matter what the danger of a fall. He heard the mechanical man start after him as he set foot on the cement floor.

Outside, the wail of sirens rebounded from the rippled warehouse walls. Would the triplets stay or flee?

“Mr. Mullion, if you will wait there just a moment—”

He didn’t bother listening to the rest of it, but moved off through the crated machinery that offered cover.

The eight-fingered being had begun another concerted effort to break down the partition that surrounded Pete’s mind. It wanted to surge through, shredding his defenses, and capture him, thereby putting an end to this chase. Fortunately, Pete wanted his freedom even more than the strange creature wanted him captured. For the moment, the stronger of the two desires seemed to be winning out. The assault made him feel dizzy and weak and uncertain. Nevertheless, he managed to maintain his mental sanctity against the onslaught. Hunched to present the smallest target, he fled deeper into the stacks of boxes and barrels.

Three police cars braked noisily in the brick courtyard outside. The sirens died slowly, mournful as they wound down into silence to be replaced by the voices of half a dozen men. Orders were shouted; confirmations were called back. Feet sounded on the bricks. “Up this way!” someone shouted. Distantly, feet found the iron rungs of the old, black fire escape.

The triplets were all on the main floor now, desperately looking for him.

“Mr. Mullion, the police will be here shortly, and they’ll arrest you. We have a way out; they won’t find us. But you’ll have to stay here and be trapped, if you won’t help us.”

The police had reached the door at the top of the fire escape and were considering unlatching it.

Pete remembered the speed with which that damaged mechanical man had disappeared from the street, earlier in the evening. Too, he remembered how the stranger under the willow tree had vanished so rapidly that night only weeks ago, when he had returned home from his first period of forgetfulness. He had been hoping that the arrival of the police would scare the triplets off. Now he saw that they would stay through the last moment. They were superior machines with superior abilities, many of which they had not, surely, yet displayed.

During one of his quiet dashes along a short, box-walled passageway, as he eluded the triplets, he came to a point where the cement floor sank in all directions to a large, heavy wire drainage grill set over a sewer opening in the floor. All the stock was perched on metal bar frames an inch or two above the cement to let the water drain beneath.

In the second floor loft, the police had gotten the door open and had reached the head of the stairs. They played the beams of three powerful flashlights on the maze of the lower level. They looked unhappy at the prospect of coming down. They called out, waited for a reply, then called out again.

Pete knelt by the wire grill and lifted it out of place. Beyond, the storm drain was easily large enough to accommodate a man. He wondered if it harbored rats and roaches. Then he decided that rats and roaches could be no less pleasant than remaining here to be discovered by the police or the triplets. The former would recommend that he be locked up in some asylum; the latter might just take it in their heads to murder him. Painlessly, of course; they had promised that much.

He laid the grill aside and dropped into the drain. The tile was only damp; no rats or roaches either visible or audible. He reached overhead and replaced the grill. It made a bit of noise sliding in place, but

he could do noth-ing about that.

He had not considered how dark it would be. His fears seemed to drink the darkness and bloom with its nourish-ment. Although he would have a hard enough time seeing what he was about, he knew the mechanical triplets would see very well in the dark, too well to make it an even battle.

Overhead, someone shouted. The police? Or the tri-plets?

He heard voices and the shuffle of feet near the drain.

A revolver boomed in the closed warehouse, echoing from the corrugated walls.

Fingers felt along the drainage grill; he could see them, searching for a hold.

He turned, peered into the stinking blackness of the storm drain, bent to avoid any ceiling projections, and hurried forward, giving the rats plenty of warning if they were there.

## IX

He was thankful for the recent balmy weather which had given the city clear skies for several days. The run-nels were dry, or nearly so, and they presented no hazard more nerve-wracking than occasional patches of slick, wet mud. He fell on a few of these, skinning both knees and both elbows. His clothes were damp in many places and smeared with a rich, black soil; chewing gum wrap-pers stuck to his trousers; his face was filthy; the left sleeve of his shirt was torn from cuff to elbow. He didn't curse once. Nor did he wish he was out of that place and under an open sky, for all these bothersome details were far more desirable than capture.

His eyes had somewhat adjusted to the gloom, though he could see very little, no more than a few feet. There was no sign of movement behind, no light to show the triplets the way.

He began to walk rather than run any farther. His chest ached; his calves and thighs felt strained and loose. As he walked, he held a hand over his heart, as if clutch-ing it, feeling the beat of it and wishing there were some way to slow the tempo. He took turn after turn in the sub-terranean network; each twist into a new branch of the drainage system was one more obstacle to anyone who might be trying to follow him.

Ahead, concrete steps, fortified with flagstone insets, led up into more darkness. The city was built on two hills and in the valley between; necessarily, there would have to be different levels in the drains. Weak, blue light, fil-tering down from above, showed him the way. He climbed the steps, avoiding the soggy clumps of rotting, dead leaves that clung in all the corners of the risers.

At the top of the stairs, he found a landing from which two tunnels bored away in opposite directions. Directly in front of him, in the blank stone wall, there was a heavy, metal door, painted gray with the number 17 stenciled on it in white. A blue safety bulb burned in a wire cage above the door. He crossed to it, tried the handle, and found the door locked.

"Hello in there!" he called without response.

He pounded on the door, sure that he had found a maintenance area of some sort. It was sturdily hinged and reverberated only slightly, despite the force of his knock-ing.

"Hey, in there!"

Still no answer.

He turned away from it and went back to sit on the first step of the stairway. Instead of thinking about his plight, his mind traveled to thoughts of Della, where it dwelled for long, pleasant minutes.

He tried to picture her, lying in bed yet, warm, curled up, one hand drawn to her mouth, almost as if she would begin sucking her thumb. It was how she always slept; he had little trouble envisioning her.

But he could do better than that. He bored a hole in the obsidian walls around his mental landscape and pro-jected a beam of cognition, seeking her.

*Della...*

See her: frightened.

She dislikes things that crawl, centipedes, caterpillars, waterbugs, snakes, and she draws away, cold with the fear of being touched by them. She never shows this fear because she doesn't want you to think of her as a typical female, as a ninny afraid of her own shadow. She is ter-rified of cancer, of tumors that bring death unknown, un-suspected and unwanted. She is frightened of the way you sometimes drive too fast, corner too closely, pass other cars when there is little room to pass. Some nights, she dreams of being killed in the Thunderbird, crushed, canned, bleeding across asphalt paving while ambulance lights flicker and sirens wail and doctors hopelessly try to extricate her from the mass of steel and upholstery and glass . . .

See her: confident.

She is not afraid of people, open and candid, willing to accept everyone. She is self-sufficient and

knows she can extricate herself from any circumstance, be it embarrassing, dangerous or boring. As long as her adversary is always another human being, she knows she can handle the situation. She is not afraid of being poor, of watching her belongings drain away in some recession or depression or through some catastrophe of nature. She knows that she will always be able to provide for herself. She is not frightened of love-making or the joys of flesh, for she holds no faith in deities who punish for joy or in codes that restrict without reason. She is not frightened of her-self, either.

His appetite for exploring her mind, for knowing the innermost of her opinions on every subject, was almost crippling in its intensity, at once both unbearable and deliriously desirable.

Was this what love had always been leading to, what love always should have been, this tasting of her way down inside and finding her both ugly and radiant? Each new bit of datum that he acquired was another link between them. Here, through such deep exploration of her, he was finding a truer, stronger love than he had ever known before. She was becoming so well-known to him that they were one and the same. And one can never hate himself, not actually, not below whatever facade he may erect. She was of himself, and he loved her.

He relived parts of her past, terrors and warmths, parental spankings and Christmas Eves. He studied her dreams of the future.

One by one, he probed the areas of her life, seeking the Della he had only known peripherally before. At times, he was pleased at how close her reality matched the image he had always had of her. Other times, the deviation between his image and herself was so great that he was shocked by his own blindness in all their relationships.

And then, as he prepared to sweep through her childhood again, investigating her memories and attitudes more thoroughly, the white mental sphere intruded, dominating his horizons. It ballooned, testing his mental shields, trying to breach them.

He opened his eyes, shaking off the post-telepathic lethargy that possessed him.

In the nearby regions of the tunnels, footsteps echoed against the stone walls. They sounded wet and heavy, and they belied the advance of three men.

At the foot of the steps, one of the triplets appeared. He looked up the long flight and managed a smile that looked somehow wicked on his artificial face.

"Wait right there," the triplet said. "Don't move, please." His face was colored blue by the single lightbulb above the service door, and his eyes shone like jewels.

He started slowly, cautiously, up the steps.

Pete began to rise.

"Wait right there," the triplet repeated.

Pete felt something crash against the walls of his mind, something which had been intended to make certain that he obeyed the mechanical man's order. But his own shield was stronger than they had expected it would be; it bent, regained its form and held. He fancied that it had gained strength from its interaction with Della's mind.

He stood and turned away from the triplet, hurrying to the righthand drainage tunnel. As he stepped up into it, grasping the edges with his hands to keep himself from tumbling backwards, he risked a glance behind. He saw the first triplet reach the top of the steps, running. Behind, the second triplet's head popped into view on the stairs as it followed. He shoved forward, into the ebony of the tube, got his balance, hunched his shoulders, held his head low—and ran.

The white sphere still rolled around the edges of his consciousness, keeping a close fix on his position. He thrust it out, again and again, only to watch it return, moments later, undiminished. He wanted to follow the thread back to the eight-fingered creature who controlled the featureless robotic minds, but he could not spare the time and the energy while they were so close on his trail.

He turned twice, trying to lose himself in secondary corridors, even though he was aware that such tactics did little to alter the circumstances, since they were again tracking him telepathically. It was just not in him to admit defeat. He had always believed that, once a man stopped thinking like a winner, he stopped being a winner. And started losing.

So, moving purposefully down the dark tubes, keeping his confidence alive with a series of unvoiced



pep talks, he came to a dead end in the tunnel. In the deep gloom, he searched desperately for a continuation of the system but found nothing more than cold stone of all sides.

The white sphere seemed to sense his distress. It hummed along his mental ramparts, shimmering and shuddering, as if in anticipation of his fall.

Behind, the triplets entered the mouth of this branch of the sewer system. They stopped, listening and probing with their master's telepathic talent. They came on. Though this avenue of the drain system was a long one, more than five city blocks, they stopped running. Their pursuit was leisurely. They knew that they had him cornered.

"Rest easy, Mr. Mullion," one of them called. His voice was sweet, bell clear.

"Go to hell."

"Cooperate, Mr. Mullion."

"Go to hell."

That battering, unseen force struck him again. It was hard, rushing at him with the speed of a train. It struck and almost overwhelmed him, once, twice, a third time. He had flickering glimpses of a completely alien consciousness. Then he was his own master again.

"We won't hurt you," the triplet crooned.

It couldn't end here. He wouldn't let it end here. It was no longer merely a matter of sanity and insanity, nor was it strictly a question of life or death. Now, he must consider Della, that woman who was no longer a woman but a part of himself. That made all the difference.

". . . no pain," one of the triplets was saying.

". . . for your own good."

The roof of the tunnel was only six inches above his head. Now, he turned to examine that, in hopes there would be a vertical run which emptied into this horizontal system. He began his search against the end wall, working toward the approaching triplets who still murmured their reassurances. He scraped his fingers on un-even stones and rough concrete; in moments, his fingers were growing numb from the torture.

And then his fingers hooked in a drainage grill and brought him to a halt with a flash of pain. It was the most pleasant pain he had ever experienced, a positive thrill.

He pushed up.

The grill rattled, loose.

He jumped, striking it with both fists, knocking it out of its recessed niche. It clattered onto a floor overhead.

"Mr. Mullion?"

The triplets came forward a bit more quickly.

He leaped and caught the edges of the hole. He hung there a moment, his feet inches from the tunnel floor, every muscle of his body strung tight. He was a century old, wrecked by time and experience, too tired to go on. It would be much easier to drop, relax, and let them have him.

But he had never been a quitter. And there was Della, the other him, his second half who needed him as much as he needed her.

He found the strength to shove up, grapple to chest level with the hole, then lever himself through with his elbows. He sprawled on a cold, damp cement floor, sucking stale air into his lungs. Though the darkness here seemed almost as complete as that in the storm drain, he knew he was not merely in another tunnel. He sensed open space about him, a high ceiling.

He got to his feet without trouble. The flush of excitement at having escaped the drains seemed to have washed away all the weariness he had felt burdened with only a moment ago.

"Mr. Mullion—" the first of the triplets began as it worked its way free of the tunnel.

Pete swung his left foot, kicking the mechanical man solidly in its face.

Something snapped. Something else made a soft, sickening splatter. The triplet whined stupidly, coughed once and fell backwards, on top of his comrades.

He had to rely on instinct and put as much space between himself and the triplets as he could. He looked about, searching for something that would guide him. He found it, to his right, a third of the way

up the wall. It was a fine, bright point of light leaking under a door. He went for it, fell on sudden, steep steps, and climbed until he reached a wooden door that was not locked. He opened it without hesitation.

Behind, one of the triplets struggled out of the drain. Softly, it called to him, its voice as melodic as ever, no sign of exertion in its rounded tones.

Pete went through the door, closed it and latched it behind him.

## XI

With his back against the cellar door, he studied the kitchen in which he stood. It was a large room, painted white with a red tiled floor, everything clean and sparkling. Though the high ceilings indicated an old structure, the kitchen was well appointed with modern ranges and a huge freezer and refrigerator. In the center of the room, a thick wooden worktable had a stainless steel sink set flush with the surface.

Just then, the swinging door that led from the kitchen to the dining room swung inward. A sturdy, Germanic woman, wide of hips, with legs like posts and arms like a wrestler's, came into the kitchen, carrying a dirty coffee cup, which she was obviously intent on scrubbing. The clock above the freezer read six-forty; this was probably the last sign of her own breakfast. At first she did not see him by the cellar door. Then, as if reluctantly tearing her attention away from the grimy dishes, she looked up and blinked, coloring slightly red.

Before she could cry out for help, one of the triplets rammed into the oak door from the other side. The panel shook, popping one of the four screws which held its two hinges in place. Against an ordinary man, it would have offered all but certain protection. It would go down in seconds before the triplets.

"What are you doing here?" the woman asked.

He saw she was in a white and black maid's uniform. It was very unlikely, then, that she was alone in the house. Her employers, and perhaps even other servants, would be within calling distance.

The mechanical man slammed into the oak door again. The portal boomed and burst another screw, ripping loose the top hinge. The screw *pinged* on the edge of the steel sink and rattled away, across the table, out of sight.

Pete stumbled across the room, gripped the edge of the table to steady himself.

"Here now!" the maid shouted. "Whoever's there! You can't go about busting up this place! Look what you're doing there!" She started to round the table toward the door. She seemed to have no concern for her personal safety, and she was prepared to risk her own well-being to keep the place tidy and in good order.

"You better stay back—" Pete began.

She threw the coffee cup at him.

He ducked.

It smashed on the refrigerator, behind him.

He thought he heard voices somewhere else in the house, raised in question at the sound of destruction. He realized it would be as bad to be caught housebreaking by these people as to be rounded up by the mechanicals. Edging around the opposite side of the big worktable, trying to keep out of the maid's way, he made for the swinging door and the rest of the house that lay beyond it.

"Stop that, now!" the maid told the triplets.

One of them struck the door again, harder than ever.

The bottom hinge tore loose of the frame. A screw rattled away over the red tile.

The heavy-set woman leaped back, surprisingly agile for her weight, and narrowly avoided getting conked solidly by the falling door. It smashed into the red tile, trembling.

Pete reached the swinging door and looked back. The maid was waving her fist at the first intruder, advancing on him belligerently. The robot looked momentarily confused, then distressed. As she beat at his shoulder with a big, hammy fist, he turned to look directly at her, squinted—

—and caught her as she slumped unconsciously to the floor. He set her down gently, straightened up and looked at Pete.

That unseen, ponderous force exploded across the surface of his mind again. His shields held against it.

He pushed open the swinging door, ran across the dining room and into a narrow hallway hung with

original oils. Then he bounded upstairs and hurried along the main upstairs hallway. He was no more than ten feet from an open doorway when a white-haired old man stepped out and fired at him, point blank, with a small, heavy, deadly looking revolver.

Pete felt hot white pain blossom in his right shoulder, sending spidery tendrils through his neck and down into his heart.

“No closer,” the old man said. “I’ll put the next one right in the middle of your chest. Believe me, I will.”

“I believe you,” Pete croaked.

“You stand right there,” the old man said.

## XII

Pete nodded.

"Is he dangerous?" someone asked in the room behind the old man. It was a woman's voice, breathy and obviously frightened.

"I've got him under control," the old man said.

"Be careful, Jerry."

"I'll be careful, for God's sake!" Jerry hissed. He was an old man with a wife who pampered him, and he was enjoying this moment of heroism. He fairly clothed him-self in the aura of the virile, no-nonsense man of the house, gripping his gun as if it were the main touchstone to his glory.

"Has he got a gun?" she asked.

"No—" He looked beyond Pete, seeing the twins for the first time.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"Who the hell-?"

Then he passed out, striking the carpet rather hard, his arms thrown out before him as if in supplication. His aura of no-nonsense virility had deserted him.

Holding his wounded shoulder, Pete bent and picked up the old man's gun. He leaped sideways through the open door and slammed and locked the flimsy portal.

"I'll shoot you if you touch me," the woman said.

She was sitting up in bed, perhaps seventy years old, with a seven-shot automatic in both hands, stretched out in front of her, the safety off.

"Good god, not another gun!" Pete groaned.

"I will!" she said.

"I believe you, lady."

"Drop your gun."

"Drop yours," he said.

"Why should I?"

"Because you've probably never fired a gun, you'd miss me, and then you'd make me hurt you. Guns are dangerous, lady."

She looked at the automatic, then wrinkled her nose. "I suppose they are," she said. She threw the weapon on the floor.

"That's fine," he said, picking it up.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

Before he could even think of an answer, she smiled stupidly, yawned and passed out, first dropping forward until her face rested on her blanketed knees, then top-pling sideways. She snored.

"There's nowhere to go, Mr. Mullion," the newscaster said. "Don't make us damage another door to reach you. Just open up, and everything will be fine."

The eyeless creature still broadcast that seeking pressure, driving harder and harder against the walls of Pete's mind. Still, Pete held off the attack. Perhaps it was the knowledge that the creature could not get to him as easily as it got to other men which caused him to enter conversation with the mindless robot beyond the door.

"You can't hide the traces of your presence here," he said. "There's the cellar door to consider."

"That can be repaired." It waited, now sure that it could reason with him.

His shoulder ached. He still clutched it with one hand. Blood bubbled through his fingers, wet and warm—and probably red, though he could not bring himself to look at the wound.

"You can't repair the maid. Or the manservant. Or the old man and woman."

"They're merely sleeping, Mr. Mullion. There was no need to harm them."

“And they aren't going to remember?”

“No.”

“I don't believe you.”

“Did you remember what happened during your pe-riods of—amnesia?”

He did not answer that. He could not.

“Open the door, Mr. Mullion.”

“Why don't you break it down?”

“Then it would require repair.” The robot seemed to sigh. “It is one matter to fix the memories of the people here. It is quite another to repair artifacts of your world. The first follows a simple pattern and can be done from a distance. But to repair the doors, I will have to dispatch tool-laden androids, increasing the chance of discovery.”

Pete considered that. He said, “You're not trying to fool me any longer, are you? You're not masquerading in robots. I'm talking directly to—the one without eyes?”

“You know about me now. Why should I attempt to conceal myself? There have been too many errors in this whole affair. But we have learned now, and we just want to straighten everything out.”

“Who are you?”

The robot had no relayed answer for that.

“Why me?”

“I can't answer your questions,” the robot said, speak-ing for his inhuman master.

Take the pressure off me,” Pete said. He felt as if the sky had lowered and were pressing directly against his scalp.

“Open the door,” the alien countered.

The old lady continued to snore, oblivious to the weird scene that unrolled around her.

“Let me think about it,” Pete said.

“But only for a minute or two,” the creature said.

Pete crossed the bedroom to the window beside the dresser. Pressing his face to the glass, he looked down, thirty feet, onto a flagstone patio. He might be able to make the jump without breaking or twisting an ankle. But he didn't want to have to try it.

“Are you thinking, Mr. Mullion?”

Pressure, pressure, boring, leaning, grinding down on him. . . .

“Yes,” he said. “Look, will you make me a promise?” \

“What is that?”

“Don't hurt me?”

“We promised that quite some time ago, Mr. Mullion. It has never been our intention to cause you pain.”

He only half listened to the reply as he rounded the bed and made his way to the second window in the room. Just beyond the window, there was a large elm tree. Its branches thrust within inches of the glass.

“Mr. Mullion?”

He took his hand away from his wounded shoulder, winced at the new rush of pain, unlatched the window and opened it. He went out feet first, squirming beneath the half-raised sill until his head and shoulders were out. He was precariously perched on the window ledge.

“Mr. Mullion?” the robot asked from beyond the door, growing wary now.

Holding the bottom of the sill with his bad arm, he reached for the elm branch nearest him. It was just a bit too far for comfort.

Behind, the door slammed open, torn from its hinges

He leaped for the branch and caught it with his bleed-ing arm, almost blacking out. He scrambled for the se-curity of the rough bark and swung his good arm over it. In a moment, he was perched upon it, looking back at the bedroom and the confused figures of the two robots as they looked under the bed and in the closet. Before they could notice the open window, he worked his way to the main trunk of the tree and went down, from branch to branch, until he dropped easily to the flag-stones out of which the

elm grew.

He looked up at the bedroom window.

A mechanical man was standing there, looking down at him.

He ran.

The houses in this part of the city were all large, set on small but thickly treed lots which afforded a sense of privacy. They also offered good cover for a man who was running for his life. He tried not to cross any open ground, staying with the trees and the shrubs, the shadows and the fragrant lilac bushes, houses and garden walls.

When he paused for breath, he realized the white, spherical sentience of the robot was keeping touch with him. He thought of thrusting it out but knew he couldn't get rid of it for very long. Yet, if he could *not* get rid of it, he was foolish for running. He did not have much strength left; his legs felt as if they were made of card-board that had suddenly gotten wet; the mechanicals would dog him until he collapsed.

With the chances of escape constantly diminishing, he realized what he must do.

He slid to the ground, his back against the wall of a three-car garage. Summoning up all his energy, he touched the white sphere with a telepathic probe and found the thread that would lead him back to the distant inhuman master of the machines. Without hesitation, he coursed along that filament, moving faster than the speed of light, slammed head on into the alien consciousness on the other end, and felt their minds melt through each other.

*A world where the sky is orange, shading toward yel-low at the horizons, with clouds that are tinted a soft green, with a sun that is only a white dot in the sky . . .*

*Buildings of glass . . .*

*Yellow trees, turning black in autumn . . .*

*Flowers that pull up their roots and walk, . . .*

One after another, the shattered fragments of the other-worldly visions flowed through his mind, sharp but not unpleasant.

He stabbed into the deepest regions of that mind, looked at the eyeless creature's innermost desires and hopes, understood only a fraction of them, whirled, twist-ed, and looked elsewhere.

As he had hoped, his sudden attack and attempt at in-timacy had disconcerted the eyeless creature on the other end. The white sphere went black as it momentarily lost control of its mechanical servants.

An unvoiced scream ululated along the telepathic channel, as frightening as some enormous, swift-moving centipede. It was not a scream of pain, so much as it was a forlorn cry of emotional anguish, of spiritual turmoil.

Silence.

Then it returned, long, wailing, scraping across the surface of Pete's mind like a hacksaw blade.

He tried to break the connection. This time, because the alien was too preoccupied to interfere, he managed to seal off the contact.

He got to his feet, weaving slightly, and hurried away from the garage and the expensive houses.

The pressure was gone. His mind felt light, quick, al-most intoxicated. The white sphere was gone as well; he was not being traced any longer.

He should feel jubilant, flushed with triumph. Instead, he felt as if he had done something unspeakably cruel to that strange being whose toothless mouth had bellowed such an eerie and yet basically human call for help.

## XIII

His clothes were a mud-smear, tattered mess. He didn't want Della to see him like this, first thing, before he had time to offer an explanation. He walked along Market Street to the Surplus Outlet Mart where he pawed through jeans and work shirts until he found ones he wanted. He paid for them and changed clothes in the rest room.

It was only ten of eight, and the only other place open at that hour was Halberstrom's, on the square. He walked down there and bought himself a large breakfast. He sat in a corner booth, out of the main traffic, and allowed himself some thought for the first time in many long hours.

Just a day ago, the only problem had been finding out who had caused his amnesia and who was watching him from the sidelines. Now, abruptly, the problem was far more complex. It was no longer "who" but "what". Now, he had to consider extraterrestrial creatures. And robots. And spaceships, certainly. And all the other paraphrenia of fantasy.

At one time, he would not have been able to accept that. But, before last night, he had not been able to read the minds of other people. He had not been chased by robots with faces of pliable putty. He had not traced an alien creature's thoughts with his own telepathic probe. And last night, he had done all these things, and now he could believe.

And despite these abrupt changes in his perception of the world, he did not feel particularly unsure of himself. If his strongest personality trait before had been a need for a minimal solidity to life—a home, a wife, a business, a style of existence—his most powerful trait now was his ability to assimilate anything, no matter how radical it was, and work within the new picture of the world that it presented to him.

It was not solely his encounter with the eyeless alien's mind and with the indestructible robots that brought about the shift in his vision, though both those things were surely a part of it. No, more than all that, more than spaceships and beasts from outer space and androids, was Della.

Yet he dreaded going home and having to, in some way, explain it all to her. That was why he had bought breakfast first, he knew. What if Della could never understand? And, honestly, how could he ever expect her to grasp the world he now saw? She did not, after all, have the benefit of extrasensory perception.

Worse still, what if, once he had come to know Della, once he had explored every nook of her mind, he grew tired of her? Might she turn out to be nothing more than a curious novelty for his new powers—and nothing but a silly antique when he had nothing more to know about her? They said that a woman's attractiveness often is related to the mystery that surrounds her. In a short time, a year or two, perhaps she would hold no mystery for his psionic mind.

He refused to consider that. Della would always be Della. He would always be in love with her. No power on earth, even telepathic, could change that.

Besides, she would be like a second part of him by the time that he had finished exploring all of her store of thoughts and hopes, theories, emotions and instincts. She would be Pete Part Two, an intricate part of all the things that made him the man he was. And did a man stop loving himself, ever? Of course he didn't.

But he wasn't sure.

He paid his bill and leaving the restaurant, stood on the pavement drawing the summer air deep into his lungs. Across the street, on the park benches, three people sat.

But that was only another attempt to avoid seeing Della, to postpone the agony that he suspected might come as he drew closer to her than ever—while she was simultaneously alienated from him.

It won't be that way, he thought in the taxi on his way home. Besides, I have to tell her. She has to know about all these things, and we have to plan some course of action together. The eight-fingered alien creature would not yet have abandoned his game, whatever it was.



They arrived at the house at a quarter past nine. He paid the man and tipped him, then went inside.

“Della!” he shouted, trying to put warmth and excitement into his voice, concealing his disquiet.

She did not answer him.

He crossed the kitchen, wondering if she could still be asleep. She would have gotten his note, and she wouldn't have gone out until he came home. He thought of reaching out and touching her mind, to see if she were asleep yet, but he decided against that. Somehow, he knew that, until he had talked with her, until he could see, more plainly, what their future was going to be, he should not invade her private realms again.

“Hey sleepyhead!” he called as he passed from the dining room into the front room.

Here, the willows outside cast shadows over the windows and kept out a great deal of the sunlight. Without any lamps burning, the chamber was in semidarkness. He was almost ready to turn for the steps when he saw her. She sat in an easy chair, in her house robe, staring at him. She had the most peculiar expression that he had ever seen, and he could not guess what it meant.

“Are you all right?” he asked her.

She smiled, but made a bad job of it. “Yes,” she said. “I'm all right.”

“But you don't look well.”

“I'm fine!” she said. It was a false bravado—but as if she did not realize, herself, how false.

“But why are you sitting here, in the dark like this?”

“Waiting for you,” she said.

“Della—”

He started toward her, then heard the footsteps on the stairs, behind. He whirled and looked up at the two mechanical men coming toward him. One of them held a weapon of some sort, short-barreled and amber, like a piece of shaped glass.

“It's for your own good,” Della said.

He fell, rolled, and heard something tinkle against the wall above him, at the exact spot where he had been standing only a moment ago.

He came up against a small coffee table, clutched it, and brought it on its side between himself and the robots.

A burst of tiny, silver needles studded the wood.

He stood behind cover of the table and heaved it at the mechanicals as they reached the bottom of the stair-case. It knocked them off balance and gave him a moment to flee. He turned toward the dining room in time to confront a second pair, their faces expressionless, all wearing identical raincoats and slacks and shoes.

To his right, there was a small, Connecticut window, many-paned with small, thin wooden struts between the sections of the glass. He flung himself sideways, closing his eyes and throwing his arms about his head, smashed through the window and struck the yard with his wounded shoulder. The place where the bullet had grazed him broke open and began to bleed again.

He got up and ran, back along the house to the alley-way behind the garage. Once in the open, where the neighbors might see him, he began to walk, though he kept a steady, brisk pace. Every few hundred feet, he looked back to see if they were following. They weren't.

He had gone two blocks when the white sphere intruded on his mental horizons, drew down on him and tracked along the perimeter of his telepathic shield.

Furious, he directed a blast of psionic power at it. It seemed to yellow, shrink and retreat. When it did not return during the next four blocks of his route, he knew that his telepathic abilities had continued to develop and that he was now capable of using his psionic power as a weapon, on a smaller scale but similar to the eyeless alien's ability.

But what good did that do him? They had Della.

## XIV

She wakes up and reaches out and feels cold sheets. When she opens her eyes on the dark room and his ab-sence finally registers on all levels, she withdraws her hand, beneath the covers, holds her breasts and tries to keep her breathing even.

She listens for him.

She throws off the covers and gets out of bed, slips on her tongs and goes to the bedroom door. She opens it, steps into the hallway and stops again to listen for him.

Silence.

“Pete?”

Silence yet.

Perhaps, she thinks, he is downstairs, sitting in an easy chair, reading. He likes to read in the mornings.

“Pete?”

But why doesn't he answer her?

She starts down the stairs.

Her heart is thudding. She has a hollow ache in her stomach. She feels a weakness behind the knees.

When she is halfway down the stairs, she sees the shape move at the bottom. At this hour, shortly after seven o'clock, the front room is in all but complete dark-ness. But it must be Pete.

“What are you doing down there?” she asks.

He comes out of the shadows.

He isn't Pete.

He is a complete stranger who—

No, he is the man from the Emerald Leaf Motel, the stranger Pete swears he sees everywhere.

Men have never frightened her, no matter how crude or fresh or direct they get. Still, this man, in this place, in this awful silence—this man frightens her.

“What do you want?”

He smiles.

He says, “We will not harm you, Mrs. Mullion.”

“We?”

Another man appears behind the first. They are twins.

“Stop right there,” she says.

They continue up the steps, towards her.

“We will not cause you any pain, believe me,” the first man says.

She turns to run, swaying on the stairs.

She can't seem to lift her feet.

Arms touch her from behind.

“Stop it!” she shouts.

“No pain-”

A shroud falls over her mind. She feels blackness well-ing up, consuming her, soft and warm and gentle. She struggles against it, without success. As it swallows her completely, she thinks of all the things she fears, lets them roll through her mind, hideous vision after hideous vision. . . .

Then she sleeps.

Then she wakes.

She is sitting in an easy chair in the living room, with no idea how she has gotten here. In her mind, some alien presence holds down her will to act. She tries to lift her arms from the arms of the chair, and she finds that she cannot do even this simple thing.

She now discovers a terror she has never known before, the horror of complete helplessness. Visions

of cerebral hemorrhages, of paralysis and lifelong dependency on others fit across her mind. If this is what has happened to her, she will kill herself. She will not be a vegetable all her life, watching Pete wait on her, hand and foot.

“Relax, Mrs. Mullion,” a voice in the darkness says.

She does not turn her head to look for the speaker. Someone else turns it for her.

She sees him, and she remembers the twins.

“You will not be harmed,” he says. “Just relax and play along with us. You can't do otherwise anyway. We guarantee your safety.”

She tries to question him but still cannot speak.

“We'll be upstairs,” he says. Then he climbs the steps, out of sight.

## XV

“Della?”

“Who's there?”

Confusion, fear mixed with anticipation . . .

“Pete.”

“Where are you?”

“With you.”

“I don't see you? Where? How can you hear me when I can't talk?”

A glow, slight but warm, anxious to burgeon . . .

“I don't understand. Are you here, in the living room?”

“In your mind. I'm not physically with you, love, but mentally and emotionally I am.”

“Mind reading? Are you telling me you're reading my mind?”

“And projecting my thoughts into yours.”

“I'm dreaming.”

“You aren't. Try to accept it, and try to be calm.”

“But I don't understand I”

“Must you?”

“Yes!” Silence. Then: “Well, not right away, not if you say you can't explain at the moment.”

“I can't explain. But I will.”

“Okay.”

Then she realizes they are waiting for Pete and that, no matter what they might say, they are here to get Pete, to hurt Pete—or to take him away and keep him again and let him come home without knowing where he has been. . . .

Pete broke his telepathic probe of Della's mind. Now he knew what had happened to her this morning. He realized he was cursing them, angrily, out loud. Other diners in the pizza shop were looking at him speculatively. He took a bite of the pizza before him and chewed on it, not because he was hungry, but because it was something to do, something to keep him from cursing.

He knew that he was going to have to go back to the house and get Della. He almost enjoyed the prospect of doing a little damage to those plasticfaced sonsofbitches.

“Right now, there's very much to do. I'm going to come into the house, in a little while, to get you.”

“These men—”

“They aren't men. And I can handle them.”

“But—”

“I can handle them.”

“But don't take chances.”

“I won't have to.”

“Pete?”

“Love?”

“How long have you been able to—to read minds, to do this thing?”

“Tonight.”

“Have you read mine?”

Doubt, anxiety, but a certain thrill as well . . .

“Yes.”

“Much?”

“Some.”

“You're avoiding answering me.”

“Looks that way.”

“Just tell me—do you love me?”

“Yes. Very much.”

“Come and get me.”

“In time. I just want you to remember to be calm, not to get involved, not to move until I tell you to. Even when you feel them losing control of you, don't leave the chair. Stay where you are and wait. No matter what. I don't want you getting hurt.”

“Okay, Pete.”

“I'll be in within the hour.”

“You're breaking contact?”

“Yes. I can't afford to exhaust myself.”

She projected images of comfort, love and sex. He did not wish to withdraw, but he did.

## XVI

He had taken up a position behind a long, shaggy hedgerow across the alleyway from the back of his house. The ground was warm and dry though uncomfortably stony. He could see the kitchen where only a night light burned. Now and then, he fancied that he could see movement beside the kitchen curtains, as if someone stood there, watching the rear lawn. But he could not be sure of that, and he did not want to make his move until he was certain of a lot of things about the trap they had laid.

Along the side of the house, the dining room window was dark, while the living room window emitted a strong, yellow light. Della was still sitting there, in her chair. They could not hope to fool him again, so easily. They were counting on his love for her to draw him back in some abortive attempt to free her.

They would be surprised, an hour or so from now, to find themselves holding the dirty end of the stick.

Ten minutes later, the rear door opened, and one of the mechanicals looked out, staring intently at the corner of the garage where a bed of tall marigolds grew. He came over to it and satisfied himself of something or other, then returned to the kitchen and closed the door.

It was exactly the sort of thing he had been hoping for. It showed him that one of them waited in the kitchen and indicated the others were most likely situated all over the house, keeping a watch on all approaches. Too it was evidence that, since he had driven the last mind probe away, they could not locate him telepathically - which meant his own power was at least equal to theirs, and perhaps superior.

He stayed with the hedge but crawled farther along until he could not see the kitchen windows and could not be seen by anyone waiting there. He stood up, brushed himself off, and crossed the alley to the garage doors. He searched along the bottom sill, found the lever, depressed one end of it and lifted. The door swung over-head with only one scratchy bit of noise to draw anyone's attention. He was sure it could not have been heard in-side the house.

He crept along the dark shape of the car until he was kneeling beside the interior door which connected with the kitchen. Cautiously, he rose and looked through the corner of the glass. In the soft, blue light of the twenty-five watt safety lamp on the stove, the mechanical man leaned against the kitchen table, commanding a mod-erately good view through both kitchen windows. He was the only one in the room.

Pete bent down, rested his back against the wall and opened his mental shield to permit a contact ribbon of telepathic energy to weave outwards.

Immediately, the alien master, through the conscious-ness of his nearest robotic servant, sensed the emanations of his prey. The white sphere of the mechanical pseudo-mind bore down on Pete's own mind—

—and blazed and ashed, smoked and dissolved, under a bolt of psychic energy which he delivered to it.

The quasi-sentient wire circuits melted, becoming nothing more than glimmering slag. The liquid, sealed core of the manufactured mind cracked open and evap-orated.

Pete pushed away from the wall and got to his feet. He turned to the small window in the door and surveyed the kitchen. The robot lay still by the kitchen table.

He opened the door, entered the kitchen, closed the door gently, and listened to the stillness of the house.

He heard footsteps. A second robot, apparently the one which had been watching the side lawn from the dining room windows, appeared in the doorway to the kitchen, looking just the slightest bit surprised.

Pete sought its white, spherical mental analogue, cracked it open like an eggshell and snuffed it out.

It fell with a loud clatter and bounced twice without even a whimper of pain. Its face, from its mouth to its left eye, was melted, the features run together like wax.

He had no more time for observation after he looked away from that ruined countenance, for he saw a third mechanical in the doorway. It was probably the one he had heard descending the stairs moments ago, and it held the amber, glasslike weapon.

He twisted sideways as the first burst of silver darts whisked past him and chewed up the plaster. They made a humming sound as they quivered, like a dozen one-, pronged tuning forks. The plaster seemed just the slight-est bit damp where they had penetrated it.

He fell to the floor as the robot fired a second burst. The spines hissed past him, over his head. Had he been standing, they would have caught him in the chest and neck.

He reached out, searching for the featureless, round mechanical pseudo-mind and the thought filament that would be trailing out behind it.

“Please, please, please—” the robot chanted.

Pete laughed aloud as he found the thing's mental analogue. He stabbed deep into it with a long, curved, imaginary knife, the edge of which he imagined to be serrated. The skin of the sphere split; air hissed out. It burst into a cold, white flame, ashed and dissolved, ceas-ing to be a thinking unit.

The mechanical man sighed once and fell onto the table, bounced from it and struck the floor, hard.

He laughed again. This was what it was like to come back from the brink of doubt, anxiety, to come from what you thought were the borderlands of insanity to a complete mastery of the world and all in it. He was exhilarated.

He directed a thought to Della: “There's only one more of them. I'll have you free in a minute.”

“Be careful.”

“Yes.”

He entered the living room and looked up the steps.

“No!” her thoughts screamed.

“What?”

He searched through the chaos of her thoughts and could not find the exact source of her fear. All that swirled there were images of him, of his corpses, dead and cold and gone from her forever. And roiling over the corpse were roaches, centipedes, snakes . . .

“Think clearly!”

She seemed to calm herself.

“He went out the front door,” she thought.

“Who?”

“That last of them. I thought you knew!”

As the full impact of what she said reached him, he swung about, facing the darkness of the dining room. Just then, the fourth and last of the inhuman hunters appeared there. He was holding a second amber pistol.

Pete threw himself at the thing.

It fired, missed, and backstepped away from him, call-ing his name over and over again and urging him to co-operate.

He rolled and struck the robot's feet, sending it tum-bling backwards. It struck its head on the corner of the dining room table, sloughing off a few inches of the mal-leable plastic flesh. But that was all that it did. The thing did not seem either hurt or dazed. It grappled with him, bringing its superhuman resources into the fight.

The amber weapon flew free of the robot's fingers, clattered against the hutch, spun around once on the carpet and was still.

They rolled; the mechanical man had the top. He weighed so much that he might have cracked Pete's hips if he had wanted to do so. Instead, he leaned forward, holding the man beneath him, and clamped one hand over Pete's mouth and nose.

He smiled, waiting.

Pete could barely struggle against the heavy machine. He sucked desperately for breath, and he felt the first tingling of suffocation begin in his lungs.

“Painless, really,” the mechanical said in the new-caster's voice.

As dizziness ballooned, he began to feel the thoughts of those nearby pouring across the threshold of his consciousness.

He was inundated by Della's almost mindless fear as she watched him being strangled to death.

It was her fear—and the ensuing rage he felt towards the eight-fingered alien for generating that fear—which drove him up from the brown shadows that had begun to blanket him. He blinked his eyes and looked into the robot's simple smile. He obeyed instinct this time and bit the robot's palm. He caused the machine no pain, but he managed to chew away most of the plastic flesh and gain breathing space. The steel would not mold to his contours and could not seal the air out effectively enough.

Strength returned with the breath he took, enough strength to let him buck hard, driving upwards. He tilted the mechanical man and slammed it sideways, rolling out from underneath it.

The room spun as he scrambled to his feet.

Della projected a scream. He sealed it out, along with the other thoughts he was receiving and didn't want.

When he turned, he saw that the robot had gotten to the amber pistol and held it once more. Even as this registered, he saw the darts spinning at him. He felt them prick his neck and cheek.

He was surrounded by yellow as he lapsed into un-consciousness.



## XVII

He woke, feeling empty. Strangely, he felt no pain, not even the slight uneasiness of a cramped muscle or a headache. It was just this hollow feeling, as if he had been used, taken and directed and run through his steps like some sophisticated puppet.

There was intense darkness on all sides of him, so deep and unremitting that, for a moment, he thought that he might be blind. When he looked down at himself, how-ever, he knew his eyes were functioning. He could see his bare chest. By turning his head, he could see the white dais on which he lay.

He tried to rise up.

He could not.

He called out.

His mouth spoke silence.

He stopped struggling and tried to remember how he had gotten here, and where "here" was. In time, he could recall every detail of his last waking moments. The re-turn of his memory did nothing to quiet his nerves.

"Della?"

Instantly, the alien being was there, pressing down on him with its telepathic powers. He sensed a relentless enemy that would not quit, ever.

"Where is Della?" he thought.

"She is safe."

"I want to see her."

"Later."

"Now!"

"You are in no position to argue or to bargain, Mr. Mullion," the creature said. "You were a match for one of us, working through the robotic mind constructions. But here, in the ship, we are all cooperating to hold your powers in check. I wish you to understand this and to cease your opposition. Cooperate. You will not be harmed. Neither will your wife, who is presently sedated and undergoing mind-scouring."

"Mind-scouring?" The sound of it was ominous.

"We must remove all traces of our presence from her memory. When she wakes up, she will not remember the robots nor anything you might have told her telepathically."

"And the same for me?"

"More for you."

"Death?" It was projected in blacks, with more fear than he would have liked to let them see.

"No, no!" the alien assured him. "You have misunder-stood our motives, from the beginning."

"I was shot."

"Only with narcotic darts, Mr. Mullion."

He directed a telepathic bolt of energy at the center of the alien mind. At the same time, he gritted his teeth and wrenched every muscle in his body, trying to sit up. If he could only sit up, all would be fine. From there, he would gain his feet, find Della, and escape this place.

The alien fielded the psychic lance and plummeted Pete into quiet sleep where, this time, there were no dreams.

"Shall we cooperate this time?" the newscaster's thoughts asked.

He said nothing.

"You see, four of us can handle you. There is no possi-bility of resistance. And, I must stress yet again, there is no *need* for resistance." It seemed to sigh in exaspera-tion. "We honestly have only your best interests in mind."

“Where did you come from?” he asked. He closed his eyes, preferring not to stare at the intense blackness on all sides.

“Our home world is of no significance to you. You could not place it, even if you were familiar with star charts—which you are not.’

“I didn't mean that,” he said. “What I meant was, why did you come into my life?”

“Yes, of course, the creature said. “We owe you that much, at least. And, too, we will need your cooperation, later. I am certain you will give that more freely when you can conceive of the background to the drama of these past few weeks.’

He waited. He sensed some sort of consultation on the telepathic channels, beyond reach, shielded.

“We never intended to have direct contact with an intelligent creature,” the alien said, returning to their conversation as if they had never broken it off. “We chose the mountainside for a soft landing in this scout vessel because it was remote, yet near subjects for study. It was necessary to settle on the paved highway long enough for our engineers to run an analysis of the earthen bank on the other side of the road. That analysis would have taken three minutes. In five minutes, we would have meshed the molecules of our ship with those of the earth and would have traveled into the mountainside far enough to find a cavern in which the scout ship could reside for the duration of our studies here.”

He was beginning to see what had happened.

“That's correct,” the alien said, receiving his thoughts on the matter. “You rounded the curve in the road and struck the side of the ship. Your car went out of control, over the edge of the roadway, down the mountainside. Fortunately, it did not catch fire. Though it was too early in the morning for the noise to attract anyone, someone might have seen the flames, no matter if they were a mile or two away.”

“Dead?”

“Yes, you were dead.”

Impossibly, the hollowness within him deepened.

“But death does not have to be a permanent condition —not when you have politin medical technology on your side.’

“That is what you call yourselves?” he asked.

“Politins. It doesn't translate.”

“And you put Humpty Dumpty back together again, is that it?”

“I read the associations with that allusion, but I cannot quite grasp the import.”

“Skip it. You made me live again, right?”

“Your body was no problem,” the politin said. “That required but a day's study and another day with the ship's special robotic surgeons. It was your mind that caused us trouble.”

“With the body, we have only a one-dimensional puzzle. This is the digestive system, this the respiratory, this organ leads to this one, does this for that, produces this hormone or enzyme which accomplishes this duty or ' that, and so forth. But with the mind, the problem becomes four dimensional, with width and breadth and depth and time all considered. Too, though the brain is organic and easily studied, it does not actually tell us much about the mind it engenders. We did the very best we could and sent you back, with a robotic observer to tail you for a few days to see what you functioned like in your everyday life.”

“The car?”

“That required far more time to rebuild, for we knew we dared not miss a detail. We understood, from you, how many of your kind are—what you would call enthusiasts over automobiles. When we had both you and the car functioning and looking right, we sent you home and released your mind as you entered your garage.”

“And then the problems started.”

“Yes.”

“With numbers. I couldn't make change or remember how many bags of popcorn to buy at the theater. Then it was accelerated into a time-space incomprehension, and I passed out on the stairs, looking for my office down-town.”

“Actually, it began before that,” the newscaster said. “We should have given you a detailed false

memory, so detailed that it could not be found false. But, in your mind, we found the concept 'amnesia,' along with all the amnesiac folklore you had picked up, and we decided to take the easier way out by letting you think you'd been a victim of just such an attack. To cement that we finished painting your cabin living room."

"And Della accidentally discovered what you'd done."

"Yes, because we overlooked placing any corroborative detail to substantiate the amnesia until it was almost too late."

"Question."

"Ask it."

"How did you remove me from the office building downtown? I presume you brought me back here, for more corrective surgery."

"You spent two days in surgery and one in testing the second time. When you passed out on the stairwell, we had an observer closeby. Our robots are capable of teleportation, or what you would call that, but only when they have the coordinates of their destination. They can teleport to this ship or the mother ship, but nowhere else until it has been mapped and pointed. They can take a passenger with them. This one brought you here."

"And this time you gave me a false set of memories, the Emerald Leaf Motel and everything."

"But we underestimated your species. It is a common fault every time we encounter a new galactic race. We did not do a good enough job with the false memories. We approached the night clerk and brought him here, implanted coinciding data in his mind and returned him to his post. We should have done the same with the maid. We thought, erroneously, that the clerk was responsible for bed changes. Your society breeds different institutions and circumstances than does ours."

"And I caught sight of your robot observer there."

"Only because, already, your mind was growing more observant, more careful of detail. We did not realize what we had done, how we had opened new regions of your brain and given you new talents. The first time, we under-performed; the second, we made you better than you had been before the accident."

Pete said, "What about that house where it was necessary for you to put everyone to sleep, where you had to break down two doors?"

"Regrettable. But we simply erased the proper memories from their minds. We had learned enough from you to manage that without complications, though we didn't like tampering more than we had to. The doors, of course, were a different matter altogether. We knew they had to be perfectly rebuilt. It required four times as long as reconstruction of their memories did."

"And now what?"

"We would like to try another operation on your brain. We have been doing much analysis in the last few days; we feel we know where we went wrong, and we don't think we'll do anything wrong this time."

"Why operate?"

"That should be obvious."

"It isn't."

"But it is. You know what I mean. You are only playing games with me now."

"Tell me anyway."

"We will restore you to the human being you were before the accident, without deficiencies."

"And without psionic abilities, either."

"Yes."

"I don't like that idea."

"You have no choice, after all. There are four of us. We will make the change with or without your cooperation."

He decided to try a more diplomatic tact. If argument would not get him what he wanted, perhaps begging would. For this prize, he did not mind humbling himself.

"But I can cope with the telepathic talent I have. It will enrich my life. It's no detriment to me or mine. I can't see why I shouldn't be permitted it. You owe me something for all this trouble, you know."

"We owe you life. And we will give it to you. Beyond that, we cannot be expected to provide

anything.”

“Let me see you.”

In the void, the eyeless face appeared.

“A projection? You aren't really here, are you?”

“You are seeing me on a viewscreen. On several view-screens.”

Hands appeared as well, eight-fingered and still.

“Look, what harm will it do to let me keep my abil-ities?”

“You will become a loner, a man without friends, too knowing and eventually unhappy with your lot.”

“Let me struggle with that,” he said.

“We choose not to.”

“There's more. Tell me.”

“You have the ability to unlock telepathic talents in others of your kind. Eventually, you'll learn how to use it.”

“What's wrong with that? I won't use it against people. You know me well enough to know I won't try to make a fortune or to persuade anyone to do what they don't want to do.”

“You are an honest and gentle member of your spe-cies,” the alien acknowledged.

“Well, then?”

“But that isn't what concerns us, Mr. Mullion. If you began to open the minds of others, the process would explode geometrically, each new telepath liberating the minds of friends and acquaintances, each of those friends liberating the minds of their friends.”

“It couldn't hurt our race.”

“No, but maybe it could hurt others. Each race must evolve, slowly, into telepathy. At that point, as all men's minds are opened, the state of society changes. Peace flowers, for war is impossible, subterfuge without hope. The race stops bickering and begins, slowly, to build a racial unity that lets it grow faster than it ever has be-fore. A hundred years after worldwide telepathic libera-tion, your people would have starships. And, because they haven't developed their telepathic abilities nat-urally, they would be like barbarians among other civ-ilized creatures who frequent the starways.”

“We're too much like animals to be allowed to play with the big boys,” Pete said.

“We do not wish to insult. We are merely stating a truth.”

“Naturally.”

“Bitterness is unnecessary.”

“Excuse me,” he said, bitterly.

“I am sorry you feel cheated.”

“If I promise not to open another mind, no one else—”

“We cannot trust in promises.”

“But—”

The eyeless face disappeared and was replaced by blackness, leaving only the disembodied hands which, a moment later, also vanished.

“Whether or not you cooperate,” the alien said, “the operation must now begin.”

## XVIII

He could feel the tension as they summoned their four alien consciousnesses into a single strike force, coalescing the energy that their quartet of minds possessed, directing it with precision, zeroing in on him where he lay pinned to the dais.

They had said, early in the conversation, just after he had awakened, that they would like his help for what they wished to do to him. Perhaps that indicated some doubt on their part. Did they think that he had grown so psionically powerful that even the four of them would be hard put to match him move for move? Had their bumbling surgical machines made him even more telepathically gifted than they?

Come on, he thought. Try me. Now.

And they struck.

They launched a cunningly strategic attack, not at all the sort of thing he had been preparing himself for. He had sought to protect himself from the insistent pressure he had sensed before. He strengthened those walls against such an eventuality, tensing himself to patch the ephemeral but desperately important partitions if the slightest crack should appear. And then they came to him with subtle weapons far more dangerous than force might have been.

They used Della against him.

They did not directly involve her, however. They were not a violent race, he supposed. They would never have considered harming her or torturing her either mentally or physically in order to break him. But they used her fears and images of her, designed to peel away his defenses and to leave the meat of him exposed for the bite of their more potent teeth.

A hundred thousand centipedes descended from the sky, like rain drope, fled across the dome protecting his mind, skittered along the walls as if hunting a damp crevice, a nook in which to draw up their spindly legs and devour their obscene foods. They copulated on the walls, writhing, their legs vibrating furiously, produced children in the passage of a minute. Generation by generation, their numbers grew geometrically until millions of them blackened the walls of his mind, so many that their movement produced an audible roar, like a small waterfall. They shifted, darted here and there, climbed over one another, died and were born, cannibalized each other, a billion legs kicking and trembling like the thin-nest of rare feathers, two hundred thousand greasy, flicking antennae searching out food/shelter/mates/warmth/ dampness. . . .

Pete knew where the vision had originated, but he could not see any purpose to it. This was Della's dread, not his. It might make her a shivering, helpless mad-woman, but it would not bother him.

And then Della appeared. She was perched upon the top of his mental ramparts, a solitary figure against the sky, kicking frantically at the tiny insects that beat a path towards her. Every single centipede had set out up the wall, drawn toward her as if she were something too delicious to be ignored, as if she were the quantity which two hundred thousand antennae all sought.

"Della," he said.

He called to her even though he knew that he was only seeing a projected image, a fluff, the fantasy of the alien minds as they played upon his own consciousness.

Her terror was so real, her face a mask of death expectancy, her skin white and clammy, that he wanted to open his walls and take her in and caress her.

He saw centipedes stream across her feet.

They started up her long, lovely legs, beneath her dress, like cancerous spoors against her prettiness.

She screamed.

"Della!"

She could not hear him. She only had ears for the teeming insects that converged on her.

The sky darkened; more of them fell from it, raining over her as the hordes below swarmed upon her.

She fell.

She was soon covered by them. She batted at them with her open hands, tore them away from her mouth where they tried to scramble through her lips. She tore at her hair to be rid of them, slapped her thighs and breasts and legs and face, mashing them in her fingers

He refused to open up, making himself remember that this was no more than an illusion, no matter how real it seemed. Then the second phase of the attack came.

## XIX

He was plunged into a chiaroscuro chaos, into acidic pits of fear, into caverns of unbearable terror where strange and unhuman shapes moved in the darkness and cried out in agony as he swept by them. He was confronted with open graves and the rotting corpses that they contained. Things rose out of the gray earth and walked like men but looked like death with maggots eating their flesh even as they arose. He could sense no up or down, no form to the void as one horrendous vision followed close after another. They had reconstructed the deepest parts of Della's id, the places where nightmares went on all day and insanity was never farther than a hand's reach. Into this hurricane of dreads, they propelled him, like a man stumbling through the crafty corridors of a carnival fun house, stumbling into things that, for a moment, made him leap and want to vomit and then made him want to laugh if only to break the tension that knotted his muscles and made his mouth dry and stale.

And all the while, they kept him aware of the fact that these were his wife's fears, many unconscious, the hell she lived with every day of her life. And, slowly, they intimated that they would crack open her psychological defense mechanisms and let her see what evil and terror lived within her, let her see the animal part of herself that would drive her mad.

"You wouldn't do it," he said to them, fighting to keep his defenses intact.

"We would."

"But you don't believe in causing pain. Mental pain is as bad as physical."

"We would do it."

"If you make her face all that stuff, all those interior things she doesn't even know are part of her, she's going to go mad. It can't be faced, not all at once, by anyone.

"Haven't you looked into yourself?" they asked.

"Little. It will take a long time to know me."

"We will do it." Their response had begun to sound like some sort of litany. "Because we can return her to sanity. We can let her suffer, to bring you into line, then repair her. We believe, however, that you will accede to our wishes rather than let her undergo even temporary madness."

"I'll cooperate," he said at last.

"Break down your walls. Let us into you, if you are sincere."

"Here," he said. He peeled away the first layer of his mental defenses, felt them pressure him.

"And here," he said, stripping himself of yet another layer of psionic insulation.

"And another," he said.

"This is most wise, Mr. Mullion," the newscaster said.

"Don't touch her."

"Of course not, Mr. Mullion."

He stripped away more of his wall, bringing himself closer to the utter helplessness that they desired. Around him, the four political minds fragmented out of the super-entity they had formed. Their psionic talents were held in four individual bodies now, geometrically weaker. They considered him far less of a threat now.

The moment they had disengaged their gestalt, he lashed out. He put forth all the psionic energy he could generate, meanwhile throwing up his mental shield which he had half destroyed while lulling them into a false security.

One screamed, flamed and winked out of existence as he seared through its mental core and burned away everything that made it an individual. The body still lived, flopping on the floor of the command room like a fish thrown up on the beach during high tide.

"What are you doing?" they demanded of him. A pacifistic race, so concerned with intelligent life that they would spend weeks repairing one damaged earthling, they could not conceive of the total

destruction of a liv-ing, thinking organism when there was no intention of later restoration. And he was never going to restore them. He was going to leave them very, very dead.

They knew that and rebelled from it.

And even in this last moment, they could not gather themselves for a lethal retaliation. He was a sentient being. They could never kill him, never knowingly de-stroy him for all time, without a hope of rebuilding him as he had been.

He bored into a second alien consciousness, struck deep, shattered it and sent the blazing fragments into the void. The creature did not even have time to cry out for a last minute reprieve from the eternal sentence.

“Stop! Stop!”

The third one exploded, ashed and was gone as if he had never existed.

The fourth cowered, begging for mercy.

“I can't leave you,” he thought.

“Why?” it asked.

“You mentioned a mother ship. You may already have called for aid.”

“We haven't.”

“I can't believe you.”

“We do not lie!” it said, still capable of anger.

“But we do,” Pete said.

“It was another of our miscalculations. We had in-sufficient time to study you. But if I should promise you freedom, and that promise is genuine, why kill me?”

“Because you haven't promised Della freedom. And I will want to liberate her mind as well.”

“We will let the two of you have telepathic abilities.”

“And if we wish to widen the mental ranges of friends?”

“You ask too much!”

“And you can't promise enough.”

“You will kill me as you killed the others.” The poli-tin's mental voice was permeated with disbelief, a lack of understanding.

“Yes.”

“But why?”

“You are a threat to the things I want.”

“But how?” it asked. “They cannot restore us. You *will not* restore us. You are condemning us to eternal, extinction, to an end of life and all the joys it contains. You are giving us no room for reconsideration. You are' behaving brutally, savagely, coldly. How can you live; with yourself; how can you justify what you do?” •;

“Della,” he said.

“I do not understand.”

“Love,” he said.

“You kill for love?”

“I wouldn't have believed it myself, a month ago. A week ago. Even yesterday.”

“You can't kill for love,” the politin argued. He could feel the surge of hope it contained, and he felt sorry that its hope was founded on such swampy ground.

“You can do *anything* for love,” he said.

“Limits restrict all—”

“For love, there are no limits. Men and women have killed for it, died for it, debased themselves for it. And, they have been acting out their plays for half-love, strangled, untelepathic love. But once I have killed you and have insured my freedom, I'll never have to kill for • love again. I will only have to liberate the minds of\* others.”

The alien's hopes had died. “Still—” it began.

“Death, even eternal death, is not the worst thing a sentient being can suffer,” Pete said.

“What else?”



“Loneliness.”

“I do not understand the word.”

“I know.”

“Will you—explain it?”

The politin was only trying to postpone the moment of its final death, but he permitted it extra seconds while he explained the word.

“You cannot understand the word easily,” he said. “You come from a culture which has been telepathic for thousands of years. No one of you need ever crave companionship or affection and be unable to obtain it. Each of you needs only to drop your voluntary veil of privacy and accept the conscious emanations of those around you, absorb a free-flowing love open to everyone. When a male meets a female of your species, you play no games. You meet, read minds and know. If you want each other, there is no comedy or tragedy of manners to be played out, as with us. If you are alone at night and want someone of similar interests to talk to, you only have to open your mind and seek others who are seeking. You are not blind, cold creatures hunting warmth and bypassing it by inches more often than you find it.”

“And your people are—sealed off from each other.”

“More than sealed off. In different worlds, side-by-side but farther apart than one star from another.”

It could not understand loneliness and never would. The politin changed its tact. “How will you escape the ship?”

“We will find our way.”

“It is buried deep inside the mountain.”

“In a cavern,” Pete corrected. “I learned that earlier. You could juggle molecules to move it through solid earth, but you couldn't suspend it in other matter indefinitely. We'll get from the ship into the cavern, find other caves that lead to the surface. The mountain has many limestone sinkholes in its depressions. We'll probably go out through one.”

“But you-”

He struck out, suddenly weary, and ended the politin's existence.

## XX

For Della, for love.

He stood above her in another room of the politin scout ship. She was asleep, and she was dreaming. Now and then, the corners of her sensuous mouth turned up in some secret smile that delighted him.

The events of the last few weeks had been pre-determined by his love for Della. He had bought the cabin and had been working on it, in the first place, because she liked bow-and-arrow hunting more than he did and had hinted at the fun their own cabin would be. When he had rounded Jagger's Curve, going to that cabin, and had been killed in his plunge down the mountain-side, the affair could have ended no way but this. His love for her had always narrowed his prerogatives, had funneled him to this moment and to this possible future that had now become the probable one. He had not understood this fundamental condition of his life until just moments ago, when they had threatened to drive her temporarily mad and when it looked as if he would lose his telepathic key to her inner mind. But then he *had* understood, and he had acted with a vengeance.

When he returned from his first period of amnesia, it was his love for her which had made him inquisitive about his stolen days. On his second return, after the follow-up period of amnesia, it had been his need to re-assure her and to erase the possibility of infidelity from her mind which had driven him back to examine his memories of the Emerald Leaf Motel. He had loved her, and he had gone back to the house to rescue her from the mechanical men when she had been a captive there. He had loved her, and he had refused to surrender the telepathic powers which he could use to make her life more full. He had loved her, and he had killed for her. Four times.

He looked into his own mind and found no regret. He would murder four times again, if necessary, to preserve their chance at complete love through telepathic communion. A hundred times, a thousand. Loneliness was the key word and his weapon. When he had destroyed the quartet of politin minds, he had not merely struck them down with unformed bolts of psychic energy. He had been afraid that alone would not be equal to the task. He had, instead, reached into the most private regions of his own soul, had dredged up the loneliness of youth, the loneliness he had known before he had met Della, and he had struck them with that. They could never have fielded such a pitch. It was gunshot directed at a primitive savage who could never understand the source of the thing which had done him in. But, if there were no regret now, it would come later. A great deal of it. And he would need Della's deepest understanding to help himself weather it.

In time, man would be as the politin were now. He would forget his loneliness and bask in telepathic unity with his fellows. His only fear would be death, the last loneliness there was. And then he would mourn these four alien deaths.

And will I be the hero then? Pete wondered. Or will I be the last villain?

The alien chamber felt terribly cold.

He reached into Della's mind.

He passed over the things she feared. In time, she would cease to fear them.

He touched, instead, on the things she loved.

So many of them. . . .

He nestled in her love and spent long minutes there, being cleansed and made pure.

Sinless, he arose and ascended into her consciousness.

What did the stars matter? What did alien creatures mean to him? What care had he for spaceships and ro-bots, computer surgeons—or half a hundred other phantasmagorical gadgets and staggering concepts? They were as chaff to grain compared to what he and Della meant together. There was more wonder, more staggering concepts in their telepathic love-to-come than in all the stars together.

At least, that would be the case for a hundred years or so, as the politin had warned. Maybe then,

they would think about the stars. Meanwhile, they had inner space.

“I love you,” he thought.

She still slept; she did not respond.

And so he woke her to begin.