

# What Mad Universe

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## *Flash*

*The first attempt to send a rocket to the moon, in 1954, was a failure. Probably because of a structural defect in the operating mechanism, it fell back to Earth, causing a dozen casualties. Although not equipped with an explosive warhead, the rocket—in order that its landing on the moon might be observed from Earth—contained a Burton potentiomotor set to operate throughout the journey through space to build up a tremendous electrical potential which, when released on contact with the moon, would cause a flash several thousand times brighter than lightning—and several thousand times more disruptive.*

*Fortunately, the rocket fell in a thinly populated area in the Catskill foothills, landing upon the estate of a wealthy publisher of a chain of magazines. The publisher and his wife, two guests and eight servants were killed by the electrical discharge, which completely demolished the house and felled trees for a quarter of a mile around. Only eleven bodies were found. It is presumed that one of the guests, an editor, was so near the center of the flash that his body was completely disintegrated.*

*The next—and first successful—rocket was sent a year later in 1955.*

## 1

Keith Winton was pretty well winded when the set of tennis was over, but he tried his darnedest not to show it. He hadn't played in years, and tennis—as he was just realizing—is definitely a young man's game. Not that he was old, by any means—but at thirty-one you get winded unless you've kept in condition. Keith hadn't; and he'd really had to extend himself to win that set.

Now he extended himself a bit more, enough to leap across the net to join the girl on the other side. He was panting a bit, but he managed to grin at her.

"Another set? Got time?"

Betty Hadley shook her blond head. "Fraid not, Keith, I'm going to be late now. I couldn't have stayed this long except that Mr. Borden promised to have his chauffeur drive me to the airport at Greeneville and have me flown back to New York from there. Isn't he a wonderful man to work for?"

"Uh-huh," said Keith, not thinking about Mr. Borden at all. "You've *got* to get back?"

"Absolutely. It's an alumnae dinner. My own alma mater. And not only that but I've got to speak; to tell them how a love story magazine is edited."

"I could come along," Keith suggested, "and tell them how a science-fiction mag is edited. Or a horror mag, for that matter—I had *Bloodcurdling Tales* before Borden put me on *Surprising Stories*. That job used to give me nightmares. Maybe your fellow alumnae would like to hear about them, huh?"

Betty Hadley laughed. "They probably would. But it's strictly a hen party, Keith. And don't look so downhearted. I'll be seeing you at the office tomorrow. This isn't the end of the world, you know."

"Well, no," Keith admitted. He was wrong, in a way, but he didn't know that.

He fell into stride beside Betty as she started up the walk from the tennis court to the big house that was the summer estate of L. A. Borden, publisher of the Borden chain of magazines.

He said, "You really ought to stay around to see the fireworks, though."

"Fireworks? Oh, you mean the moon rocket. *Witt* there be anything to see, Keith?"

"They're hoping so. Have you read much about it?"

"Not a lot. I know the rocket is supposed to make a flash like a flash of lightning when it hits the moon, if it does. And they're hoping it will be visible to the naked eye so everybody's going to be watching for it. And it's supposed to hit at a quarter after nine, isn't it?"

"Sixteen minutes after. I know *Tim* going to be watching for it. And if you get a chance, watch the moon dead center, between the horns of the crescent. It's a new moon, in case you haven't been looking, and it'll hit the dark area. If you're looking without a telescope, it'll be a faint small flash, like somebody striking a match a block away. You'll have to be watching closely."

"They say it doesn't contain explosives, Keith. What is it that will make the flash?"

"Electrical discharge, on a scale nobody's ever tried before. There's a newfangled outfit in it—worked out by a Professor Burton—that uses the kickback of the acceleration and converts it into potential electrical energy—static

electricity. The rocket itself will be something on the order of a monster Ley-den jar. And it's traveling through a vacuum in space, so the charge can't flash over or leak off until it hits, and when it does—well, lightning won't be in it. It'll make the granddaddy of all short circuits."

"Wouldn't an explosive charge have been simpler?"

"Oh, sure, but we'll get a lot brighter flash from this— weight for weight—than even from an atomic warhead. And what they're interested in is a bright flash, not an explosion as such. Of course it *will* tear up a little landscape—not as much as an A-bomb, maybe, but more than a blockbuster—but that's incidental. And they expect to learn a lot about the exact composition of the surface of the moon by training spectroscopes on the flash through every big telescope on the night side of Earth. And they—"

The side door of the house was ahead and Betty Hadley interrupted by putting her hand on his arm. "Sorry to interrupt you, Keith, but I *must* hurry. Honestly, or I'll miss the plane. 'Bye."

She put out her hand for him to take but Keith Winton put his hands on her shoulders instead and pulled her to him. He kissed her and, for a breathless second, her lips yielded under his. Then she broke away.

But her eyes were shining—and just a bit misty. She said, "Bye, Keith. See you in New York."

"Tomorrow night? It's a date."

She nodded and ran on into the house. Keith stood there, a fatuous smile on his face, leaning against the doorpost.

In love again, only this time it was different from anything that had ever happened to him before.

He'd known Betty Hadley only three days; had, in fact, seen her only once before this marvelous weekend. That had been on Thursday when she'd first come to Borden Publications, Inc. The magazine which she edited, *Perfect Love Stories*, had just been bought by Borden from a lesser chain. And Borden had been smart enough to take over the editor along with the magazine. Betty Hadley had done very well with it in the three years she'd run the magazine; the only reason the Whaley Publishing Company had been willing to sell was the fact that they had been changing to the exclusive publication of digest magazines; *Perfect Love* had been their only surviving fiction publication.

So Keith had met Betty Hadley on Thursday and now, to Keith Winton, Thursday seemed just about the most important day in his life.

Friday he'd had to go to Philadelphia to see one of his writers, a guy who could really write but who'd been paid in advance for a lead novel and didn't seem to be doing anything about writing it. Keith had tried to get the writer started on a plot, and thought he'd succeeded.

Anyway, he'd missed seeing Joe Doppelberg, his prize fan, who'd picked Friday to happen to be in New York and to call at the Borden offices. Judging from Joe Doppelberg's letters, missing a chance to meet him in person had been a definite gain.

Then yesterday, Saturday, afternoon he'd come out here at L. A. Borden's invitation. This was Keith's third time here, but just another weekend at the boss's estate had turned into sheer magic when Betty Hadley turned out to be one of two other guests from the office.

Betty Hadley—tall and lithe and golden blond, with soft sun-tanned skin, with a face and figure that belonged on the television screen rather than in an editorial office—Keith sighed and went on into the house.

In the big walnut-paneled living room, L. A. Borden and Walter Callahan, head accountant for Borden, were playing gin rummy.

Borden looked up and nodded. "Hi, Keith. Want to take over after this game? We're nearly finished. I've got some letters to write and Walter would probably as soon take your money as mine."

Keith shook his head. "Got to do some work myself, Mr. Borden. I'm smack against deadline on the Rocketalk Department; I brought along my portable and fan letter file."

"Oh, come now; I didn't bring you out here to *work*. Can't you do it at the office tomorrow?"

"Wish I could, Mr. Borden," Keith said. "But it's my own fault for getting behind, and the stuff has to go to the printer tomorrow morning at ten sharp. They're closing the forms at noon so there isn't any leeway. But it's only a couple of hours' work and I'd rather get it done now and be free this evening."

He went on through the living room and up the stairs. In his room he took his typewriter out of its case and put it on the desk. From his brief case he took the file folder that held the incoming correspondence addressed to the Rocketalk Department or, in the less inhibited cases, to The Rocketeer.

Joe Doppelberg's letter was on top of the stack. He'd put it there because it had said Joe Doppelberg might be coming to call in person and Keith wanted to have the letter handy.

He worked paper into the typewriter, put down *Rocketalk* as a heading, and dived in.

*Well, fellow space pilots, tonight—the night I'm writing this, not the night you're reading it—is the big night, the big night, and the Ole Rocketeer was out there to see it. And see it he did, that flash of light on the dark of the moon that marked the landing of the first successful mis-sile ever launched through space by man.*

He looked at it critically, then yanked the paper out of the machine and put in a fresh sheet. It was too formal, too stilted, for his fans. He lighted a cigarette and wrote it again, and it came out better—or worse.

In the pause while he read it over he heard a door open and close and the sound of high heels clicking down the stairs. That would be Betty, leaving. He got up to go to the door and then sat down again. No, it would be anti-climactic to say good-bye again, now, with the Bordens and Callahan around.

Much better to leave it on the note of that quick but breathless lass and the promise that she would see him tomorrow evening.

He sighed and picked up the top letter. Joe Doppelberg's. **It** Said:

*Dear Rocky-Tear: I shouldn't ought to write you atall, because your last ish stinks to high Arcturus, except for the Wheeler yarn. Who ever told that mug Gormley he could write? And his space navigation? The big bohunk couldn't peelot a rowboat across Mud Creek on a sunny day.*

*And that Hooper cover—the gal was okay, more than okay, tho what gals aren't on covers? But that thing chasing her—is it supposed to be one of the Mercurian devils in the Wheeler story? Well, tell Hooper I can think of scarier Bems than them, cold- sober, without even a slug of Venusian sappy-sap.*

*Why don't she just turn around and chase it?*

*Keep Hooper on the inside—his black and white stuff is okay—and get somebody else for covers. How about Rockwell Kent or Dali? I'll bet Dali could make a dilly of a BEM. Get it, Rocky? Dali-dilly.*

*Lookit, Rocky, get the Uranian bug-juice ready and iced because I'm going to beard the lyin in his den, some day this week. Not coming to Spaceport ISTfawk just to see you, Rocky, don't flatter yourself on that. But because I got to see a Martian about a dog-star anyway, Til be in town, so I'm going to see if you're as ugly as they say you are.*

*One recent idea of yours, Rocky, is tops. That's running half-col pix of your best and regularest correspondents with their letters. So I got a surprise for you. I'm sending mine. I was going to bring it, but this letter II get there before I do and I might miss an ish going to press in between.*

*Ennahoo, Rocky, kill the fatted moon-calf, because Til be seeing you soon, if not sooner.*

**JOE DOPPELBERG**

Keith Winton sighed again and picked up his blue pencil. He marked out the parts about the trip to New York; that Wouldn't interest his other readers, and anyway he didn't want to give too many of them the idea of dropping in at the office; he could waste too much time that way.

He penciled out a few of the cornier phrases in the other parts of the letter, then picked up the snapshot that had come with the letter and glanced at it again.

Joe Doppelberg didn't look like his letter sounded. He was a not unhandsome, rather intelligent-looking kid of sixteen or seventeen. He had a nice grin. Probably, in person, he'd be as shy as his letter was brash.

Sure, he might as well run the picture. Should have sent it to the photoengraver before but there was still time. He marked the copy to be set with a half-column runaround for a cut and wrote "%-col. Doppelberg" on the back of the photograph.

He put the second page of Joe's letter into the typewriter, thought a moment, and then typed at the bottom:

*So okay, Doppelberg, we'll get Rockwell Kent to do our next cover. You pay him. But as for having the glamour-gals chasing the bug-eyed monsters (Bems to you), it can't be done. In our stories the gals are always chaste. Get it, Doppelberg? Chaste-chased. And that ain't half as bad as your Dali-dilly, either.*

He took the page out of the typewriter, sighed, and picked up the next letter.

He finished at six, which left him an hour before dinner. He took a quick shower and dressed and there was still half an hour left. He wandered downstairs and out the French doors that led to the garden.

It was just turning dusk and the new moon was already visible in the clear sky. The seeing would be good, he thought. And, dammit, that rocket flash had *better* be visible to the naked eye or he'd have to write a new opening paragraph for the Rocketalk Department. Well, there'd be time for that after nine-sixteen.

He sat down on a wicker bench beside the main path through the garden and sniffed deeply of the fresh country air and the scent of flowers all about him.

He thought about Betty Hadley, and just what he thought about her need not be recorded here.

But thinking it kept him happy—or perhaps happily miserable would be a more apt phrase—until his mind wandered to the writer in Philadelphia and he wondered if the so-and-so was actually working on that story or was out getting plastered.

Then he thought about Betty Hadley again and wished that it was twenty-four hours later, Monday evening in New York instead of Sunday evening in the Catskills.

He glanced at his wrist watch and saw that they'd be ringing the dinner bell in a few minutes. That was good news because, in love or not in love, he was hungry.

And being hungry made him think, for no reason at all, of Claude Hooper, who did most of the covers for *Surprising Stones*. He wondered if he could keep on getting covers from Hooper. Hooper was a swell guy and a fairly good artist, and he could draw women who made your mouth water, but he just couldn't draw sufficiently horrible-looking monsters to pursue them. Maybe he just didn't have enough nightmares or had too happy a home life, or something. And most of the fans were kicking. Like Joe Doppelberg. What did Doppelberg— The moon rocket, falling back to Earth, was traveling faster than sound and Keith neither saw nor heard it, although it struck only two yards away from him. There was a flash.

## 2

### *The Purple Monster*

There was no sense of transition, of change or of movement, no lapse of time. It was merely as though, simultaneously with a bright flash, someone had pulled the wicker bench out from under him. He grunted from impact with the ground and, because he had been leaning against the back of the bench, went over backward full length. There he was lying flat on his back, staring up at the evening sky.

And it was seeing the sky that was the most amazing thing; it couldn't have been merely that the wicker bench had collapsed under him—or even merely vanished from under him—because the bench had been under a tree and there was now no tree between him and the dull blue dusk.

He raised his head first and then sat up, for the moment too shaken—not physically but mentally—to stand up. Somehow he wanted his bearings before he quite trusted his knees.

He was sitting on grass, smoothly mowed grass, in the middle of a yard. Behind him, when he turned his head around, he saw a house. A quite ordinary-looking house, not nearly so large or well designed as Mr. Borden's house. And it had the look, somehow, of a vacant house. At least there was no sign of life, no light at any window.

He stared at what should have been Mr. Borden's house, but wasn't, for several seconds, and then turned to look the other way. A hundred feet in that direction, at the edge of the lawn on which he sat, was a hedge; at the other side of the hedge were trees—two orderly rows of them, as though on either side of a road. They were tall and very beautiful poplars. There was no maple tree—it had been a maple under which he had been sitting—anywhere in sight. Nor was there even a splinter of a wicker bench.

He shook his head to clear it and stood up cautiously. There was a momentary touch of dizziness but, outside of that, he was all right. Whatever had happened to him, he wasn't hurt. He stood still until the dizziness passed and then started walking toward a gate in the hedge.

He looked at his wrist watch. It was three minutes of seven and that was impossible, he thought. It had been three minutes of seven, just about, when he'd been sitting on the bench in Mr. Borden's garden. And wherever he was now he couldn't have got there in nothing flat.

He held the wrist watch to his ear; it was still ticking. But that didn't prove anything; maybe it stopped from—from whatever had happened, and had started again when he had stood up and started walking.

He looked up again at the sky to judge the time lapse; he could detect none. It had been dusk then and it was dusk now. The silver crescent moon was in the same place; at least it was the same distance from the zenith. He couldn't be sure here—wherever *here* was—about his bearings and directions. The gateway through the hedge led to an asphalt-paved three-lane highway. There were no cars in sight.

As he closed the gate he looked again at the house behind him and saw something he had not previously noticed; there was a sign on one of the porch pillars that read: *For Sale. R. Blaisdell, Greenvitte, 2V.Y.*

Then he must still be near Borden's estate, for Greenville was the nearest town to Borden's. But that was obvious anyway; he *couldn't* have gone far. The real question was how he could be anywhere at all out of sight of where he'd been sitting only minutes ago.

He shook his head again to clear it, although it felt all right. Could he have suffered sudden amnesia? Had he walked here without knowing it? It didn't seem possible, particularly in a matter of minutes or less.

He stood looking uncertainly up and down the wide asphalt roadway between the tall poplars, wondering which way to walk. The road ran straight; he could see almost a quarter of a mile, to the next rise, in either direction, but there was no sign of human habitation. Yet there had to be a farmhouse somewhere near, as cultivated fields lay just beyond the far row of poplars. Probably the trees themselves blocked his view of the farmhouse that must be near by. If he walked to the fence that bounded the field across the road, he'd be able to see it.

He was halfway across the road when he heard the sound of an approaching car, still out of sight beyond the rise to his left. It was a very noisy car to make itself heard at that distance. He went the rest of the way across the road and by the time he turned, the car was in sight. Information from the driver of the car would be as valuable as information from a farmhouse; better, for perhaps he could persuade the driver to give him a lift to Borden's, at least if he was going in that direction anyway.

The car was a Model T of ancient vintage. A good omen, Keith knew. He'd done quite a bit of hitchhiking in his college days and he knew that the likelihood of getting a lift in a car was in direct proportion to its age and condition of decrepitude.

And there was no doubt about the decrepitude of this vehicle. It seemed barely to have made the rise

it had just climbed; it chugged and labored to gather speed.

Keith waited until it was near enough and then stepped out into the road and waved his hand. The Ford slowed down and stopped beside him.

The man at the wheel leaned over and lowered the window on Keith's side—for no reason that Keith could see, for there wasn't any glass in the window anyway. "Want a lift, mister?" he asked.

He looked, Keith thought, almost too much like a farmer to be one. He was even chewing a long yellow straw, just the color of his hair, and his faded blue overalls matched his faded blue eyes.

Keith put a foot on the running board and leaned his head into the car through the open window, so he could make his voice heard above the chugging of the engine and the tinny rattle that came from all parts of the body even when the car was not in motion.

He said, "I'm afraid I'm lost. Do you know where L. A. Borden's place is?"

The farmer rolled the straw to the opposite corner of his mouth. He thought deeply, frowning with the effort.

"Nope," he said, finally. "Never heard of him. Don't have a farm on this road. Mebbe over on the pike; I don't know all the farms over there."

"It isn't a farm," Keith told him. "It's a big country estate. He's a publisher. Where does this road go? Into Greeneville?" "Yep. It's ahead, the way I'm going, ten miles or so. Back t'other way it hits the Albany Highway at Carteret. Want a lift to Greeneville? Guess you can find out there where this Borden lives."

"Sure," Keith said. "Thanks." He got into the car. The farmer gravely reached across him and turned a crank that raised the window that hadn't any glass in it. "Rattles," he explained, "if I leave it open."

He stepped on the clutch pedal and the gear pedal and the car groaned and started. The body rattle of the car sounded like hail on a tin roof. It reached its top speed and Keith estimated that it would take at least half an hour to reach a ten mile distant destination, if the car got there at all.

Well, if he got to Greeneville, he'd at least know where he was. He'd be plenty late for dinner, so maybe, he thought, he'd better phone Borden to reassure him, eat in town, and then hire a taxi, or some sort of vehicle, to drive him to the estate. He could be there by nine at the latest, plenty of time to be ready to watch the fireworks on the moon at sixteen minutes after. *That* was something he wasn't going to miss.

How was he going to explain to Mr. Borden? About the only thing he *could* say was that he'd taken a walk and had got lost; that he'd had to get a lift into Greeneville to get his bearings. It was going to sound rather silly, but not so silly as the truth. And he didn't want his employer to think he was subject to spells of insanity or amnesia.

The old car chugged along the long, straight road. His benefactor didn't seem to want to talk and Keith was glad of that. They'd have had to yell at each other anyway. And he'd much rather think and try to figure out what had happened.

Borden's estate was a big one and certainly must be well known in its immediate neighborhood. If the driver of the ancient jalopy knew everyone along the road, he couldn't possibly not have heard of Borden's if it were close. Yet it couldn't possibly be more than twenty miles away, because Borden lived ten miles from Greeneville—although Keith couldn't remember what direction it was from that town—and the spot where he'd been picked up along the road had also been about ten miles from Greeneville. Even if those two ten-mile distances were in diametrically opposite directions, he couldn't have gone over twenty miles—and even that far was silly, considering the short lapse of time.

They were coming to the outskirts of a town now and he looked at his watch again; it was seven thirty-five. He looked out of the window of the car at buildings they were passing until he saw a clock in the window of a store. His watch was right; it hadn't stopped and started again.

A few minutes later they were in the main business district of Greeneville. The driver swung into the curb and stopped. He said, "This is about the middle of town, mister. Guess you can look up your party in a phone book and you'll be all right. And there's a taxi stand right across the street to get you wherever you're going. Charge you a hell of a price, but they'll get you there."

"Thanks a lot," Keith told him. "Can I buy you a drink before I phone?"

"Nope, thanks. Got to get back quick. Mare's about to foal; I come in to pick up my brother. He's a vet and I want him there."

Keith thanked him again, and went into the drugstore on the corner just beyond where the farmer had let him out of the car. He went to the phone booth at the back and took up the slender Greeneville phone book hanging by a chain from one side of the booth. He leafed through it to the B's, and to—

There wasn't any Borden listed.

Keith frowned. Borden's phone was on the Greeneville exchange. He was sure of that because he'd phoned Borden several times on business from the office in New York. It had been a Greeneville number.

But of course it could be an unlisted number. Could he remember it? Of course he could—it had been three numbers all alike—ones. That was it: Greeneville 111. He remembered wondering if Borden had used pull with the phone company to get a number as easy to remember as that.

He pulled the door of the booth shut and fumbled a nickel out of the change in his pocket. But the phone was a type he hadn't seen before. There didn't seem to be any slot for a coin to go into. He looked all over and around it before he decided that maybe they didn't have coin phones in these little upstate towns and that he was probably supposed to pay the druggist for the call.

He picked up the receiver and when an operator's voice asked "Number please?" he gave it. There was a minute's

pause and then the operator's voice came back on the line. "There is no such number listed, sir."

For a second, Keith wondered if he was really going insane; it didn't seem possible that he could be wrong on that number. Greeneville one-one-one; you couldn't forget a number like that, or remember it wrong.

He asked, "Will you please, then, find out the number of L. A. Borden's phone? I thought that was the number. I can't find him listed in the phone book, but I know he's got a phone. I've called him."

"One minute, sir. ... No, there is no such name on our records."

Keith said "Thanks," and put the receiver back on the hook.

He still didn't believe it. He stepped out of the booth so the light would be better, taking the phone book with him as far as its chain would let it go. He looked under B, and there still wasn't any Borden listed. He remembered that Borden called his estate Fouroaks, and he looked under that. There was no listing for Fouroaks.

Suddenly he snapped the book shut and looked at the cover. It read *Greeneville, N. Y.* A momentary suspicion that he was in the wrong Greeneville died a-borning; there could be only one Greeneville in New York State. Another and fainter suspicion died almost before he realized its existence when he read the smaller type under the name of the town:

*Spring, 1954.*

He still didn't believe that L. A. Borden wasn't in that book; he had to fight the impulse to look through it page by page to see if the name was not there but out of alphabetical order.

Instead, he walked forward to the soda counter and sat down on one of the old-fashioned wide-legged stools. Behind the counter the druggist—a little gray-haired man with thick spectacles—was polishing glasses. He looked up. "Yes, sir?"

"A coke, please," Keith said. He wanted to ask questions, but for the moment he couldn't think what questions to ask. He watched while the druggist mixed the coke and put it on the counter in front of him.

"Beautiful night out," the druggist said.

Keith nodded. That reminded him he'd have to remember to watch for the flash of the moon rocket, no matter where he was at the time. He glanced at his watch. It was almost eight o'clock; another hour and a quarter and he'd have to be in a clear space outdoors where he could watch the moon. It didn't look, now, as though he'd be back at Borden's by that time.

He drank the coke almost at a gulp. It was cool and tasted good, but it made him realize that he was getting hungry. And no wonder, if it was eight o'clock; dinner was over by now at the Bordens' place. Besides, he'd eaten a light lunch and played quite a bit of tennis since then.

He looked around back of the soda fountain for signs indicating that the druggist served sandwiches or other food. Apparently he didn't.

Keith took a quarter out of his pocket and put it on the marble top of the soda fountain.

It rang metallically and the druggist dropped the glass he had been polishing. Behind the thick spectacles the druggist's eyes got wide and scared; he stood there with his body rigid while his head turned back and forth as he looked from one end of the store to the other. He didn't seem to notice or to realize that he had dropped and broken a glass. The towel, too, fell from his fingers.

Then his hand went forward gingerly, covered the coin and picked it up. Again he looked both ways as though making sure that he and Keith were the only people in the store.

Then and only then did he look at the coin. Shielding it deep in cupped hands he stared at it, moving it close to his eyes. He turned it over and studied the other side.

His eyes, frightened and yet ecstatic, went back to Keith's face.

"Beautiful!" he said. "Hardly worn at all. And a nineteen twenty-eight." His voice dropped to a whisper. "But—who sent you?"

Keith closed his eyes and opened them again. Either he or the druggist must be crazy. He wouldn't have doubted which had it not been for the other things that had happened—his sudden teleportation from one place to another—the absence of L. A. Borden from the phone book and the records of the phone company.

"Who sent you?" the druggist asked again. "Nobody," Keith said.

The little druggist smiled slowly. "You don't want to tell. It must have been K. Well, never mind that, in case it wasn't. I'll take a chance. I'll give you a thousand credits for it." Keith didn't say anything.

"Fifteen hundred," the druggist said. His eyes, Keith thought, looked like a spaniel's eyes—the eyes of a hungry spaniel seeing a bone just beyond his reach.

The druggist took a deep breath. He said, "Two thousand, then. I know it's worth more, but that's all I can give you. If my wife—"

"All right," Keith said.

The hand that had been holding the coin concealed dived into the druggist's pocket like a prairie dog popping into its hole. Unnoticed glass crunched under the druggist's shoes as he walked down to the cash register at the end of the counter and punched a key. No *Sale* came up behind the glass window. The druggist came back, crunching glass again, his attention on the bills he was counting. He put a pile of them in front of Keith Winton.

"Two thousand," he said. "Means I'll have to give up part of the vacation I'd planned this year, but I guess it's worth it I must be a little crazy."

Keith picked up the bills and looked long and hard at the top one. There was a familiar picture of George Washington in the center of it. The figure in the corners was 100 and under the oval portrait of Washington was spelled out *One Hundred Credits*.

And that was silly, too, Keith thought. Washington's picture belonged only on *one* dollar bills—unless things were different here.

*Here?* What did he mean by *here*? This was Greenville, New York, U. S. A., in the year 1954. The phone book said so. George Washington's picture said so.

He looked again and read more of the printing. *United States of America*, he read. *Federal Reserve Note*.

And it wasn't a new bill. It looked worn and circulated and genuine. There were the familiar little silk threads. A serial number in blue ink. To the right of the portrait, *Series of 1Q45*, and a reproduced signature, *Fred M. Vinson*, over fine type that read *Secretary of the Treasury*.

Slowly, Keith folded the little stack of bills and put them into his coat pocket.

He looked up and his eyes met those of the druggist, looking out at him through the thick spectacles, looking anxiously.

The druggist's voice was just as anxious as his eyes. He said, "It's—it's all right, isn't it? You're not an agent? I mean, if you are, you've *got* me now for collecting. So you might as well arrest me and get it over with. I mean, I took a chance and, if I lose, there's no use keeping me in suspense, is there?"

"No," Keith said. "It's all right. I guess it's all right. Can I have another coke, please?"

This time some of the coke slopped out as the druggist put the glass down on the marble counter. And, as glass crunched again under the druggist's shoes, he smiled nervously and apologetically at Keith, got a broom from the corner and began to sweep behind the counter.

Keith sipped his second coke and thought. That is, he thought if one could call the whirl of things inside his head thinking. It was more nearly like riding on a pinwheel.

He watched until the druggist had finished with the broom.

"Look," he said, "I'd like to ask you a few questions that may seem—uh—crazy to you. But I've got a reason for asking them. Will you answer them, no matter how goofy they sound to you?"

The druggist eyed him cautiously. "What kind of questions?" he wanted to know.

"Well-what is the exact date?"

"June tenth, nineteen fifty-four."

"A.D.?"

The druggist's eyes got wide but he said, "Sure. A.D."

"And this is Greenville, New York?"

"Yes. You mean you don't know—"

Keith said, "Let me ask the questions. There aren't two Greenvilles in the state, are there?"

"Not that I know of."

"Do you know a man—or know of a man—named L. A. Bor-

The druggist reached out a hand for the coin, and the hand trembled so badly that he couldn't grip the edges of it.

Suddenly, Keith felt ashamed of himself. He shouldn't have done it. And besides, it would lead to conversation that would keep him from getting off by himself to read those magazines, and that was what he was in a hurry to do.

He said gruffly, "Keep it. You can have them both—the quarter and the half—for what you gave me." He turned quickly and started out of the store.

He started; that was all.

He took one step and froze. Something was coming in the open doorway of the drugstore. Something that wasn't human, that was a long, long way from being human.

Something that was well over seven feet tall—so tall that it had to stoop slightly to get through the doorway—and that was covered with bright purple fur except for its hands, feet and face. Those parts of its body were purple too, but they were covered with scales instead of fur. Its eyes were flat white disks, devoid of pupils. It had no nose, but it had teeth. It had no lack of teeth.

While Keith stood frozen, a hand grabbed his arm from behind. The druggist's voice, suddenly fierce and shrill, was shouting: "A nineteen forty-three coin! He gave me a nineteen forty-three coin! He's a *spy*, an *Arcturian!* Get him, Lunan. Kill him!"

The purple thing had paused just inside the doorway. Now it made a shrieking noise that was almost supersonic in pitch. It spread its thick purple arms so the hands were eight feet apart and came toward Keith looking like something out of a nightmare that Gargantua might have. Its purple lips bared two-inch fangs and its mouth opened, a green cavern.

And the druggist, yelling "*Kill him! Kill him, Lunan!*" was climbing up Keith's back. His hands closed around Keith's throat and tried to strangle him.

But in view of what was coming at him from the front, Keith hardly noticed that. He turned and ran the other way, to the back of the store, losing the druggist en route. He hadn't noticed a door at the back of the store, but there must be one. There'd *better* be one.

### 3

#### *Shoot on Sight*

There *was* a door.

Something clawed at his back as he went through it. He pulled free, hearing his coat rip. He slammed the door

and heard a yelp of pain—not a human one—behind him. But he didn't turn around to apologize. He ran.

He didn't turn until, half a block away, he heard the sound of a pistol report behind him and felt a sudden pain as though a red-hot poker had just been drawn across his upper arm.

He looked back then, just for a second. The purple monster was still coming toward him. It was about halfway between the door he'd just left at the back of the store, and Keith. But despite its long legs it seemed to run slowly and awkwardly. Apparently he could easily outdistance it.

The purple creature carried no weapon. The shot that had seared Keith's shoulder, he saw, had come from the little druggist, who, a big old-fashioned revolver in his hand, was standing just outside the door. He was aiming the pistol for a second shot.

Keith heard the shot as he dived into the areaway between two buildings, but the bullet must have gone past him harmlessly for he didn't feel it.

Then he was between the buildings and for a terrifying moment he thought he had trapped himself in a cul-de-sac. There was only a blank brick wall at the end of the areaway, and it was too high for him to climb. But when he reached the back he saw that there were doors to the buildings on either side and that one of the doors was standing ajar. He didn't bother trying the closed door; he hurried through the open one and closed and locked it behind him.

He stood there in the dimness of a hallway, panting, and looked about him. In the direction toward the street, stairs led upward. In the other direction there was another door; undoubtedly it would lead to an alley.

Sudden hammering sounded on the door through which he had just entered—hammering and the babble of excited voices.

Keith ran to the back door, went through it and found himself in the alley. He ran between two buildings that fronted on the next street. He slowed down his pace as he neared the sidewalk and emerged walking at a normal pace.

He turned in the direction that would take him to the main street, half a block away, and then hesitated. It was a fairly crowded, busy street. But was there safety or danger in crowds? He stood in the shadow of a tree a dozen paces short of the corner and watched.

What he saw looked like normal traffic on a normal small city's main street—for a moment. Then, walking arm in arm, two of the purple-furred monsters went by. Both of them were slightly bigger than the one that had attacked him in the drugstore.

The monsters were strange enough, but there was something that was stranger: the fact that the people before and after them paid no attention to them. Whatever they were, they were—accepted. They were normal. They belonged here.

*Here?*

That word again. Where, what, when was *here*?

What mad universe was this that took for granted an alien race more horrible looking than the worst Bern that had ever leered from a science-fiction magazine cover?

What mad universe was this that gave him two hundred dollars for a quarter and tried to kill him when he offered a half dollar free? Yet whose credit-currency bore a picture of George Washington and current dates and which had provided—fortunately still folded and in his pocket—current and only subtly different issues of *Surprising Stories* and *Perfect Love Stories*?

A world with asthmatic Model T Fords—and space travel?

There must be space travel. Those purple things had never evolved on Earth—if this were Earth. And when he'd asked the druggist about the moon ship, he'd said, "It lands every night."

And then—what was it the druggist had shouted just before the purple thing had attacked him? "*Arcturian spy!*"? But that was absurd. Arcturus was light-years away. A technology that still used Model T Fords might possibly have perfected travel to the moon, but *Arcturus*? Could he have misunderstood that word?

And the druggist had called the monster *Lunan*. A proper name, or the designation of an inhabitant of Luna, the moon?

"It lands every night," the druggist had said. "It's in by now. We'll be getting customers any minute."

Bright purple customers seven feet tall?

Suddenly Keith was aware that his shoulder hurt him and that there was a wet, sticky feeling on his upper arm. He looked down and saw that the sleeve of his sport jacket was soaked with blood; blood that looked black rather than red in the dim light. And there was a deep gouge in the cloth where the bullet had creased it.

He needed attention for that wound, to stop the bleeding.

Why not walk out there, look for a policeman (Were there policemen *here*?) and give himself up, tell the truth?

But what was the truth?

Could he tell them, "You're all wrong. This is the U. S. A., Earth, Greenville, New York, and it's June, nineteen hundred fifty-four, all right—but there isn't any space travel yet except an experimental rocket that's going to land later tonight. And dollars are the currency and not credits, even if they've got Fred M. Vinson's signature and Washington's picture—and those purple monsters walking down your main street can't possibly be there, and a guy named L. A. Borden—if you can find him better than I can—will explain who I am. I hope."

Impossible, of course. From what he'd seen and heard, there was only one person *here* who would believe any of that. That one person's name was Keith Winton and he would be promptly locked up in the nearest nuthouse.

No, he couldn't possibly go to the authorities with what would seem to them an utterly incredible story. Not yet, anyway. Not until he'd had time to orient himself a little better and to find out and figure out what had happened and



where he was.

Somewhere, blocks away, sirens wailed. They came closer.

If those sirens meant the same thing *here* that they did in a more familiar universe, then they were police cars and probably after him.

The fact that there was blood on his coat, if no other reason, decided him against the main street. Quickly he crossed the quiet side street, went through another alley and then, keeping in the shadows as much as possible, put another few blocks between himself and the main street.

He shrank back into the shadow of another areaway as a squad car turned the corner with siren shrieking.

It went past.

Maybe they were looking for him, maybe they weren't, but he didn't dare risk that. He had to find sanctuary somewhere; he couldn't wander about very long with blood on his sleeve and—he remembered now—with the back of his coat torn where the purple monster had ripped it.

Across the street there was a sign, *Rooms for Rent*. Did he dare take a chance on trying to rent a room? The feel of blood running down past his elbow told him he'd have to.

He made sure no traffic was coming and then crossed the street. The building with the sign looked like a cross between a rooming house and a cheap hotel. It was a red-brick building flush with the sidewalk. He looked through the glass of the door.

There wasn't any clerk at the desk in the tiny lobby. On a corner of the desk was a pushbell and a sign, *Ring for Clerk*. He opened the door as quietly as he could and closed it the same way. He tiptoed to the desk and studied the rack behind it. There was a row of boxes, some with mail, a few with keys in them.

He looked around carefully and then leaned across the desk and picked the key out of the nearest box; it was numbered 201.

He looked around again. No one had seen him.

He tiptoed to the stairs. They were carpeted and didn't creak. And he couldn't have picked a better room key. Room 201 was right at the head of the stairs.

Inside the room he locked the door and turned on the light.

If only the occupant of 201 didn't come in within the next half hour, he had a chance.

He stripped off his coat and shirt and studied the wound. It was going to be painful, but not dangerous unless it became infected. The gouge was quite deep but the bleeding had already started to slow down.

He made sure by looking in the dresser drawers that the missing occupant of 201 had shirts—and luckily within half a size of his own—and then he ripped apart the shirt he had just taken off and used it to bandage the arm, winding it around and around so that the blood would soak through slowly if at all.

Then he appropriated a dark-blue shirt from the dresser—choosing a dark one because his own shirt had been white—and a necktie from the rack.

He explored the closet and found three suits hanging inside it. He chose an Oxford gray to contrast with his own light-tan suit—the coat of which was hopelessly torn and bloodstained anyway. There was a straw hat in the closet. At first he thought it was too big for him but, with a little paper folded under the sweatband, it served. With a complete change of clothes and a hat—he had been hatless before—he doubted if even the druggist would recognize him at a distance on the street. And the police would be looking for a man in a torn tan coat. The druggist could not have missed seeing that tear.

He made a quick estimate and translation of the value of the things he had taken and left a five hundred credit note on the bureau. Fifty dollars should be ample; the suit, which was the main item, was neither expensive nor new.

He made his own clothes into a bundle, wrapped with some newspaper that had been in the closet. Much as he wanted to study and read those newspapers, no matter how old they might be, he knew that getting out of here and to a safer place came first. The man whose room he was using might return at any moment.

He opened the door and listened. There was still no sound from the little lobby downstairs. He went down the steps as silently as he had come up them.

He hesitated in the lobby, wondering if he should now ring the bell and ask for a room in the ordinary way. No, he decided, not here. The clerk would notice that he had on an Oxford gray suit and a straw hat and carried a bundle; if, during the evening, the owner of those garments came home, noticed what was missing and told the clerk, the clerk might connect the two facts.

He went out the door to the street. Now, as soon as he got rid of the bundle in some place where it would not attract immediate attention, he should be comparatively safe for a while. Safe as long as he didn't talk to anyone and make a break of some sort. And making a break would be all too easy until he'd learned the ropes. If giving a man a half dollar dated nineteen forty-three made him try to kill you as a spy—and *had* the druggist really said *Arcturian* spy?—then who could even guess what other pitfalls there might be in the most ordinary conversation? He was glad now he hadn't talked much to the man who'd given him the lift into Greenville; surely he'd have made a bad break sooner or later.

He walked toward the main street now, pretending a confidence that he was a long way from feeling. At the very corner of the main street he got rid of his bundle into a convenient trash receptacle.

And now, he decided, with his appearance reasonably changed, he dared look for sanctuary for the night. Sanctuary and a place where he could study at leisure the two magazines in his pocket. He had a hunch those two magazines, carefully studied, might give him at least a clue to what it was all about.

He walked in the direction opposite that of the drugstore where disaster had so nearly befallen him. He passed a

men's haberdashery, a sporting goods store, a theater at which was playing a picture he had seen in New York two months before, and everything seemed normal and ordinary. The people about him seemed normal and ordinary.

For a moment he wondered if possibly everything *was* normal and ordinary and he'd been imagining the differences. Possibly the druggist had been insane, possibly there was some reasonable explanation for everything, even the purple monsters.

Then he came to a newsstand with a rack of newspapers in front of it. Both local Greenville papers and New York newspapers were displayed. All very ordinary looking, until he happened to notice a headline. It read:

ARCS ATTACK MARS, DESTROY KAPI  
EARTH COLONY UNPREPARED DOPELLE VOWS VENGEANCE

He stepped closer to read the date. It was today's issue of *The New York Times*, typographically as familiar as the palm of his hand.

He picked the top copy off the rack and went into the store with it. He handed the news dealer a hundred-credit note and got ninety-nine credits in change—all in bills like the ones he had, except for the denominations. He stuffed the paper into his pocket and hurried out.

A few doors farther on was a hotel. He checked in, signing—after a second's hesitation while he pretended to fumble with the pen—his right name and address.

There wasn't any bellhop. The clerk handed him a key and told him where to find his room, at the front end of the corridor on the second floor.

Two minutes later, with the door closed and locked behind him, he took a deep breath of relief and sat down on the bed. For the first time since whatever had happened in the drugstore, he felt really safe.

He took the newspaper and the magazines from his pocket and put them on the bed. Then he got up and hung his coat and hat on the hanger, and as he did so he noticed two knobs and a dial on the wall beside the doorway, above a six-inch circular area of cloth—obviously a built-in radio with the cloth covering the speaker outlet.

He turned the knob that looked like a rheostat, and it was one. A faint hum immediately came from the speaker. He turned the tuning dial until a station came in clear and strong, then turned down the volume a little. It was good music-sounded like Benny Goodman, although he didn't recognize the tune.

He went back to the bed, took off his shoes to make himself comfortable and propped pillows up against the head of the bed. He picked up, first, his own magazine, *Surprising Stories*. He studied again, with growing wonder, the cover—the cover that was incredibly the same picture, incredibly different.

He'd have stared at it for minutes had not a sudden thought occurred to him that made him open the magazine quickly to the contents page. He looked at the fine type at the bottom and read:

Published by Borden Publications, Inc. L. A. Borden, Editor and Publisher. Keith Winton, Managing Editor. . . .

He found he'd been holding his breath until he saw his name there. He belonged here, then—wherever *here* was, he still had a job. And Mr. Borden was here, too, but what had happened to Borden's summer estate, the estate that had seemingly literally fallen out from under him a few minutes before seven o'clock this evening?

Another thought struck him, and he grabbed up the love story book and almost tore it getting it open to the contents page. Yes, Betty Hadley was Managing Editor. But there was something puzzling—the fact that the magazine was published by Borden Publications, Inc. This issue, the July one, should have shown the imprint of Whaley Publishing Company—it was only a matter of days since Borden had bought the magazine. Even the August issue should still bear the Whaley imprint. But that was a minor matter.

The important thing was that—whatever mad universe this was—Betty Hadley was here.

He sighed with relief. With Betty Hadley here, this couldn't be too bad a place, even if it contained purple monsters from the moon. And if he, Keith Winton, was still editor of his favorite science-fiction magazine, *Surprising Stories*, then he still had a job and could still eat, and he didn't care too much if they paid him in credits instead of in dollars.

The tune on the radio stopped suddenly, as though someone had shut off a record. A voice cut in:

*"Special news bulletin. Second warning to citizens of Greenville and surrounding territory. The Arcturian spy reported half an hour ago has not yet been apprehended. All railway stations, roads and spaceports are being closely guarded and a house-to-house search is being instituted. All citizens are requested to be on the alert.*

*"Go armed. Shoot on sight. Mistakes may and will be made but again we remind you that it is better that a hundred innocent people die than that the spy escape to cause the loss, perhaps, of millions of Terrestrial lives.*

*"Shoot on the slightest suspicion!*

*"We repeat the description. . . ."*

Scarcely breathing, Keith Winton listened to that description.

*". . . about five feet nine, one hundred sixty pounds, tan suit, white sport shirt open at the collar, wears no hat. Brown eyes, brown wavy hair, appears to be about thirty years old. . . . r*

He let his breath out slowly. They hadn't discovered his change of clothes. And there was no mention of his being wounded. The druggist, then, had not known that one of the shots he'd fired had been a hit.

The physical description was fairly close, but that couldn't be too dangerous if they didn't know what

clothes he was wearing now or the fact that his upper arm would be bandaged.

Of course he'd be in much greater danger if the man whose room he had burgled at the rooming house came home and reported that his Oxford gray suit and straw hat were missing. And despite the fact that he'd been left five hundred credits to cover his loss, he probably *would* report them if he had heard the broadcasts. He was sorry now that he'd left the money; an ordinary thief would attract less attention than would a thief who left money to cover what he took. He should, he realized, have made it appear to be the ordinary rifling of a room, have stolen other objects as well. He could have taken all three suits in a suitcase that had been on the floor of the closet; then they could have taken only a guess as to which of the three he was wearing.

As it was, if they tied in what had happened at the rooming house, they'd have a good description of him again.

But—ye gods, what had he walked into?—Shoot on *sight*! And he had seriously considered giving himself up!

Well, that "shoot on sight" order definitely ended any possibility of his going to the authorities. Somehow, he was in such deadly danger here that there wouldn't even be a chance to explain—if he knew *how* to explain. Even with the roads and stations watched, he'd have to get back to New York and orient himself. But what would New York be like? As he knew it, or otherwise?

It was getting hot and stuffy in the hotel room. He went to a window and opened it, then stood looking out on the street below. So ordinary a street, such ordinary people. Then he saw three of the tall purple monsters, arm in arm, come out of the theater lobby across the street. And nobody paid any attention to them.

He stepped back suddenly from the window, for one of the purple things might, for all he knew, be the same one that had seen him in the drugstore. The monsters all looked alike to him, but if they were used to human beings—as they seemed to be—then the one that had seen him once would undoubtedly be able to recognize him again.

The sight of the purple monsters made him tremble a little at a sudden thought—*tw* he insane? Could it be that? If so, it was the craziest form of insanity he'd ever heard of, and he'd taken a course in abnormal psych at college.

And, if he really was crazy, which was the delusion—the world in which he now found himself, or all of his memories?

Could his mind have conceivably built itself a set of false memories of a world without spaceships, without purple monsters from the moon, with dollars instead of credits, no spies from Arcturus and no Earth colonies on Mars?

Could it be that this world was the one he'd lived in all his life and that the world which seemed familiar, the world of his memories, was a phantom of his mind?

But if this *were* the real world, if his memories—up to seven o'clock tonight—*were* false, then where did he fit into things? Was he an Arcturian spy? That seemed no more impossible than anything else.

There were footsteps suddenly along the corridor just outside his door, heavy footsteps of several people. There was a loud, authoritative knock on the door.

A voice said, "Police."

## 4

### *Mad Manhattan*

Keith took a deep breath and thought fast. The radio had just told him that a house-to-house search was being made; probably that is all this was. As someone who'd just checked into the hotel he'd be investigated first, naturally. Aside from his time of checking in, they could have no grounds for suspicion.

Was there anything on him that would give him away if he was searched? Yes, his money. Not the credit bills the druggist had given him, but his change and the bills that were in his wallet in dollar denominations.

Quickly he took from his pocket the change he had left—a quarter, two dimes and some pennies. From his billfold he took the bills—three tens and some singles—that weren't credit bills.

The knocking was repeated, more loudly and insistently.

Keith wrapped the change in the bills, making a small tight wad, and reached out through the window, putting them on the corner of the window ledge out of sight.

Then he took a deep breath and went and opened the door of the room.

Three men, two of them in police uniform, stood there. The uniformed ones held drawn revolvers in their hands. It was the other, the man in a gray business suit, who spoke.

He said, "Sorry, sir. We're making a routine checkup. You've heard the broadcasts?"

"Of course," Keith said. "Come in."

They were coming in anyway, even before he spoke. They came in, ready and alert. The muzzles of both of the pistols were aimed at his chest and they didn't waver a bit. The cold, suspicious eyes of the man in gray didn't waver from Keith's face, either.

But his voice was carefully polite. "What is your name?"

"Keith Winton." "Occupation?"

"Editorial work. I'm managing editor of *Surprising Stories*." Keith gestured casually at the magazine

lying on the bed.

The muzzle of one of the two revolvers aimed at him dropped a little, maybe as much as an inch. A broad grin spread across the round, flat face of the man behind it.

"The hell," he said. "Then you must be the guy who runs the Rocketalk Department, huh? The Rocketeer?" Keith nodded.

"Then maybe," said the uniformed man, "you remember my name. I'm John Garrett. I've written you four letters and you've published two of them."

Quickly he transferred the pistol to his left hand—but kept it aimed squarely at Keith—and stuck out his right hand.

Keith shook it. "Sure," he said, "you're the guy who keeps trying to talk us into running color on our inside illustrations, even if we have to raise our price a d—" He caught himself quickly, "—a credit."

The man's grin got broader and his pistol dropped to his side. "Sure," he said, "that's me. I've been a fan of your magazine ever since—"

"Raise that gun again, Sergeant," snapped the man in the gray suit. "Don't get careless."

The gun came up again, but the sergeant kept on grinning. He said, "This guy's all right, Captain. If he wasn't what he said he was, he couldn't have known what was in my letters to the magazine, could he?"

The captain asked, "Were your letters published?" "Well-yes, but—"

"Arcturians have prodigious memories. If he prepared himself for the role of an editor, he'd have studied back issues of the magazine he was going to claim to edit."

The sergeant frowned. He said, "Well, yeah, but—" He pushed back his hat with his right hand and scratched his head.

The captain had closed the door of the room and leaned against it, looking from Keith's face to the sergeant's. He said, "But the idea's a good one, Sergeant, if you can check up on Mr. Winton's genuineness in some way that hasn't been in print. Can you?"

The sergeant looked even more puzzled, but Keith said, "Sergeant, do you remember the last letter you wrote us? About a month ago, I believe."

"Sure. You mean the one where I said—"

"Don't say it," Keith interrupted him. "Let me. You said that comic books could run pictures in color and could sell even cheaper than pulp magazines, so you couldn't understand why we couldn't run our stuff in color and still hold to the same price."

The muzzle of the gun dropped again. The sergeant said, "That's right, Captain. That's just what I said, and that letter's not been published yet. So this guy's all right or he wouldn't know about it. He couldn't. Unless—" He glanced again at the magazine lying on the bed. "Unless it's in that issue. I haven't seen that one yet. It's a new one, must've hit the stands today."

"That's right," Keith said. "But your letter isn't in it; go ahead and take a look."

Sergeant Garrett glanced at his superior officer and got a nod. He stepped around Keith and picked up the magazine, leafed through it to the Rocketalk Department at the back and tried to read and keep his eyes on Keith at the same time.

The man in gray smiled thinly and took a short-barreled revolver from a shoulder holster. He said, "Put away your gun and concentrate on what you're doing, Sergeant. Burke and I will stand guard."

Sergeant Garrett said, "Sure, Captain. Thanks," and bolstered his gun. With both hands and both eyes for the task, he could handle the magazine easily.

As he hunted for the correspondence department, Garrett said, "I still think you oughta use color inside, Mr. Winton. It'd sure make the Bems show up better."

Keith smiled. "Wish we *could* afford it, Sergeant. But our books couldn't compete with the others if we did."

The captain looked from one to the other of them curiously.

"What are you guys talking about?" he asked. "What are Bems? And why talk about books? Those are magazines."

Keith said, "Calling their magazines books is a common habit among pulp editors and publishers, Captain. Possibly because they wish the magazines *were* books. As for Bems, that's slang among the fans. It's the initials of *bug-eyed monsters*. That's a Bern on the cover of the issue Sergeant Garrett's looking at."

"And a good one," said the sergeant. "One of them things On the third planet of Arcturus, ain't it?"

"If I remember the story," Keith said, "it's a Venusian."

The sergeant laughed heartily, as though Keith had made a very funny joke. If he had, Keith didn't know what it was, but he grinned too. The sergeant kept turning pages through the Rocketalk Department.

A minute later he looked up. "Say, Mr. Winton, about this letter from the guy in Provincetown who doesn't like the lead novels Bergman writes. Don't pay any attention to guys as dumb as that. Bergman's your best writer, outside maybe of—"

"Sergeant!" The captain's voice was icy. "We're not here to listen to your likes in fiction. Just look at the signatures or headings of those letters to be sure yours isn't in that issue. And don't take all evening to do it."

The sergeant turned red and turned pages.

"No," he said, a minute later. "It ain't in here, Captain."

The man in gray smiled at Keith. He said, "Guess you're all right then, Mr. Winton. But, as routine, do you have identification?"

Keith nodded and started to reach for his wallet. But the man in gray said, "Wait. If you don't mind—"

And whether Keith minded or not, he stepped around behind Keith and ran his hands swiftly over all of Keith's pockets. Apparently he felt nothing in any of the pockets that interested him except the wallet. He took that out and examined the contents quickly, then handed it back.

He said, "Okay, Mr. Winton. Looks all right, but—"

He went to the closet, opened the door and looked inside. He opened the dresser drawers, looked under the bed, made a quick but reasonably thorough search of the room.

There was a touch of suspicion in his voice again. "No luggage, Mr. Winton? Not even a toothbrush?"

"Not even a toothbrush," Keith said. "I didn't expect to stay in Greeneville overnight. But the business I came on took me longer than I expected."

The man in gray finished his search. He said, "Well, sorry to have bothered you, sir. But we have to be thorough and not take any chances—and you'd just registered here. Good thing you and Sergeant Garrett got together on a proof of who you are or we'd have to check up even more thoroughly. But as it is—"

He nodded to the other uniformed man, who shoved his pistol back into its holster.

Keith said, "Quite okay, Captain. I understand you can't take any chances at all."

"You're plenty right there. Not with a spy loose somewhere around. Well, he won't get out of Greeneville. We've got a cordon that a mosquito couldn't get through. And we'll keep it here till we get the Arc, too."

"Think I'll have any trouble getting back to New York?" Keith asked.

"Well—they're screening pretty fine at the stations. Guess you can talk them into letting you through." He smiled. "Especially if you find one of your fans among the guards."

"And that isn't too likely, Captain. You know, I've been thinking about going back in the morning. It'll get me to the office so late that I think I really ought to change my mind and go back tonight. I was pretty tired when I decided to stay over here, but I'm feeling better now. Do you know offhand when's the next train for New York?"

"Half past nine, I believe," the captain said. He glanced at his wrist watch. "You'll have time to make it, but I don't know if you'll have time to have them check up on you and let you through. And the next train's at six in the morning."

Keith frowned. "I'd like to make the nine-thirty one. Say, Captain, wonder if you'd do me the favor of phoning whoever's going to be in charge at the station and vouching for me so they won't have to hold me up and make me miss the train. Or is that too much to ask?"

"Guess not, Mr. Winton. Sure, I'll put in the phone call from here."

Ten minutes later Keith was in a taxi bound for the railroad Station; half an hour later he was on an uncrowded train bound for New York City.

He breathed a deep sigh of relief; the worst immediate danger seemed to be over. Surely he'd be safe in New York City. The main thing was that he was through the cordon. Not only that, but he'd dared—after the policemen had left his room—to recover his money from the window sill. He'd believed, and correctly, that the call Captain Whoever-he-was had made to the officials at the railroad station would spare him being searched again when he showed proof of his already-established identity.

And he hated to give up those bills and coins until he knew what things were all about. Presumably they were all dangerous but some of them were valuable. The druggist had given him the equivalent of two hundred dollars for one coin, and possibly others would be even more valuable. Why, the druggist had admitted that the quarter was worth more than he'd paid for it!

But the half dollar— He shrugged mentally. No use trying to guess; he'd just have to wait until he could find out what it was all about, and be as careful as possible meanwhile. After paying for his hotel room and the railroad ticket, he still had about a hundred and forty dollars' worth of credits; that would last him for a while. For quite a while, if he was careful with it. And the little wad of non-credit currency and coins was carefully stuffed into the fob pocket of his trousers so he wouldn't inadvertently offer the wrong coinage to pay for a purchase. The coins were tightly wrapped in the bills so they wouldn't rattle together and give him away.

Oh, it was undoubtedly dangerous to hang onto them, but he had a reason stronger even than their possible value. They were a straw to which his hope of sanity clung. His memories might be figments of his imagination, but those coins were hard physical objects. They were *proof*, in a way, that at least part of what he remembered was really true. The slight bulge in his fob pocket was, in some measure, reassuring.

Watching out the window of the train as it gathered speed, he saw the lights of Greeneville become less and less frequent, and then they were out in the darkness of the country.

At least for the moment, he was safe. And with a little over two hours of leisure to look through the two magazines and the newspaper he had bought. The newspaper came first.

ARCS ATTACK MARS, DESTROY KAPI

That was the news, the big news. He read it carefully. Kapi, it would seem, was an Earth colony on Mars established in 1939, the fourth of the seven colonies established there. It was the smallest of the colonies; there had been eight hundred and forty-odd Terrestrial colonists. All had been killed, it was believed, as had an estimated hundred and fifty Martian laborers.

Then, Keith realized, there must be native Martians, as distinguished from the colonists, the emigrants from

Earth. What were the native Martians like? There wasn't any clue in the brief news article, which read like a front-line dispatch from a more familiar war. Possibly "Lunan" really had been a name, after all; perhaps the purple monsters were Martians and not inhabitants of the moon.

But there were more important things to wonder about than that. He read on.

A single ship of Arcturians had somehow got through the cordon of spaceguards and had launched a single torpedo before the Dopelle fighters had detected it. They had attacked at once and, although the Arcturian vessel had switched to interstellar drive, they had caught up with it and destroyed it.

Preparations, said *The New York Times*, were being made for a counterraid. The details were, of course, a military secret.

There were a lot of names and things that meant nothing to Keith as he encountered them in the course of reading the article. Somehow, it seemed stranger when he came across a familiar name in an unfamiliar context—a mention, for example, of General Dwight D. Eisenhower, in charge of Venus sector.

The end of the article concerned increased defense measures proposed for the more vulnerable cities, and was quite obscure to Keith Winton. There were frequent references that meant nothing at all to him—a recurring phrase "all-city mist-out" and several references to "the renegades" and "the Nighters."

The main article—about two columns of it—out of the way, he went through the paper from front to back, reading every headline and at least part of any story that looked interesting or unusual. There seemed to be amazingly little difference in the minutiae of life, almost no difference in the domestic scene.

The society news was there, and he recognized many of the names and would undoubtedly have recognized most of them had he been in the habit of reading society news. St. Louis was leading in one major league and New York in the other—and that, too, was as he remembered it, although he couldn't be sure whether the exact percentage figures were the same. The ads were for the same familiar products and brands that he knew—except that the prices were given in credits instead of dollars and cents. There were no ads for spaceships, no Little Wonder Atomic Kits for the kiddies.

He studied the want ads particularly. The housing situation was considerably better than he remembered it, and a probable explanation of that lay in the fact that an occasional flat or house was offered with the comment "Emigrating to Mars." One Pets for Sale ad offered a Venus coline, whatever that was, and another offered a moonpup.

At a little after one o'clock, on schedule, the train pulled into Grand Central. Keith folded the newspaper for more detailed study later. It had occupied his attention so strongly that he hadn't even glanced at the two magazines.

Gradually, as the train slowly crawled into the station, Keith became aware of something unusual, something different that he couldn't put his finger on, something in the atmosphere of the place. It wasn't lack of lights; there were the usual lights on in the station, perhaps more of them than he remembered.

He realized, too, that the car he was leaving was only a fourth full, perhaps not that much. And as he left it, he saw that it was the only train unloading and that all the redcaps seemed to have gone off duty.

Just ahead of Keith, a little man was struggling to carry three suitcases, one in each hand and one under an arm. He was having heavy going.

"Give you a hand with one of those?" Keith asked.

The little man said, "Sure, thanks," with real gratitude in his voice. He relinquished one of the heavy suitcases to Keith and they started down the cement walk between the tracks.

Keith said, "Not much traffic tonight, is there?"

"Guess that was the last train in. Really shouldn't run 'em *that* late. What's the use of getting in if you can't go home? Oh, sure, you get a better start in the morning, but in the long run what good does it do you?"

Keith said, "Not much, I guess," and wondered what they were talking about.

"Eighty-seven killed last night!" the little man said. "At least that many bodies found; nobody knows how many more went in the river."

"Awful," Keith said.

"And that's one night, an average night. Say there were at least a hundred killed. And that's only the ones killed outright. Heaven knows how many got dragged down alleys and beat up but not killed." He sighed. "I remember when it was safe even on Broadway."

He stopped suddenly and put down the suitcases. "Got to rest a minute," he said. "If you want to go on, just leave that other one."

Keith was glad of a chance to put down the case he'd been carrying; his wounded left shoulder prevented him from changing hands with it. He flexed his right hand, cramped from the handle of the suitcase. "I'm in no hurry," he said. "I'm in no hurry to get home."

The little man laughed as though something very funny had been said. Keith allowed himself a noncommittal smile.

"That's a good one," the little man said. "In no hurry to get home." He slapped a hand against his thigh.

Keith said, "Uh—I haven't heard a newscast for a while. Have you? Is there anything new?"

"Damn right there is!" The little man's face got suddenly scared and deadly serious. "There's an Arc spy in the country. But maybe you heard that—it was on early in the evening." He shuddered slightly.

"No, hadn't heard that," Keith said. "Remember any of the details?"

"Upstate in Greeneville, town we came through. Don't you remember? They kept all the train doors locked, nobody on except people they checked. Whole station full of cops and guards."

Keith said, "Guess I must have dozed through our stop at— You said Greeneville?"

"Yeah, Greeneville. Glad I didn't have to get off there. They'll turn that town upside down." "How was he spotted?" Keith asked.

"Tried to sell someone some banned coinage, and the coin was an Arc counterfeit—one of the wrong-dated ones."

"Oh," said Keith. It *had* been the coin then; he felt pretty sure of it. Maybe he'd be smart to get rid of the rest of them, regardless of their value or potential value, as soon as he had a chance to put them into a sewer or somewhere. Or maybe he should have left them on the window sill of the hotel room he'd had in Greeneville.

No, that would have been bad, for if they were found they'd be traceable to him; he'd registered in that hotel book by his right name and had—fortunately, for other reasons—given his right name to the policemen who'd come up to the room. Yes, finding of those coins on the window ledge outside that room would lead to a search for Keith Winton in New York to explain how they got there. He hadn't thought of that when he'd recovered them from the ledge—he'd thought, in fact, that he was being a little foolhardy in continuing to take a chance with them. Now he sweated a little, realizing how lucky it had been that he had taken that chance.

He asked, "If they spotted the spy on this coin business, how come they didn't catch him?"

"*Catch him!*" The little man shook visibly with emotion. "Lord, mister, you don't *catch* Arcturians; you kill 'em. And they did try to kill him—a druggist and a moonie that the druggist yelled to for help—but he got away from both of 'em."

"Oh," said Keith.

"Bet twenty or thirty people have been killed in Greeneville by mistake since then," the little man said gloomily. He rubbed his palms together and picked up the suitcases. "Guess I can make it the rest of the way now, if you can."

Keith picked up the other suitcase and they resumed their way toward the station lobby.

"Hope there are cots left," the little man said.

Keith opened his mouth and shut it again. Any question he might ask could be one that would give away his ignorance on some point he should know about. He said, "Probably won't be," in a humorously pessimistic voice, so it could be taken for a joke if it was the wrong thing for him to have said.

But the little man merely nodded gloomy assent. They were nearing the lobby now, and a redcap came toward them. The little man sighed with relief as he and Keith surrendered the three suitcases to the redcap.

"Cots?" the redcap asked. "There are a few left."

"Sure, swell. Two of them," said the little man. Then he hesitated and looked at Keith. "Didn't mean to speak for you. Some people rather sit up."

Keith felt as though he were walking a tightrope in the dark. What was this business about a choice between a cot or sitting up? He didn't want to do either.

He said hesitantly, "Guess I'll mosey along."

He looked in surprise—for they had just come through the doors into the main room of the station—at the cots. Long, orderly rows of army-type cots, closely spaced. Except for aisles left for walking between the rows of them, they covered the entire floor of the tremendous room. On most of the cots people lay asleep.

Could the housing shortage be *this* desperate? No, it couldn't; not from the number of for-rent ads in *The New York Times* in his pocket. But—

The little man touched his shoulder—his bad shoulder, as it happened—and Keith jumped. But the little man didn't notice that. He was saying, "Just a minute, porter," to the redcap, who was several steps ahead of them.

He leaned closer to Keith. "Uh—if you're short of creds to get yourself a cot, mister, I could—uh—lend you a few."

"Thanks," Keith said. "But I think I'd better run along."

"You don't mean you're going *out*, do you?" There was horror and surprise on the man's face.

He'd said something wrong again, but he couldn't guess what it was, or why the cots were there in Grand Central, or why it seemed to matter whether he stayed here. Anyway, he'd better get away from the little man before he aroused his suspicions, if he hadn't already.

"Of course not," he said. "I'm not that foolish. But someone was supposed to meet me here and I want to look around for him. Maybe I'll take a cot later, but I don't think I can sleep anyway. Don't worry about me. And thanks for offering to lend me credits, but I've got plenty."

He got away quickly before he could be asked any more questions. The lighting here in the main room of the station was dim, undoubtedly so people could sleep without bright light glaring in their eyes. Keith threaded his way through the dimness, walking as quietly as he could so as not to awake the sleepers he passed, and headed toward the Forty-second Street entrance.

As he neared it, he saw that two policemen were posted at each of the doors.

But he couldn't stop now. The ones he was approaching had seen him coming and were watching him. He'd been walking directly toward the door they were covering, and he couldn't turn aside now without attracting their attention even more strongly than if he kept walking. If it turned out that he wouldn't be allowed to leave—for what reason he couldn't remotely guess—he could pretend that he'd strolled up to the door merely to look through the glass.

So he walked up to them casually, noticing that the door had been painted black on the outside of the

glass.

The bigger of the two policemen spoke as Keith came near. But his voice was respectful.

He asked, "Are you armed, sir?"

"No."

It's pretty dangerous out there. Well, we haven't the authority to make you stay; all we can do is advise it."

Keith's first reaction was one of relief; he wasn't, as he had feared, going to be kept in here. Whatever the reason, he didn't want to waste a night in Grand Central.

But what did the policeman mean? Dangerous? What sort of danger was it that he knew nothing about but that kept these thousands of people, the late arrivals on the last trains from here and there, inside the station? What had happened to New York?

Well, it was too late for him to back out now. Besides, he thought grimly, he was in danger *anywhere* until he knew the score and the ropes a lot better than he did.

He said as casually as he could, "Haven't far to go. I'll be all right."

"It's your business," said the cop.

The other one grinned. "We hope it ain't your funeral. Okay, mister." He opened the door.

Keith almost stepped back. It hadn't been black paint on the outside of the glass of the doors. It had been—blackness. A kind of utter black darkness he'd never seen before. Not a glimmer of light showed anywhere. The dimmed lights inside the station didn't seem to cut into that blackness at all. Looking down, he could see the paving of the walk for only a foot or two beyond the edge of the open door.

And—was it his imagination, or was a little of that outside blackness drifting into the station itself through the doorway, as though it weren't darkness at all but a palpable blackness, a gaseous blackness? As though it were something more than mere absence of light?

But, whatever was out there, he couldn't admit now that he hadn't *known* about it. He had to go through that open doorway now, whatever it led into.

He walked through and the door closed behind him. It was like walking into a closet. This was a blackout beyond blackouts. It must be—he remembered a phrase from *The New York Times*—the *mistout*.

He looked up and there wasn't a sign of a star or the moon and it had been, in Greeneville, at least, a brightly moonlit night.

He'd taken two steps outside the door and now he turned to look back at it. He couldn't see it. There should be a lighted pane of glass there. However dimly lighted, it should be visible for a long way in darkness like this. Unless, of course, the glass really *had* been painted black on the outside. He stepped closer and he could see it, a very dim rectangle, close enough now that he could reach out and touch it. It wasn't visible any farther away than that.

He took a step back and it was gone. He fumbled a box of matches out of his pocket and struck one of them. Held at arm's length, he could see only a faint spot of light. At two feet from his eyes, he could see it clearly. But no farther.

It burned down almost to his fingertips and he dropped it; he didn't know whether it went out when it hit the sidewalk or not. Maybe it was still burning down there on the concrete.

He wished now that he had taken a cot back inside the station, but it was too late to turn and go in again. He'd attracted enough attention going out. But why hadn't he followed the little man's lead? He'd have to remember that it was safer to imitate others than not.

Reaching out to touch the building and trailing his hand along it as he walked, groping with his free hand before him, he started walking west, toward the Vanderbilt Avenue corner. He kept his eyes open, straining against the black, but he might as well have closed them for all the good they did him. He knew now how a blind man felt. A cane, to tap ahead of him on the invisible sidewalk, would have been welcome. A seeing-eye dog, though, would have been useless; he doubted if even a cat could see more than a foot or so into this black mist.

His trailing hand encountered emptiness, the corner of the building. He paused a moment, wondering if he should go on at all. He couldn't go back into the station, but why not just sit down here on the walk, his back to the building, and wait for morning?—if morning *did* bring dissipation of the black mist.

Certainly getting to his bachelor apartment down in the Village was completely out of the question. Taxicabs *couldn't* be running. And reason told him that no other form of transportation would be running either. Only utter fools or people as ignorant as himself—and surely there couldn't be another in that category—would try to get anywhere in stuff like this.

But he decided against the sidewalk. There might be police patrols that would question him, wanting to know why he was outside the so-near sanctuary of the station. No, if he did sit down to wait out the night, it couldn't be here, so near his starting point. If he was picked up farther away, he could at least say he'd been *trying* to get home from the station.

So with only his shuffling feet to guide him now, he made his way from the building to the curb and out into the



street. If there was any traffic—but there *couldn't* be, unless it operated on radar. That thought hurried him across the second half of the street: how did he know they didn't operate on radar?

He found the curb on the far side by falling over it. He got up and shuffled across the sidewalk until he was again able to touch solidity with a guiding right hand as he groped along Forty-second Street.

Forty-second Street, only a few blocks from Times Square and Broadway, and he might as well have been on the—no, not on the moon, for on the moon there'd be purple monsters to keep him company. *Were there any here?*

He tried not to wonder about that.

His ears strained but couldn't pick up a sound except for the soft shuffle of his own footsteps, and he realized that, for no conscious reason, he was walking on tiptoe to disturb the awful quiet as little as possible.

He completed the short block to Madison, crossed it, and began to grope his way toward Fifth Avenue.

Where, he wondered, was he going? To Times Square? Why not? The Village was out of the question, too far to reach in a full night of snaillike progress like this. But he had to be heading somewhere, so why not for the center of things? If there was anything open anywhere in New York, it would be there.

To get in, *anywhere*, out of this palpable blackness!

He started trying doors as he passed them. They were all locked. Trying them reminded him that he had a key to the Borden Publishing Company office in his pocket, and that it was only three blocks south. But no, the outer door of the building would surely be locked, and he didn't have a key to that.

He crossed Fifth Avenue. Across the street from him, to his left, would be the public library. He considered crossing the street and spending the rest of the night on the steps there, but decided not to. Might as well keep on to Times Square, now that he'd picked that as a destination. Surely there'd be some sanctuary at the hub of the universe, even if it was only a lighted subway station.

From Fifth Avenue to Sixth Avenue—he wondered if they'd tried to name it Avenue of the Americas here—is a long block. But in all its length there wasn't an unlocked door. He tried them all.

He crossed Sixth Avenue, was halfway to Broadway.

He tried another door; it was locked as had been all the others. But in the brief instant when his footsteps paused as his hand tried the knob, he heard a sound, the first sound other than ones he had made himself since he'd left Grand Central.

It was the sound of footsteps, as soft and cautious as his own had been. Stealthy footsteps; something inside told him that there was danger in them, deadly danger.

## 5

### *The Nighters*

He stood rigid as the footsteps shuffled closer. Whoever, whatever it was, there wasn't any way of avoiding a meeting, unless he turned and worked his way back in the other direction. It was, it seemed suddenly to Keith, a one-dimensional world. There was only a forward and a backward in it as long as each of them—he and the unknown—groped their way along the building fronts. Like ants crawling along a string they must meet and pass unless one of them turned.

And before he had made up his mind to turn, it was already too late. A groping hand touched him and a whining voice was saying, "Don't rob me, mister. I ain't got no credits."

Keith sighed with relief. "Okay," he said: "Til stand still. You go around me."

"Sure, mister."

Hands touched him lightly, and a strong alcoholic breath almost made him gasp as the man groped past him. There was a chuckle in the darkness.

"Just an old space dog on a spree," the voice said. "And rolled already, mister, two hours ago. Look, mister, I'll give you a tip. The *Nighters* are out. The whole gang of 'em, over Times Square way. You better not keep on the way you're goin'. I'm warnin' you."

The man was past him now, but his hand still touched Keith's sleeve to maintain contact.

"They're the ones who robbed you?" Keith asked.

"*Them?* Mister, I'm alive, ain't I? Would I be alive if the *Nighters* had got me? I ask you."

Keith said, "That's right; I forgot that. So maybe I'd better not go that way. Uh—are the subways open?"

"The *subways?* Man, you really want trouble, don't you?"

"Where *is* a safe place to go?"

"Safe? Long time since I heard that word. What's it mean?" He gave a drunken laugh. "Mister, I was on the Mars-Jupe run in the days of the plat-rush, when they said the last rites over us before they closed the airlocks. I'd damn near as soon be back there as messing around this mistout and playing tag with *Nighters*."

Keith asked, "How'd you know I wasn't a *Nighter?*"

"You kidding? How could one guy be a *Nighter* when they go in armlocked gangs from building to building and you can hear 'em tapping? We're fools to be out in this. You and me, both of us. If I wasn't drunk— Say, got a match?"

"Sure, a box of them. Here. Can you—?"

"I got the shakes, mister. From Venus swamp fever. Would you light one for me? And then when I get a fag going, I'll tell you a safe enough place where you and me can hide out the rest of the night."

Keith scraped a match along the side of the box and struck it. The sudden flame made gray dimness out of the black mist for a radius of a couple of feet.

It revealed a hideous leering, scarred face—and above it a club raised to strike. The club started to come down the instant the match flared.

There wasn't time to duck that blow. Keith stayed alive in that second by acting instinctively, instantaneously. He stepped in under the blow, thrusting the flaming match into that ugly face. The man's forearm, not the club, struck Keith's head a glancing blow. The impact of it jarred the club from his hand, and the club struck the sidewalk with a thud.

Then they were struggling, wrestling in the dark, with strong hands trying for Keith's throat, foul breath in his face and fouler words in his ears. He managed to jerk free of those strangling hands. He stepped back and struck. His fist connected solidly in the dark.

He heard his assailant fall—not knocked out, though, for he was still cursing. Under cover of the sound, Keith took three light, quick steps backward, out into the open blackness away from the wall; he stood there quietly, not making a sound.

He heard the man scramble to his feet, breathing hard. For half a minute, perhaps, that breathing was the only sound in the world.

And then there was another sound, a new one. It was a different kind of sound altogether—it was the distant, soft tapping of a hundred blind men's canes. As though a company of blind men were coming tapping through the dark. The sound came from the direction in which Keith had been going, the direction of Broadway and Times Square.

He heard a subdued mutter, "Nighters!" and then the quick shuffle of footsteps as his former assailant started off. His voice, no longer cursing or even belligerent, came back out of the dense dark: "Run, pal. *Nighters!*"

The shuffle and scuffle of his footsteps died away as the tapping sounds got louder and nearer. They came nearer incredibly fast.

What were Nighters? Human beings? He tried to piece together the few things he'd heard about them, or read about them. What had the man with the scarred face said about them?—"They go in armlocked gangs from building to building and you can hear 'em tapping." Human or otherwise, they must be an organized gang of killers that scoured the streets of the mistout—a long row of them from building to building with their arms locked together, tapping canes to guide them.

Were the canes weapons, too, or did they carry other things besides the canes they tapped with?

The tapping sound was only yards away now, coming closer faster than men can walk in the dark, almost at a run. They had a system, somehow, that gave them speed.

Keith didn't wait any longer; he turned and ran diagonally toward the line of building fronts until his hand, outthrust, made scraping contact, and then ran parallel to them, and despite the risk of falling over some object he couldn't see, he *ran*.

The danger behind seemed greater than the danger of running blindly in darkness. The fear that had been in the voice of the man with the scarred face was contagious. That man, however foul he was, had been no coward. And he had *known* what the Nighters were and he'd been afraid of them, plenty afraid. Killer himself, he was jackal to a pack of lions when that tapping sound had come.

Keith ran thirty or forty paces and then stopped to listen. The sounds behind him were a little farther away; they weren't coming as fast as he had dared to run. Then, from the opposite direction, from the direction in which he'd been running, came a horrible, hoarse scream. He thought, he felt sure, that it was the voice of the man with the scarred face. The scream rose to a high pitch of agony and then subsided into a rattle and silence.

What had the man with the scarred face run into? *What* could cause a man to die—and Keith had no doubt but that the scarred man was dead—in that great an agony? It was as though the jackal running from the lions had stepped into the coils of a boa constrictor. Crushed in a monster serpent's coils, a man might scream like that—and for about that long, before he died.

The hair at the back of Keith Winton's neck prickled. He'd have given, at that instant, his right arm for *light*, no matter what that light might reveal. He knew now what fear was; he could taste it in his throat.

Behind him, the tapping. He'd gained on it in that sprint; it was about twenty yards away instead of five or ten. He could outdistance it if he ran again and kept running. But *what* was he running toward?

Scar-face had been running along the building fronts; whatever had got him must be there. Keith diagonaled out toward the curb and down it into the street. Then, turning to run parallel to the curb, he started again away from the tapping row of Nighters. He ran another thirty or forty paces and again stopped to listen. Yes, again the tapping was farther behind him.

Or *was* it? For a moment, he was confused as to direction and thought he'd got turned around in the dark. Then he realized the truth. There was tapping behind him; there was also tapping in the opposite direction, ahead of him.

Two lines of them, coming from opposite directions, and he was in between. That was their method of hunting, of treeing whatever quarry might be on whatever block they were working. He'd wondered how they managed to catch anybody when their progress by tapping gave them away and warned their quarry to run. But he understood now.

He stopped, his heart beating wildly. The Nighters—whatever Nighters were—had him in the middle. There was no way to run.

He stood there hesitating until the tapping from behind him—nearer than the tapping in front—came so close that he *had* to do something. Standing still meant being caught within a minute. Running either forward or backward meant being caught sooner than that.

He turned at right angles and ran for the building fronts on the south side of the street—the side opposite from

the point at which Scar-face had met his death. He didn't worry about the curb; there wasn't time to grope for it with his feet. He found it by falling over it, scrambled to his feet, and made the few more steps across the sidewalk to the nearest building front. He paused only a fraction of a second to listen. The tapping was equidistant to his right and to his left.

He groped his way into a doorway. He found the handle of the door—not because he expected to find it unlocked, but because he needed to locate it in order to open it from the inside. He swung his fist at the glass beside it.

He should have cut his knuckles badly, but he didn't. As though luck had decided to give him a break at last, a small area of glass fell neatly inward. The rest of the pane didn't crack or fall out of the door frame.

He had a glimpse of light inside as a thick curtain drawn down over the glass of the door swung inward from the blow of his fist. He reached quickly through the opening, turned the knob from the inside, and stumbled through the door.

The light inside almost blinded him as he slammed the door shut behind him.

A voice said, "Stop or I'll shoot!"

Keith stopped and raised his hands shoulder high. He blinked until he could see again. He was in the lobby of a small hotel. Across the desk, a dozen feet in front of him, leaned a white-faced very frightened-looking clerk, holding a repeating shotgun the muzzle of which looked as big as a cannon and was aimed straight at Keith's chest. The clerk was breathing harder than Keith.

His voice trembled a little. "Don't come any closer. Get out, get back out right away. I don't want to have to shoot you, but—"

Without moving in either direction and without lowering his arms, Keith said, "I can't. The *Nighters* are right outside. If I open the door to go out, they'll come in."

The clerk's face got even whiter. For a second, he was too scared to speak and in that second they both heard the sound of tapping.

The clerk's voice was just above a whisper when he found it. "Back up against that door. Hold the curtain fast against the break, so no light shows."

Keith took a step backward and leaned against the door.

He and the clerk were both very silent. Keith was sweating. Would the *Nighters* see—or, groping, feel—that hole in the glass? Was a knife or a bullet or something going to come through that hole into his back? His skin crawled. Time crawled.

But nothing came through the hole.

For a moment there was louder tapping, muffled voices. He thought they were human voices, but he wasn't sure. Then the sounds died away.

Neither Keith nor the clerk moved or spoke for at least three minutes after the last sound from outside. Then the clerk said, "They've gone. Now get out."

Keith kept his voice pitched as low as he could and still make it audible to the clerk. He said, "They're still near; they'll get me if I go out again. I'm not a robber. I'm not armed. And I've got money. I'd like to pay for that window-pane I broke—and I'd like to rent a room if you've got one. If you haven't a room, I'll even pay a fair price to sit in your lobby all night."

The clerk studied him uncertainly, without lowering the gun.

Then he asked, "What were you doing—out there?"

Keith said, "I came in from Greenville—last train into Grand Central. I'd had word my brother was seriously sick and I took a chance on getting home—a dozen blocks. Hadn't realized quite how bad it was out there. Now that I've seen it—well, I'll settle for getting home in the morning."

The clerk studied him closely. Finally he said, "Keep your hands up." He lowered the shotgun down to the counter, but kept his hand on it and his finger inside the trigger guard while, with his free hand, he took a pistol out of a drawer behind the desk.

He said, "Turn around, your back toward me. I'll be sure you're not armed."

Keith turned around and stood still while he heard the clerk come around the end of the counter. He stood even stiller while the business end of a pistol pressed into the small of his back and the clerk's hand ran over his pockets lightly.

"Okay," the clerk said. "I guess you're all right; I'll take a chance on it anyway. I'd hate to send a dog out into—that."

Keith sighed with relief and turned around. The clerk was walking behind the desk again and no gun was pointed at him.

He asked, "How much do I owe you for the windowpane? And how much for a room, if you've got one?"

"Sure, we got a room. A hundred creds will cover both. But first give me a hand with something. Let's move that rack of magazines and pocket books—give me a hand to put it in front of the door. It's high enough to block off that break in the glass. Anyway, it'll keep the curtain from swinging in, and you couldn't see the break from outside as long as the curtain stays flat."

Keith said, "Good idea." He took one end of the rack and the clerk took the other and they slid it against the door without having to lift it.

Keith's eye was caught by the titles of some of the pocket editions of books in the magazine rack. One in particular—a book called *Is the Mistout Worth It?* He'd take a few of those books up to his room with him. He noticed the price—2% cr. Apparently the rule of one credit to ten cents held pretty true.

And that meant that a hundred credits—ten dollars—for the pane of glass and for a hotel room seemed plenty reasonable, almost a bargain. Almost? Hell, it *was* a bargain. He'd have paid all the credits he had left—well over a thousand of them—rather than go out into the mistout on Forty-second Street again tonight.

That reminded him of a minor mystery. He was pretty sure that there wasn't any hotel on the south side of Forty-second between Sixth Avenue and Broadway. Especially a cheap small hotel like this one. That is, there wasn't any such hotel here where *he* came from. That is—

He quit that-is-ing and followed the clerk back to the desk and signed a registration card. He took a hundred-credit note from his wallet and then put a fifty-credit note on top of it.

He said, "I'm going to pick out two or three of those pocket books to read. You keep the change." That would give the clerk a four-dollar-plus tip.

"Sure, thanks, Mr. Winton. And here's your key. Three-oh-seven—that's third floor front. You'll have to walk up and find it yourself. You see, we lock up at sunset, so there aren't any bellboys on. And I have to stay here on guard."

Keith nodded and pocketed the key. He walked back to the rack of books and magazines.

First he picked *Is the Mistout Worth It?* No doubt at all about his wanting that one.

His eye ran over the other titles. Some of them were familiar, others were not.

H. G. Wells' *Outline of History* he grabbed quickly. He could get a lot that he needed to know out of that book.

And what for third choice? There was plenty of fiction, but he wanted redder meat than that. Something that would give him more concentrated information.

There were, he noticed, half a dozen books about somebody named Dopelle. Where had he heard that name before? Oh yes, in *The New York Times*—the general in charge of all the Terrestrial space fleets.

*Dopelle, the Man. The Story of Dopelle. Dopelle, Hero of Space.* And several others.

If there were that many books about him out of the slim assortment of non-fiction titles in the rack, then Dopelle was someone he should know something about. He picked *The Story of Dopelle*, and wasn't even surprised to notice that it had been written by Paul Gallico.

He held up the books so that the clerk could see how many he was taking and then headed for the stairway before he was tempted to pick more of them or to choose some magazines to add to the two he still had; the ones he'd bought in Greene-ville and hadn't looked at beyond the covers and title pages.

Already he had more reading matter than he could do justice to in the remainder of the night, no matter how lightly he skimmed it or how little he slept.

And he'd have to get *some* sleep, no matter how interesting the reading matter was. The walk up to the third floor showed him how tired he was. His wounded shoulder was aching rather badly by now. And the knuckles of his right hand were beginning to hurt like the very devil; the glass had not cut them but they were badly bruised and so sore that it hurt him to flex the fingers of his right hand.

He found the room by the dim light in the hallway, went in and turned on the light. It was a pleasant, comfortable room, with an inviting-looking bed that he stared at longingly. But he didn't dare get into it until he'd found out a few things that he might learn from the books he'd bought. Things that might save him, tomorrow, from making some blunder as bad as the one he'd made tonight in leaving Grand Central Station. Only by sheer good luck had he survived *that* blunder.

He undressed enough to be comfortable and sat down to read, deliberately picking the less comfortable of the two chairs in the room, so he could stay awake longer. He knew that, if he lay down on the bed to read, he wouldn't be able to keep awake for half an hour.

He chose first, *Is the Mistout Worth It?* That one was going to get a once-over lightly, but at least he was going to find out what the mistout *was*.

Luckily, the history of the mistout was fairly well summarized in the first chapter. It had been perfected, he learned, by a German professor in 1934, shortly after the destruction—by Arcturian spaceships—of Chicago and Rome. The destruction of Chicago, in which nearly nine million people had perished, had happened early in 1933, the destruction of Rome a few months later.

Immediately after the destruction of Chicago, every large city in the world had enforced a strict blackout—but the blackout had not saved Rome.

Rome, although its blackout had been perfect, had gone the way of Chicago. Fortunately, however, that particular Arcturian ship—the one that destroyed Rome—had been captured by Dopelle with a few members of its crew alive.

Through the intervention of someone or something called Mekky (the author of *Is the Mistout Worth It?* assumed that all of his readers knew all about Mekky and therefore failed to explain) it had been learned from the surviving Arcturians in the ship that they had detectors which picked up hitherto unknown rays—not light rays—emitted by electrical incandescence.

They could thus locate a city through their detectors even though lights were burning inside closed buildings, for the buildings were as transparent to the so-called epsilon rays as they were to radio waves.

For a while it seemed that the only safety for Earth's cities lay in going back to candles or gaslight for illumination at night. (Electrical lighting could safely be used for interior lighting by day, for sunlight damped out the epsilon rays before they left the atmosphere.)

But Dopelle had retired to his laboratory and worked on the problem. He had discovered the nature of epsilon rays and had issued daily bulletins of his work to scientists all over the world who were, under his orders, trying to

find some method of damping out these rays by night as effectively as sunlight damped them out by day.

The German professor had come up with the only practicable answer that had yet been found—the epsilon gas which formed the mistouts which were now required by the Greater Earth Council for all cities larger than a hundred thousand population.

It was a substance of strange properties indeed, this discovery of the Herr Professor Kurt Ebbing. Odorless, harmless to all forms of animal and vegetable life, it was impervious to light and to epsilon rays. It was inexpensively made from coal tar; one plant could turn out enough in a few hours each evening to mix with the air and completely blanket a city. And at dawn sunlight disintegrated it within the space of ten or fifteen minutes.

Since the discovery of the mistout, other Arc ships had been through the cordon but no major city of Earth had been attacked. The mistout worked.

A dozen smaller cities had been destroyed. Granting that the Arc ships would have chosen for attack the largest cities that their detectors showed, then a dozen large cities had been saved. Balancing the losses in the dozen smaller cities against the losses that *would* have been sustained had a dozen large cities been destroyed—as they would have been without their mistouts—it could be shown that the mistout had saved a probable ten million lives or more at a very minimum. Had New York or London been among the cities that, without the mistout, would have been destroyed, then the number of lives saved might have run many times that minimum figure of ten million.

But the mistout had taken lives, too. Law-enforcement agencies in most major cities had found themselves completely helpless to combat growing crime waves. Under cover of the mistout, the streets of most of the biggest cities had become no-man's-land after dark. In New York, five thousand policemen had been killed before the police department—what was left of it—had abandoned the attempt to patrol the streets at night.

Vigilante methods had been tried and had failed.

The situation was aggravated by the strong tendency of combat veterans who had fought in space to turn to crime, a psychosis to which possibly a third of them succumbed.

In most of the largest cities—particularly in Paris, New York and Berlin—all attempt to keep order at night had finally been abandoned. After dark, the gangs and criminals held sway. Respectable citizens remained off the streets and stayed at home. Public transport service did not operate.

Strangely—but fortunately—most of the criminals confined their depredations to the open air. Burglaries were no more common than in the pre-mistout days. The citizen who stayed at home behind locked doors and windows was in no more danger than he had ever been. The nature of the *mistout psychosis*, as it was called, that underlay most urban crime, seemed to require that depredations be done under cover of that dense and dreadful dark.

There were both lone-wolf criminals and gangs, but the gangs were worse. Some gangs, such as the Nighters of New York, the Bloodies of London and the Lennies (Keith wondered if the name came from Lenin's) of Moscow, had adopted specialized techniques and seemed highly organized.

Hundreds died nightly in the biggest cities. The situation would have been even worse except for the fact that the hoodlums robbed and killed one another more often than honest citizens who stayed home.

The mistout was, the book admitted, a big price to pay for immunity of big cities to space attack. Possibly a million people had died in crimes in the mistout—but a minimum of ten million lives had undoubtedly been saved. Because of the mistout, the twelve flaming hells since Chicago and Rome had been small—expendable—cities. *Is the Mistout Worth It?* Yes, said the author, to the tune of at least nine million lives and probably many more than that.

Keith shivered a little as he put down *Is the Mistout Worth It?* If he'd bought that book in Greenville and read it on the train, he'd have known better than to have left Grand Central Station. He'd have taken a cot there—or slept on the floor if all the cots were gone.

Very obviously, night life on Broadway wasn't what it had been where *he* came from.

He walked to the window and stood looking—well, not *out*, exactly, but at the blank blackness that was beyond the pane. The curtain wasn't pulled down, but that didn't matter on any but a first-floor window.

A few feet away, outside, one wouldn't be able to see the lighted window at all. It was an uncanny kind of blackness; he wouldn't have believed it if he hadn't been out in it.

And what was going on right now down there in the darkness of Forty-second Street, only half a block from Times Square, the center of the universe?

He shook his head in blank bewilderment. Criminals taking over Forty-second Street! Purple denizens of the moon walking down the main drag of Greenville! General Eisenhower in charge of Venus sector of Earth's space fleet in the war with Arcturus!

What mad universe was he in?

## 6

### *The Sewing Machines Rampant*

Well, whatever universe this was, he was here and he was stuck with it; and he was going to be in continuous danger until he learned the ropes well enough so he wouldn't risk making a fatal break every time he did or said anything.

Breaks just weren't safe in a spot where you could get yourself shot on sight as a spy on no provocation at all, where you could get yourself killed by being foolish enough to try to walk from Grand Central Station to Times Square after dark.

He'd better stay awake long enough to read some more.

Resolutely, he picked up the pocket edition of H. G. Wells' *Outline of History*. He was too tired by now to sit up any longer. He'd lie on the bed to read and, if he went to sleep, well, he'd read as long as he dared in the morning before he went out to face New York by day. And whatever New York was like by day, it would be an improvement over New York by night.

He folded the pillow under his head and started in on H. G. Wells. He skimmed lightly through the opening chapters, reading only key sentences here and there, turning pages rapidly, usually several at a time.

He'd happened to reread the book only a few months before and was quite familiar with it. There was nothing different about this copy of it—so far. Even the pictures were the same.

The dinosaurs, Babylon, the Egyptians, the Greeks, the Roman Empire, Charlemagne, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, Columbus and America, the American Revolution, the Industrial Revolution—Info *Space*.

That was the chapter heading, nine-tenths of the way through. He quit skimming and leafing over pages and started to read.

The year nineteen hundred and three. Professor George Yarley, an American scientist at Harvard University, had discovered the spacewarp drive.

Accidentally!

He had been working on, of all things, his wife's sewing machine, which had been broken and discarded. He was trying to rig it up so the treadle would run a tiny home-made generator to give him a high-frequency low-voltage current that he wanted to use in some class experiments in physics.

He'd finished making his connections—and fortunately he remembered afterwards just what they'd been and where he'd made his mistake—and he'd worked the treadle a few times when his foot stamped unexpectedly on the floor and he nearly fell forward out of his chair.

The sewing machine, treadle and generator and all, just wasn't there any more.

The professor, Wells humorously pointed out, had been sober at the time, but he'd quickly remedied that. After he'd sobered up, he borrowed his wife's new sewing machine and carefully duplicated the generator that was to run off the treadle. This time he saw the error in wiring which he'd made the first time and deliberately made the same mistake again.

He worked the treadle—and the new sewing machine was gone.

He didn't know what he had, but he knew he had *something*. He drew money from his bank account and bought two more sewing machines. One was for his wife to sew with. The other one he rigged exactly as the first two had been rigged.

And this time he got witnesses, including the president and the dean of the university. He didn't tell them what they were going to witness; he just told them to watch the sewing machine.

They did, and then the sewing machine wasn't there anymore.

He had a little trouble convincing some of them that it wasn't a trick of prestidigitation, but when they were convinced—by the disappearance of the dean's wife's sewing machine from her own sewing room—they all admitted that he had something.

They relieved Yarley of his teaching duties and gave him a grant to finance further experimentation. He lost half a dozen more sewing machines and then he quit using sewing machines and began to get the thing down to the essential minima.

He found he could use a clockwork motor—connected in one particular way—to run the misconnected generator. The treadle wasn't essential—but an electric motor running the generator canceled something out and the thing wouldn't work. He found that he didn't need a bobbin or a flywheel but that the shuttle was necessary, and it had to be made of ferrous metal.

He found that he could use anything except electricity to run the generator. Beside foot power through a treadle and the clockwork motors, he tried a water wheel and his son's toy steam engine (and had to buy him a new one).

And he finally got it down to a comparatively simple layout of stuff mounted on a box—boxes were cheaper than sewing machines—powered with an inexpensive toy windup motor, the whole thing costing less than five dollars and taking only a few hours to make.

All he had to do then was wind the motor, push the lever, and—well, it went *somewhere*. Where it went or why it went he didn't know. But he kept experimenting.

Then one day there was a news story about something at first thought to be a meteor that had struck the side of a tall building in Chicago. Upon subsequent examination it proved to be what was left of a wooden box and some oddly assorted clockwork and electrical apparatus.

Yarley took the next train to Chicago and identified his handiwork.

He knew then that the thing had moved through *space*, and he had something to work on. Nobody had timed the striking of the object against the Chicago building to an exact second, but as nearly as a time could be assigned to it, Yarley decided that the object had traveled from Cambridge to Chicago in approximately nothing flat.

The university gave him assistants, then, and he began experimenting in earnest, sending out the things in considerable numbers, each with an identifying serial number on it, and with an accurate record kept of variations in the number of windings, the exact number of turns given the clockwork motor, the direction in which it had been facing, and the time—to a fraction of a second—of its disappearance.

Also, he publicized what he was doing and got people watching for them all over the world.

Two, out of the thousands he sent, were reported. By comparison with his records he learned some crucial

things. First, that the machine traveled in the exact direction of the axle of the generator part; second, that there was a relationship between the number of windings and the distance it traveled.

Now he could really go to work. By 1904 he had determined that the distance the machine traveled was proportionate to the cube of the number of turns or fractional turns on the generator and that the duration of the trip was actually and exactly zero seconds.

And by cutting the generators down to thimble size, he could send a machine for a comparatively short measured distance—a few miles—and make it land in a particular field outside of town.

It might have revolutionized transportation in general except for the fact that the machines were always damaged seriously, internally and externally, when they landed. Generally there was barely enough of them left for identification, not always that much.

And it wasn't going to make much of a weapon; explosives sent never arrived. They must have exploded en route, somewhere in the warp.

But in three years of experimentation they got it worked out to a nice formula and even began to understand the principles back of it as well as being able to predict the results.

They determined that the reason things were destroyed was their sudden materialization, at the end of the journey, in *air*. Air is pretty material stuff. You can't displace a quantity of it in nothing flat without damaging whatever does the displacing—not only damaging it as an object, but damaging its very molecular structure.

Obviously, the only practical place to which an object could be sent, and arrive intact, was space, open space. And since the distance increased as the *cube* of the number of windings it wouldn't take a very large machine to reach the moon, or even the planets. And even interstellar travel would not take a really monster one, especially as the thing could be done in several hops, each taking no longer in time than it took the pilot to press a button.

Furthermore, since time was a zero factor, no trajectories needed to be calculated. Simply aim directly at a destination, adjust the distance factor, press the button and there you were, materializing in space a safe distance from the planet, ready to descend and land.

Of course the moon was the first objective. How to land took them a few years to work out. The science of aerodynamics hadn't been worked out very well yet—although two brothers named Wright had successfully flown a heavier-than-air machine at Kittyhawk, N.C., a few years before—in the same year, in fact, in which Professor Yarley had lost his first sewing machine. And anyway there wasn't supposed to be any air on the moon.

But the method of landing was solved, and in 1910 the first man landed on the moon and returned safely.

The habitable planets were all reached within the next year.

The next chapter was *The Interplanetary War*, but Keith couldn't read it. It was three-thirty in the morning. He'd had a long day and things had happened to him. He simply couldn't hold his eyes open.

He didn't even undress any farther than he already had; he simply reached out and turned off the light, and was asleep almost before his head dropped back on the pillow.

It was nearly noon when he awakened. He lay there for a moment before opening his eyes, thinking of the crazy dream he'd had about a world with space travel—via sewing machine—and war with Arcturus and mistouts over New York.

He rolled over and his shoulder hurt so badly that he opened his eyes and saw an unfamiliar ceiling over his head. That was a shock, and it awakened him fully. He sat up in bed and looked at his wrist watch. Eleven forty-five! Hours late for his job. Or was he?

He was horribly mixed up, disoriented. He got out of bed—a strange bed—and walked over to the window. Yes, he was on Forty-second Street, on the third floor, looking down at a normal street scene. Normal traffic and the sidewalks as crowded as ever, with ordinary-looking people wearing ordinary clothes. It was the New York he knew.

It *must* have been a dream, all of it. But then how did it happen that he was here on Forty-second Street?

He stood there, puzzling, trying to fit in his being here in New York into the scheme of things. The last thing he remembered that really made sense was sitting in a chair in Mr. Bor-den's garden. After that—

*Could* he have returned to New York other than in the way he seemed to remember—and have supplied, somehow, a nightmare to substitute for his memory of the trip? If so, he was overdue to see a psychiatrist.

Was he crazy? He must be. Yet *something* had happened to him. Unless he accepted the unacceptable, he couldn't remember how he got back to New York from Mr. Borden's estate, nor could he account for the fact that he was in a hotel room uptown instead of in his own diggings down in the Village.

And his shoulder was really sore. He put a hand to it and felt the bandage under his shirt. He'd been injured somehow, but surely not in the fantastic manner of his nightmare.

Well, he'd get out of here, go home and—he couldn't plan any farther than that just yet. He'd go home first and then decide.

He turned around and walked to the chair where he'd put some of his clothes. Something on the floor beside the bed caught his eye. It was a copy of the pocket edition of H. G. Wells' *Outline of History*.

His hands shook a little as he picked it up and opened it to the contents page. He looked at the names of the last three chapters. In order, they were: *Into Space*, *The Interplanetary War*, and *Struggle Against Arcturus*.

The book dropped out of his hand. He reached to pick it up and saw another one that had slid partly under the bed. It was named *Is the Mistout Worth It?*

He sat down in the chair and didn't do anything for a few minutes except to try to think, to adjust his mind to the fact that it hadn't been a nightmare; it had been reality.

Or a reasonable facsimile thereof.

Either he was stark mad or it had all really happened. Being chased by the purple monster. The mistout with its jungle savagery.

He reached for the hip pocket of the trousers hanging over the chair and got his wallet. The bills in it were credits, and not dollars. A little over a thousand credits.

He dressed slowly, thoughtfully, and walked back over to the window. It was still Forty-second Street and it still looked ordinary, but it didn't fool him now. He remembered what it had been like at one o'clock last night, and he shuddered a little.

And, looking for them, he began to notice things he hadn't noticed before. Most of the store fronts were familiar, but others were strange and he was almost sure they hadn't been there before.

Then, to top it off, he caught a flash of purple in the crowd. It was a purple monster, all right, walking into a novelty store across the street. And nobody was paying any more attention to it than to any of the human beings in the street.

He sighed deeply and got ready to leave. Packing consisted in putting the *Outline of History*, *The Story of Dopelle* and the two pulp magazines into various pockets. He decided not to take along the copy of *Is the Mistout Worth It?*; he'd got all he needed out of that. Nor the copy of yesterday's *New York Times*.

He went downstairs and out through the lobby. A different clerk was on duty and didn't even glance at him. The front door gave him pause for a moment because the glass in it was intact; then he noticed the fresh putty around the edges of the glass.

Now that he was fully awake he was hungry. Eating was the first order of business; he hadn't eaten since noon yesterday. He walked east until he found an inviting-looking little restaurant across from the public library.

He took a little table for one at the side and studied the menu. There was choice of a dozen entrees and all but three of them were familiar. The other three were all expensive items at the bottom of the list—Martian *zot a la Marseille*, roast *krail* with *kapi* sauce, and *gallina de luna*.

That last, if Keith remembered his Spanish, meant moon chicken. Some day, he decided, he was going to eat moon chicken, Martian *zot* and roast *krail*, but right now he was too hungry to experiment. He ordered goulash.

Goulash, for one thing, didn't require concentration. And while he ate, he skimmed through the final two chapters of the *Outline of History*.

H. G. Wells was bitter about the interplanetary war. He saw it purely as a war of conquest, with Earth the aggressor.

The inhabitants of the Moon and of Venus had proved friendly and exploitable, and they had been exploited. The intelligence of the tall, purple Lunans was about that of a savage, but the Lunans were much more docile. They made excellent laborers and still better mechanics, once they had been introduced to the mysteries of machinery. The more industrious among them saved their wages and made sightseeing trips to Earth, but they never stayed here; two or three weeks was the maximum time one of them could remain healthy on Earth. For this same reason, employing them on Earth was impractical—and was forbidden by law after thousands of them had died within a few months of being imported to work as laborers here. The life span of a Lunan was about twenty years, on Luna; elsewhere—Earth, Venus, Mars, Callisto—none had ever lived longer than six months.

The Venusians, although almost as intelligent as Terrestrials, were creatures of a quite different nature. Interested solely in philosophy, the arts, and abstract mathematics, they had welcomed Earthmen, avid for the exchange of cultures and ideas. They had no practical civilization, no cities (or even houses), no possessions, machines or weapons.

Few in number, they were nomads who, aside from the life of the mind, lived as primitively as animals. They offered no barrier and every assistance—short of work—to man's colonization and exploitation of Venus. Earth had established four colonies there, aggregating a little short of a million people.

But Mars had been different.

The Martians had the silly idea that they didn't *want* to be colonized. They had, it turned out, a civilization at least equal to ours, except that they had not discovered space travel—possibly because, wearing no clothes, they had not developed sewing machines.

The Martians had greeted the first arrivals from Earth gravely and courteously (the Martians did everything gravely; they had no sense of humor) and had suggested that they return home and stay there. They had killed the second arrivals and the third.

And, although they had captured the spaceships in which these parties (except the first) had arrived, they had not bothered to use or copy the machines. They had no desire to leave Mars, ever. In fact, Wells pointed, no Martian had ever left Mars alive, even during the interplanetary war.

A few, captured alive and put on Earth-bound ships for demonstration and study here, had willed themselves to death even before the ships had left the thin atmosphere of Mars.

This unwillingness or inability to live, even for minutes, off their own planet extended to Martian animals and plants. No single specimen of Martian fauna or flora graced zoos or botanical gardens of Earth.

The so-called interplanetary war, therefore, had been fought entirely on the surface of Mars. It had been a bitter struggle in which the Martian population had been several times decimated. They had, however, capitulated short of annihilation and had permitted colonization of Mars by Earth-men.

Of all the planets and their satellites in the Solar System, only four—Earth, the Moon, Venus, and



Mars—had turned out to be inhabited by intelligent life. Saturn supported plant life of a strange sort and a few of the moons of Jupiter bore plant life and wild animals.

Man had met his match—an aggressive, colonizing race of intelligent beings—only when he went beyond the Solar System. The Arcturians had had the space drive for many centuries. It was only by chance—for the galaxy is very wide indeed—that they had not yet visited the Sun's planets. When they learned of us through an encounter near Proxima Cen-tauri, they set about to remedy that omission.

The current war with Arcturus was, on Earth's part, a defensive war—although it involved such offensive tactics as we could muster. And thus far the war had been a stalemate, defensive tactics on both sides being adequate to block any sus- tained offensive action. Only occasional ships of either side managed to penetrate defensive cordons and to wreak damage.

By fortunate early capture of a few Arc ships, Earth had quickly overcome the technological handicap of several centuries under which it had started in the war.

Currently, thanks to the genius and leadership of Dopelle, Earth had a slight advantage in some ways, although basically it was still a war of attrition.

Dopelle! That name again. Keith put down the H. G. Wells book and started to take *The Story of Dopelle* from his pocket when he realized that he had long since finished eating and had no further excuse for sitting there.

He paid for his meal and went out. The steps of the library across the street looked inviting. He could sit there and read some more.

But there was his job to be considered.

Did he work for the Borden Publishing Company—here and now—or didn't he? If he did, having missed a Monday morning might not be unforgivable. Missing a whole day might be.

And it was well after one o'clock already.

Should he call up first and try to get as much information as he could before he dared make a personal appearance? It seemed the logical and sensible thing to do.

He went into the cigar store on the next corner. There was a short line waiting in front of the phone booth. Annoying as waiting in line was, it enabled him to solve the minor question of how pay telephones were operated in a coinless country. As each caller ahead of him in the line left the phone booth he walked to the cash register and made payment in paper currency of the amount that showed on a register on top of the phone booth. When payment had been made, the cashier pressed a button and the register reverted to zero.

Probably there had been such a register atop the booth in the drugstore in Greenville and he had failed to notice it. And since his call there had not been completed, the dial pointers had remained at zero.

Fortunately, none of those ahead of him made long calls and he reached the booth in a few minutes.

He dialed the Borden Publications number, realizing as he did so that he really should have looked it up in the directory while he was waiting; it might or might not be the same number that he knew.

But a voice that sounded like that of Marion Blake, the receptionist, said, "Borden Publications."

Keith said, "Is Mr. Winton there? Mr. Keith Winton?"

"No, sir. Mr. Winton is not here. Who is calling, please?"

"Never mind. I'll call tomorrow."

He hung up quickly before she could ask any more questions. He hoped she hadn't recognized his voice; he didn't think she had.

He paid half a credit at the cash register, and he realized now that he could and should have got more value for that half credit. He should have asked whether Keith Winton was out to lunch or out of town—or if they didn't know where he was. But it was too late now unless he wanted to stand in line again.

And suddenly he was in a hurry to get there and find out the worst, no matter how dangerous it might be.

He walked rapidly the few blocks to the office building in which Borden Publications occupied all of the tenth floor.

He took the elevator up, and took a deep breath as he stepped out of it.

## 7

### *A Cocktail from Callisto*

He stood before that familiar, beautiful door that he had always admired so. It was one of the very modern ones that look like nothing more than a sheet of glass with a futuristic chrome handle on it. The hinges were either hidden or invisible. The lettering *Borden Publications, Inc.* was just below eye height, small and chaste, in chrome letters that were suspended right inside the thick glass.

Keith took the handle very carefully, as he always did, so he wouldn't fingerprint that beautiful sheet of nothingness, opened the door and went in.

There was the same mahogany railing, the same pictures-hunting prints—on the walls. And the same plump little Marion Blake with the same pouting red lips and upswept brunet hair-do, sitting at the same stenographer-receptionist desk back of the railing. She was the first person he'd seen that he *knew* since— Lord, was it only since seven o'clock yesterday evening? It seemed like weeks. For a dizzy moment he wanted to jump over that railing and kiss Marion Blake.

He'd seen familiar things and familiar places, but not a familiar person, until now. True, the address on the contents page of the copy of *Surprising Stories* (at 2 cr.) had told him that the Borden Publications were still here, still in business at the same old stand, but he found now that he hadn't really believed it until he saw that Marion Blake was still receptionist.

For just a second, the familiar sight of her there, and the fact that everything else about the office was just as he remembered it made him doubt his memory of the past eighteen hours.

It couldn't be, it simply *couldn't*—

Then Marion had turned and was looking up at him and there wasn't a trace of recognition in her face.

"Yes?" she asked, a bit impatiently.

Keith cleared his throat. Was she kidding? Didn't she know him, or was she just acting funny?

He cleared his throat again. "Is Mr. Keith Winton in? I'd like to speak to him, please."

That could pass as a gag to counter hers; if she grinned now, he could grin back.

She said, "Mr. Winton has left for the day, sir."

"Uh—Mr. Borden. Is he in?"

"No, sir."

"Is Bet-Miss Hadley in?"

"No, sir. Nearly everybody left at one o'clock. That's the regular closing time this month."

"The reg— Oh." He stopped himself in time before he could pull a boner by being incredulous about something he undoubtedly should know. "I forgot," he finished lamely. He wondered why one o'clock in the afternoon would be the regular closing time and why this month in particular.

"I'll be in tomorrow then," he said. "Uh—what would be the best time to catch Mr. Winton?"

"About seven."

"Set?"— He caught himself starting to echo her again. Did she mean seven in the morning or seven in the evening? Must be the morning; seven in the evening would be almost time for the mistout.

And then suddenly he guessed the answer and it was so simple he wondered why he hadn't thought of it sooner.

Of course working hours would be different in a city with the mistout, a city in which the streets were sudden death after dark, a city without normal night life. The hours of work would *have* to be different in order to give employees any personal lives at all.

It would change things completely when one had to be home before dark, probably well before, in order to assure safety. The working day would be from six or seven in the Morning—an hour or so after the early sunshine dissolved the mist—until one or two o'clock in the afternoon. And that would give people afternoons as the equivalent of evenings, for recreation.

It would have to be that way, of course. He wondered why he hadn't thought of it when he was reading the book on the mistout.

And it was good news. It meant that Broadway wasn't necessarily as dead as he had pictured it. There would be shows and dances and concerts, but they'd all be in the afternoon instead of the evening. Probably matinees were held in the morning. And instead of night clubs there'd be afternoon clubs.

Everybody would be safely home in bed by, say, seven or eight o'clock and would sleep till four or five o'clock so they'd be up and dressed by dawn.

And since dawn and darkness didn't come at the same times all the year around, working hours would be varied according to the season of the year. That's why one o'clock was the closing time *this* month. Probably it was regulated by local ordinance, because Marion had expected him to know it and had appeared surprised when he didn't.

Marion, he noticed, was putting things into the drawer of her desk, getting ready to leave. She looked up again as though wondering why he was still there.

He said, "Isn't your name Blake? Marion Blake?"

Her eyes widened a little. "Why, yes. But I don't—"

"I thought I remembered you, but I wasn't sure right away," Keith said. He was thinking fast, remembering things he'd heard Marion say about herself, girl friends he'd heard her mention, where she lived, what she did.

He said, "A girl named Estelle—I forgot her last name—introduced us at a dance in—wasn't it Queens?" He laughed a little. "I was with Estelle that night. Isn't it funny, that I can't remember her last name, but I remember both of your names, when I danced with you only once?"

She dimpled at him for that compliment. She said, "You must be right, even if I don't remember it. I live in Queens and go to dances there. And I've got a girl friend named Estelle Rambow. So you couldn't have made that all up, I guess."

"I wouldn't expect you to remember my name," Keith said. "It was months ago. I'm Karl Winston, I'm sure you made an impression on me, though, because I still remember that you told me you worked for a magazine publisher. Only I'd forgotten which one, so I wasn't expecting to see you when I came in here. And I remember you told me that you wrote—poetry, wasn't it?"

"I wouldn't really call it poetry, Mr. Winston. Just verse, really."

"Call me Karl," Keith said, "since we're old friends, even if you don't remember me. You're leaving now?"

"Why, yes. I just had two letters to finish after one o'clock and Mr. Borden said if I'd finish them I could come in half an hour late tomorrow morning." She glanced at the clock over her desk and smiled ruefully. "Guess I got hooked on the deal, though. The letters were long ones; took me almost an hour."

"Anyway, I'm glad you were still here," Keith said. "Will you have a drink with me?"

She hesitated. "Well—just one drink. I've got to be out in Queens by two-thirty. I've got a date then."

"Fine," Keith said. He was glad she did have a date, because over one drink he could find out a few things he wanted to know and yet he didn't want to be stuck with Marion for the whole afternoon.

They took the elevator down and he let Marion choose the place, which turned out to be a little bar around the corner on Madison, one he'd never been in before.

Over a pair of Callisto cocktails (Keith had ordered one when Marion had; he found it too sweet but not undrinkable), he said, "I think I mentioned to you that night that I'm a writer—doing feature stuff up to now. But I've decided to take a flyer at some pulp fiction. I've done a little of it already."

"Oh. That's why you came up to the office?"

"Yes, I wanted to talk to Winton—or to Mr. Borden or Miss Hadley—to find out what kind of stuff is needed right now. And what lengths and so on."

"Well, I can tell you some of it. I think they're fairly well stocked on both westerns and detective stories. Miss Hadley is looking for shorter lengths for her love book and I understand they can use both short and long stuff for the adventure books."

"How about science-fiction? I think I'd be best at that."

Marion Blake looked at him in surprise. "Oh, you've heard about that, then?"

"About what?"

"That Borden's going to start a science-fiction magazine."

Keith opened his mouth—and closed it again quickly before he could put his foot in it. He mustn't be surprised at anything. So he took a slow sip of his Callisto cocktail and thought instead. There was a catch somewhere.

Why would Marion say that Borden was starting a science-fiction magazine? Borden published *Surprising Stories* all right; he had a copy in his pocket to prove it, and he'd seen that it had the Borden imprint. Why wouldn't Marion say Borden was starting *another* science-fiction magazine, then?

Since he didn't know why, he answered cautiously, "I did hear a rumor to that effect. Is it true?"

"It's true, all right. They've got one issue dummied up and ready to go to press. They'll start it as a quarterly with a fall issue, and if it sells well on the stands they'll make it a monthly. And they do need material for it; all they've got beyond the first issue is one lead novel and a short or two."

Keith nodded and took a sip at his drink. "What do you think of the science-fiction field?" he asked.

"I think we should have put out a science-fiction magazine a long time ago. It's the only important field we haven't got a magazine in."

Keith casually reached into his back pocket and took the folded copy of *Surprising Stories* from it—the copy he'd bought in Greenville and hadn't had time to read yet, because he'd given precedence to *The New York Times*, *Is the Mistout Worth It?* and H. G. Wells.

Casually he put it down on the table to see what comment Marion would make about it, just after she'd said that Borden didn't have a book in the science-fiction field.

He watched her closely and saw her glance at the cover of the magazine.

She said, "Oh, I see you've been reading our top adventure book."

As simple as that, Keith thought. And again, why hadn't he had sense enough to think of the answer himself? Why, of course. In a world where interplanetary travel and interstellar war and purple moon monsters were actual fact, cold reality, then stories about such things would be *adventure* stories, and not science-fiction at all.

But if stuff like that was merely adventure, then what in hell would science-fiction be? He made a mental note to buy some science-fiction magazines the very first chance he had. They would really be something to read.

He looked back at *Surprising Stories*. "It's a good magazine, all right," he said. "I'd like to write for it."

"Mr. Winton needs material, I guess. He'll be glad to talk to you if you come in tomorrow morning. Do you have any stories ready?"

"Not exactly. I've got a lot of half-baked ideas, and I thought I'd like to talk to him first before I go ahead with any of them. So I don't bake the wrong ones."

"Do you know Mr. Winton, Mr. Winston? Say, your names are a lot alike, aren't they? Keith Winton, Karl Winston. Maybe that won't be too good."

He answered the question first. "No, I've never met Mr. Winton. Yes, our names are a lot alike—same initials, too, since I spell Karl with a K. But why may that not be too good?"

"Sounds a little like a pen name, that's all. I mean, if stories by Karl Winston appear in Keith Winton's magazines, a lot of people are going to think they're his own stuff under a thinly disguised pen name. And probably he wouldn't like that."

Keith nodded. "I can see that, now that you mention it. Well, it doesn't matter because I'll probably do fiction under a different name anyway. My feature stories are under my own name, except of course things I've ghost-written. But I'd already decided to use a pen name for fiction."

He took another sip of the almost sickeningly sweet Callisto and decided he'd never order another one.

He asked, "Can you tell me something about this Keith Winton, by the way?"

"Why—what do you want to know?"

He gestured vaguely. "Oh, anything to give me a line on him. What he looks like. What he eats for breakfast. How tough an editor he is."

"Well—" Marion Blake frowned thoughtfully. "He's tallish, a little taller than you, and slender. Dark. Wears shell-rimmed glasses. About thirty, I think. Kind of serious-looking." She giggled a little, suddenly. "Guess he's more serious than usual lately, but you can't blame him for that."

"Why not?"

She said archly, "He's in love—I think."

Keith managed a smile. "With you?"

"*Me?* He never even *sees* me. No, with our new love book editor, the super-beautiful Miss Betty Hadley. Not that it does him any good, of course."

Keith wanted to know why, but that "of course" warned him off. When people say "of course" they mean one is already supposed to know. But how—since he had already said he didn't know Keith Winton and hadn't said he did know Betty Hadley—could he be expected to know why being *in* love with Betty Hadley wasn't going to do Keith Winton any good?

Still, if he could keep Marion talking, he might find out. Without asking.

"Kind of tough on him, huh?" he said.

Til say." Marion sighed deeply. "Gee, I guess any girl in the world would give her eye teeth and her right arm to swap places with Betty Hadley."

He couldn't ask why, but he could keep fishing. He asked,

"Would you?"

"Would *I?* Are you kidding, Mr. Winston? To be fiancée of the greatest man in the world? The smartest, the handsomest, the bravest, the most romantic, the most—*golly!*"

"Oh," said Keith, a bit flatly in spite of himself.

He gulped the rest of his drink and almost gagged on it. He raised a finger to the waitress and, as she came toward the booth, asked Marion, "Have another?"

"I'm afraid I haven't time." She glanced at her watch. "No, I haven't. Anyway, I've got almost half of this one left. You go ahead and have another, but not me."

Keith looked up at the waitress. "One Manhattan, please."

"Sorry, I don't believe I've ever heard of that one, sir. Is it a new drink?"

"Martini?"

"Oh, sure. The blue or the pink?"

Keith suppressed a shudder. "Do you have straight whiskey?"

"Of course. Any particular brand?"

He shook his head, not wanting to tempt fate any farther than that. He hoped the whiskey would be neither pink nor blue.

He looked back at Marion, wondering how he could keep her talking and get her to tell who Betty Hadley's fiancée was. Apparently he was supposed to know. And maybe he *did* know, for that matter; at least, a horrible suspicion had come to him.

Marion confirmed it without further prodding. A dreamy look came into her eyes.

"*Gee*" she murmured. "*Dopelle!*" It sounded reverent; almost like a prayer.

## 8

### *Mekky*

Well, Keith thought, now he knew the worst. And anyway, she was only engaged and not married. Maybe there was still a chance, no matter how slim a chance.

Marion sighed again. She said, "I think she is a fool, though. Agreeing to wait until after the war is over. And who knows how long the war will last? And insisting on keeping her job as an editor, when *Dopelle* has as much money as he wants to have, and—still, I suppose she'd go nuts waiting if she didn't have a job to handle. *Golly*, I'd go nuts waiting for *Dopelle*, even if I *had* a job."

"You have got a job."

"But I haven't got *Dopelle*." Marion took a sip of her drink and sighed so deeply that Keith was afraid she'd attract attention to their table.

Keith's whiskey came, and it was amber and not blue or pink. Furthermore, a sip of it convinced him that it not only tasted like whiskey, but *was* whiskey. He downed it neat as Marion took the last sip of her *Callisto* cocktail. It made him feel a little better. Not much better.

Marion stood up. "Got to go," she said. "Thanks for the drink, Mr. Winston. You'll be in at the office tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow or the next day," Keith said. He'd already decided he might as well have a story with him when he went in. Two or three, if he could turn them out fast enough—and he thought he knew a way in which he could turn them out that fast.

He walked with Marion to the subway, and then headed for the public library.

That wasn't where he wanted to go. He wanted to go back to the bar he'd just left—or any other bar—and hang one on. But common sense told him that would be fatal. Probably quite literally fatal. He could get into enough trouble here when he was cold sober.

But he'd just taken two very tough punches. First, he *didn't* have a job here; the Keith Winton who worked for Borden not only wasn't he but didn't even look like him. He was about the same age, and that was all. Second, Betty Hadley was not only engaged but engaged to someone so incredibly romantic that—that it was incredible.

In the library, he went upstairs to the general reading room and took a seat at one of the tables. He didn't send in a slip for books; he had with him more than he could read in one afternoon. And besides his reading, he had plans to make.

He took out of his pockets the three publications he'd bought and hadn't read yet—the copies of *Surprising Stories* and *Perfect Love Stories* and Paul Gallico's *The Story of Dopelle*.

He frowned at the pocket edition. From the little he'd heard and read about Dopelle—and it was little only because he'd been in this screwy place less than twenty hours—the guy had the whole Solar System in his pocket. He practically ran the place—and he had Betty Hadley too.

He picked up the book and put it down again. Once he started it, he wanted to read it through, and that would take more time than he could afford this afternoon.

Since he wasn't a pulp magazine editor, he had a living to make, and he had to start making it right suddenly; the money he had left from the Greeneville episode wasn't going to last him very long. And his idea for making a living was contingent upon his study of those two—and other—magazines.

He took up *Surprising Stories* first. He studied the contents page, comparing it with his memory of the contents he had sent to press for the July issue. All of the authors were the same, right down the line. Some of the story titles were the same, others had been changed.

Before he started reading, he skimmed through, glancing at the illustrations. In each of them was the same subtle difference he had noticed in the cover picture. They had been done by the same artists—or by artists having the same names and the same general styles—but they were more vivid, had more action. The girls were more beautiful and the monsters were more horrible. Horribly more horrible.

He started in on the shortest of the short stories and read it carefully, analytically. The plot was as he remembered it, but there were differences in the setting and in the surrounding circumstances. He finished it still vaguely puzzled, but with the glimmerings of an idea.

He sat and thought a few minutes and the idea clarified. He didn't read the other stories, but he skimmed them, paying little attention to the plots of characters, concentrating on settings and background.

His idea had been right. The difference between these stories and the ones he remembered putting in the issue was that the backgrounds, the settings of these stories coincided. Each writer described Martians the same way, Venusians the same. Spaceships all worked on the same principle—the one he'd read about in the H. G. Wells book. The only space-war stories concerned either the Earth-Mars war of the early planetary colonization days or the current Earth-Arcturus conflict.

Marion Blake had been right, of course, in classifying *Surprising Stories* as an adventure magazine, not one in the science-fiction field. The backgrounds were—in this mad universe he found himself *in—true*. Situations and settings were authentic, and consistent with one another.

Adventure stories, pure and simple.

He smacked the book down on the table in front of him, drawing a reproving glance from the librarian.

But, he thought, there must *be* science-fiction magazines here or Borden wouldn't be starting one. And, if these stories were not science-fiction, what would science-fiction be? He'd buy some and find out.

He picked up the Dopelle book and stared at it bitterly again. *Dopelle!* He hated the guy. But anyway, he knew now how to pronounce his name, having heard Marion say it; it was pronounced as though it were French—Dough-PELL, only two syllables and the accent on the second.

He frowned at it. That book, much as he was going to hate it, came next on his course of reading. But should he start it here and now? He glanced at the big library clock and decided not. There were even more important things to do and they all had to be done before dark, before the mistout.

He had to find a place to stay and a way to make money so he could keep on eating. He didn't dare let himself get down to the end of his resources until he had a way to bring in more money.

He took out his wallet and counted what he had left out of the two thousand credits—the two hundred dollars, approximately—the Greeneville druggist had given him. There was just about half of it left.

Enough, maybe, to last him a week if he was careful. Certainly not longer than that, since he'd have to buy some clothes and toilet articles and heaven knew what else, starting from scratch.

Or did he, in this universe, still have a closet and a bureau full of clothes in a nice little two-room bachelor apartment down on Gresham Street in Greenwich Village?

He considered the possibility and discarded it as too slight to consider seriously. The Keith Winton who had his job probably had his apartment too. He knew by now that this universe didn't have any neat niche for him to fit into.

He'd have to make one for himself. And a precarious job it was going to be.

But *where* was he? *How* did he get here? *Why*?

He shoved those wonderings resolutely aside. There must be an answer, maybe even a way back. But survival came first, and his mind must be free to plan—and to plan intelligently. How best could he parlay a hundred bucks' worth of credits into a future?

He thought and planned, and after a while he went to the desk and borrowed a pencil and paper from the librarian. He returned to his table and began to make a list of the things he'd need. Its length appalled him.

But when he put down approximate figures and added them up, it wasn't as bad as he'd feared. He could do it all for about four hundred credits and have six hundred to live on. If he picked a cheap hotel and ate at inexpensive restaurants, he could hold out for ten days, possibly even two weeks, on that much.

He went out of the library and headed first for the tobacco store across from it whose telephone he had used a few hours before.

Might as well, he thought, eliminate the remote possibility first. He looked up Keith Winton in the phone book; the name was listed and the telephone number and address were the same.

He went into the booth—there was no line in front of it now—and called the number.

A voice said, "Keith Winton speaking."

He hung up quietly. That was that.

He headed for the nearest dime store and started his buying there, realizing that he couldn't afford to be fastidious if he was going to stay within his means. He started with a small cardboard suitcase, the cheapest that he could find, at twenty-nine and a half credits. He went on down the list—socks, handkerchiefs, razor, toothbrush-Gauze bandage and an antiseptic for his shoulder, pencil, eraser, a ream of white paper and a ream of yellow—the list seemed almost endless. And when he'd added a few shirts from a cheap haberdashery, the suitcase was almost full.

He had the suit he was wearing sponged and pressed while he waited in a cubicle at the back of a cleaner's shop. He had his shoes shined.

His final purchase, and it left him a little under six hundred credits, was a dozen pulp magazines of various kinds. He took his time picking them out, with a special purpose in mind.

It was while he was in the drugstore making that final purchase that the crowd must have gathered. When he came out of the store the edge of the sidewalk was lined half a dozen deep, and from a block or so down the street, came the sound of wild cheering.

Keith hesitated a moment and then stood still, backed against the window of the drugstore. He wanted to see what was coming, but he stood a better chance of seeing from there, over the heads of the crowd, than if he tried to work his way nearer to the curb, especially impeded as he was with suitcase and magazines.

Something or someone was coming. The cheering grew nearer. Keith saw that all traffic had stopped and pulled toward the curbs. Two policemen on motorcycles came along and behind them was a car with a uniformed man at the wheel.

There wasn't anyone in the back seat of the car but, above it, floating in mid-air about ten feet above the car and keeping pace with it, was *something*.

It was a round, featureless, blank metal sphere a little larger than a basketball.

The cheering grew as it came nearer. Auto horns honked and the din became almost deafening.

He heard words now that were part of the cheers and recognized one of them. "Mekky! *Mekky!* MEKKY1" And someone beside him yelled, "Get the Arcs for us, Mekkyl"

And then the incredible thing happened.

Over or under the cheering, Keith suddenly heard a voice that wasn't a cheering, yelling voice. It was a calm, clear voice that seemed to come from everywhere or nowhere.

"*An interesting situation, Keith Winton,*" it said. "*Come see me sometime and we'll investigate it.*"

Keith started violently and looked around him. No one near him was looking at him. But the suddenness with which he turned made the man next to him turn and look.

"Did you hear that?" Keith demanded.

"Hear what?"

"Something about—about a Keith Winton?"

"You're crazy," the man said. His eyes left Keith's and went to the street again, and he yelled at the top of his voice, "Mekky! 'Ray for Mekky!'"

Keith stumbled out from against the building to the narrow open area of sidewalk between the crowd at the curb and the crowd at the back of the sidewalk. He tried to keep pace with the car and the thing that floated about it, the basketball-sized sphere. He had the strangest feeling that it was that *thing* that had spoken to him.

If so, it had called him by name and no one else had heard it. Now that he thought of it, that voice hadn't seemed to come from outside at all; it had been inside his head. And it had been a flat mechanical-sounding voice. Not a human voice at all.

Was he going crazy?

Or was he already crazy?

But whether or not, and whatever the explanation, he had a blind impulse not to lose sight of—of whatever that basketball was. *It had called him by name.*

Maybe it knew the answer to why he was here, to what had happened to the world as he, Keith Winton, knew it—to the sane world in which there'd been two world wars but no interplanetary ones, to the world in which he'd been editor of a science-fiction magazine which—*here*—was an adventure magazine and was edited by someone who had the name of Keith Winton but didn't even look like him.

"Mekky!" the crowd was roaring. "Mekky! Mekky!"

Mekky must be the name of the sphere. And maybe Mekky had the answers. Mekky had said, *"Come see me sometime!"*

Sometime, hell! If there were answers, he wanted them now.

He stumbled into people, his suitcase banged legs. He drew sharp looks and sharp words. But he paid no attention to either; he kept going, not quite keeping up with the pace of the car out in the street, but not losing much ground either.

And the voice came inside his head again. *"Keith Winton,"* it said. *"Stop. Don't follow. You'll be sorry."*

He started to yell his answer over the roar of the cheering. "Why?" he yelled. "Who are-?"

And then he realized that people were hearing him, even over the sounds of their own voices, and were turning to stare.

*"Don't attract attention,"* the voice said. *"Yes, I can read your thoughts. Yes, I am Mekky. Do as you have planned and see me about three months from now."*

"Why?" Keith thought, desperately. "Why so long?"

*"A crisis in the war,"* said the voice. *"The survival of the human race is at stake. The Arcturians can win. I have no time for you now."*

"But what shall I do?"

*"As you have planned,"* the voice said. *"And be careful, more careful than you have been. You are in danger every moment."*

Keith tried desperately to frame within his mind a question that would give him the answer he sought. "But what has happened? Where am I?"

*"Later,"* said the voice within his mind. *"Later I will try to solve your problem. I do not know the answer now, although I perceive the problem clearly, through your mind."*

"Am I insane?"

*"No, and do not make one fatal error. This is real; it is not a figment of your imagination. Your danger here is real and this world is real. If you are killed here, you will be very dead."*

There was a second's pause, then: *"I have no more time for you now. Please stop following."*

Abruptly, in Keith's mind, before he could frame another frantic question and before he could again hear the sounds of cheering voices and tooting auto horns, there was a sensation of silence. Whatever had been in his mind had withdrawn. He knew that without knowing how he knew, and he knew that thinking further questions would be useless; there'd be no answers.

Obedient to the last order he stopped walking. He stopped so suddenly that someone bumped into him from behind and snarled at him.

He caught his balance and let the man past, then stood staring down the street, over the heads of the crowd, at the sphere that was floating away from him, out of his life.

What was it? What kept it up there? Was it alive? How could it have read his mind?

Whatever it was, it seemed to know who he was and what his problem was—and it had said that it could solve that problem.

He didn't want to let it go. Wait three months? Impossible, when there was even a remote chance of getting the answer now!

But the sphere was already half a block away; he couldn't possibly keep up with it, through that crowd on the sidewalk, while he was burdened with the suitcase and the armful of magazines. He looked about him wildly and saw that he was in front of a cigar store.

He darted in and put the suitcase and magazines down on a soft drink cooler near the entrance.

He said, "Back in just a second. Thanks for watching these," and ran out again before the proprietor could protest. Possibly he'd lose all the stuff he'd just bought, taking a chance like that, but right now following that sphere was the most important thing in his life.

Outside again he could go faster. Pushing his way ruthlessly as fast as he could walk, he held his

ground half a block behind the car and the motorcycles and even gained a little.

They turned south on Third Avenue, went south to Thirty-seventh Street and turned east again. Just around the corner there was a big crowd gathered. The motorcycles and the car stopped just at the edge of the crowd.

But the sphere that had floated above the car didn't stop. It floated on and up, over the heads of the cheering people. Up, up, to an open window in the fourth floor of an apartment building on the north side of the street.

A woman was leaning out of the window. She was Betty Hadley.

Keith Winton got to the edge of the crowd and didn't try to push his way into it; he could see better from here than closer in against the building.

The cheering was tremendous. Besides the cheers for Mekky, he could hear cheers for Betty Hadley and for Dopelle. He wondered if Dopelle was here—but couldn't see anyone who seemed likely to be the world's greatest hero. All eyes of the crowd were on Mekky, the sphere, or on Betty Hadley, leaning out of the window, smiling. And looking more beautiful, more desirable than he had ever seen her.

She was dressed, what he could see of her, in the sort of costume heroines wore on the covers of science-fiction magazines—a scarlet bra that outlined perfect hemispheres, bare (and perfect) shoulders and arms, bare midriff, and below that—well, he presumed she had on something below that, but she wasn't leaning far enough out of the window for him to tell.

The sphere floated upward until it was level with and just beside the open window from which Betty Hadley leaned; it poised there, a few inches from her white shoulder. It hovered there; whether it was facing Betty or the crowd below, in the case of a featureless sphere, Keith found it impossible to guess.

It spoke. This time, from the very first word, Keith knew somehow that it was speaking in the minds of the entire crowd, not to him individually. The cheering didn't stop; there was no need for it to slacken for everyone to hear; the words were heard through the mind and not through the ears. One could hear both the cheering and the words of the sphere, and one didn't interfere with the other.

*"Friends,"* said the voice, *"I leave you now to bear a message from my master and creator, Dopelle, to Miss Hadley. It is a private message, naturally."*

*"I thank you for the reception you have given me. And, from my master, I bring this message to all of you: The situation is still critical and we must all do our best. But be of good cheer. There is hope for victory. We must and we shall win."*

"Mekky!" the crowd roared. "Dopelle!" "Betty!" "Victory!" "Down with Arcturus!" "Mekky, Mekky, MEKKY!"

Betty Hadley, Keith saw, was still smiling, her cheeks flushed with embarrassment at the adulation of the crowd. She bowed once more and then withdrew her head and shoulders inside the window. The sphere floated in after her.

The crowd began to disperse.

Keith groaned. He tried to hurl a thought at the sphere, but he knew it was too late. It would pay no attention to him even if it received the thought.

Well, it had warned him. If it had been inside his mind it knew how he felt about Betty Hadley and it had warned him not to follow. It had known how he would react to seeing Betty again under circumstances like that. It tried to save him from the bitterness and despair he was feeling now.

It hadn't meant much—not too much, that is—when Marion Blake had told him that Betty was engaged. As long as she wasn't actually married, he'd thought, there was still hope. He'd dared to think he could make her forget this Dopelle.

But—what a chance! Far more than anything he'd read or heard about that magnificent hero, the exhibition he'd just seen had made him realize what a personage Dopelle must be. "My master and creator," Mekky, the miraculous sphere, had called him. And all New York cheering him when he wasn't even there!

What chance had he, Keith Winton—less than a nonentity, an wnentity, in this universe—to take away the fiancée of a guy like that!

## 9

### *The Dope on Dopelle*

He walked back moodily to the cigar store where he'd left his suitcase and magazines. They were still there and he apologized to the proprietor for the manner of his leaving them, and bought a carton of cigarettes to make amends.

The streets were beginning to empty when he came out of the cigar store. He realized that it must be getting near dusk and that he must find a place to stay.

He hunted until, on Eighth Avenue near Fortieth Street, he found an inexpensive little hotel where, for a hundred and twenty credits in advance, he took a room for a week. He left his suitcase and magazines in the room, went down again to eat in a cheap chili restaurant, and then returned to his room for a long evening of reading and study.

He picked up one of the pulp magazines. Now to test the feasibility of his plan. If, that is, it needed testing; it must be sound since Mekky, the sphere, had told him to go ahead with it.



For a while, a long while, he couldn't really concentrate. Betty Hadley's face, with its aura of golden blond hair, its smooth creamy skin and kissable red lips, kept getting in the way. Not to mention Betty Hadley's beautiful body as he had seen it at her window, clad (as far as he could tell) only in a form-fitting scarlet bra.

Why hadn't he had sense enough to obey the sphere's orders not to follow it—and get himself in a mood like this, just when he had to be able to think more clearly than he'd ever thought before.

For a long time Betty kept getting between him and the magazine, and the hopelessness of his ever getting her made what he was trying to do seem futile and useless. But after a while, in spite of himself, he began to get interested in his reading. And he began to see that what he had hoped to do might be really possible.

Yes, he ought to be able to make himself a living writing—for some of these magazines, if not for others. Five years earlier, before he'd started working for Borden, Keith had done quite a bit of free-lancing. He'd sold a number of stories, and he'd written a number that hadn't sold.

In fact, his batting average had been about fifty-fifty, and—for a writer who wasn't too prolific and who had difficulty in plotting—that hadn't been too good. Besides, his stories hadn't come easily; he'd had to sweat them out. So when a chance at an editorial job had come, he'd taken it.

But now, with five years of editing under his belt, he thought he could do better at stories than he had before. He could see now what a lot of his mistakes had been—laziness among them. And laziness is curable.

Besides, this time he had plots to start with—the plots of all the unsold stories he could remember. He thought he could do better with them now than he'd done five years ago, a lot better.

He went through magazine after magazine of the pile of them that he had bought, skimming all the stories, reading some of them. Darkness fell outside and the blank blackness of the mistout pressed against the pane of his window, but he kept on reading.

One thing became increasingly obvious to him—he couldn't, and didn't dare try to, place stories in a setting with which he was as unfamiliar as he was with the world about him. He'd make mistakes, little mistakes if not big ones, that would give him away, that would show his unfamiliarity with the details of life here. Stories of the present were definitely out.

Fortunately, that still left him two fields. From his reading of Wells' *Outline of History* he knew that the differences here all dated from those vanishing sewing machines of 1903. He'd be on sure ground on any story written as a costume piece and placed before 1903. Luckily, he'd been a history major at college and was pretty familiar with the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, particularly in America.

He noticed with satisfaction that the pulp magazines carried a fair percentage of historical stories, costume pieces; a far higher percentage of them than had pulp magazines of where he'd come from. Possibly because, here, there was a wider difference between life of today and life of the colonial and pioneer times, the settings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were quite popular in some of the adventure magazines. *Surprising Stories* was an exception to that rule, seeming to specialize exclusively in modern adventure in space. To balance it, Borden published another pulp adventure magazine, *Romantic Adventure Stories*, which specialized exclusively in historical—Civil War and Revolutionary War stories predominating. He noticed that it, also, was edited by Keith Winton.

Even the love pulps, he was both surprised and pleased to learn, carried a fair percentage of love stories in historical settings. That was a field he hadn't counted on; it made three fields available to him.

The other was, of course, science-fiction. He studied three science-fiction magazines and found he couldn't go wrong on them; they were stories of adventures in far and unexplored galaxies, stories of the distant future or the remote, mythical past, stories of time travel, unexplored powers of the mind, even pure fantasies of the werewolf-vampire type in historical settings. He'd be on safe ground there.

He finished his study of the magazines by ten o'clock and, from then until midnight, he sat at the little desk in his room, pencil in hand and paper before him. Not writing yet—he'd need a typewriter for that—but jotting down notes of all the stories he could remember having written and not sold.

He could remember, in that length of time, twenty such stories. There were others he'd be able to think of later. Of those twenty, six had been historical adventures or romances; those six were *in*, particularly the four that had been short and could be rewritten comparatively quickly. Another six he picked out as being fairly easy to translate into historical or fantastic settings.

A dozen stories, then, to start on, as soon as he could get hold of a typewriter. If one or two out of the dozen could be sold quickly, he'd be all right. Of course he couldn't keep on rewriting stories indefinitely; sooner or later he'd have to start turning out new ones. But with his experience in editing back of him he thought he could do that, also, once he had a start. And having the backlog of unsold stories to begin on would get him off with a bang.

If he couldn't sell a story before he went broke, well—he'd have to look into the possibility of getting some money out of the coins in his pocket. A quarter had got him two thousand credits in Greenville—but it also got him into a terrific jam. He wasn't going to take a chance on that again unless he had to, and even then not without studying up on the subject to see what the pitfalls were.

By midnight he was too sleepy to remember any more plots of his unsold stories. But he hadn't finished all he wanted to do yet. He picked up the copy of *The Story of Dopelle* by Paul Gallico and started to read.

Now to find out what the competition really was.

The competition, he learned within the next hour, was more than terrific. It was impossible.

Dopelle (he didn't seem to have a first name at all) was simply unbelievable. He seemed to combine all the best characteristics—and none of the bad ones—of Napoleon, Einstein, Alexander the Great, Edison, Don Juan, and Sir Lancelot. He was twenty-seven years old.

The sketch of the first seventeen years of his life was brief. He'd been brilliant in school, skipped a lot of grades and had been graduated (*magna cum laude*) by Harvard at the age of seventeen, president of his class and the most popular man of his class despite his comparative youth.

Prodigies aren't usually popular, but Dopelle had been an exception. He hadn't been a grind. His high standing in his classes was due to his ability to remember perfectly everything he read or heard, obviating the necessity for hard study.

Despite his heavy schedule of classes (he'd taken about everything Harvard had to offer) he'd had time to captain an undefeated and untied football team. He had worked his way through school, and had become financially independent in the process, by writing in his spare time six adventure novels which had become best sellers at once and which still rated as top classics in their field.

The wealth these books (all of which, of course, were made into top-ranking motion pictures) brought him enabled him to own his own private space cruiser and his own laboratory where—during his last two years of college—he had already made several important improvements in the techniques of space travel and space warfare.

That was Dopelle at the age of seventeen, just an ordinary young fellow, comparatively speaking. His career had really started then.

He'd gone from Harvard to a Space Officers' Training School, had emerged a lieutenant, and had jumped grades rapidly for a year or so. At twenty-one he was in charge of counter-espionage, and was the only man who had ever been to the Arcturian System as a spy and had returned alive. Most Terrestrial knowledge about the Arcs had been obtained by him on that trip.

He was an incredibly good spacefighter and spacepilot. Time and again his squadron had turned back Arcturian attacks—with Dopelle spearheading the fighting as well as directing it. Because of his invaluable scientific knowledge, the brass had begged him not to fight personally. But—apparently by this time he was already above authority—he fought anyway, every chance he got. He seemed, however, to bear a charmed life. His bright red spaceship, the *Vengeance*, was never hit.

At twenty-three he was general of all the Solar forces, but command seemed to be the least important of his activities. Except during times of crisis he delegated authority and spent his time having exciting adventures in espionage or in working in his secret laboratory on the moon. It was his work there that enabled Earth to keep technologically equal to, or slightly ahead of, the Arcs.

The list of his accomplishments in that laboratory was almost unbelievable.

The greatest of them, perhaps, was the creation of a mechanical brain, Mekky. Into Mekky Dopelle had put mental powers beyond those of human beings. Mekky wasn't human, but he (Gallico pointed out that although Mekky was actually an *it*, he was always referred to as *he*) was, in some ways, superhuman.

Mekky could read minds and could speak to people, individually or *en masse*, telepathically. He could even, at close range, read Arcturian minds. Human telepaths had tried that, but invariably had gone insane before they could report their findings.

Also, Mekky could solve—as an electronic calculating machine can solve—any problem, however difficult, if all the factors could be given him.

Into Mekky also was built the ability to teleport—to transfer himself instantaneously through space without the necessity of having a spaceship to ride in. This made him invaluable as an emissary, enabling Dopelle, wherever he was, to keep in touch with his space fleets and with the governments of Earth.

Briefly and touchingly, near the end of the book, Gallico told of the romance between Dopelle and Betty Hadley. They were, it seemed, engaged and deeply in love with one another, but had decided to wait until the end of the war to marry.

Meanwhile Miss Hadley continued to keep her job as editor of the world's most popular love story magazine, the job she had held when she and Dopelle had met and fallen in love—while he was in New York incognito on an espionage job. Now the whole world loved the lovers and eagerly awaited the end of the war and the day of their marriage.

Keith Winton swore as he put down the book. Could anything possibly be more hopeless than his loving Betty Hadley?

But somehow it was the very hopelessness of things that gave him hope. The cards just couldn't possibly be stacked *that* badly against him. There might be a catch somewhere.

It was after one o'clock when he undressed for bed, but he phoned the desk of the hotel and left a call for six. Tomorrow was going to be a busy day. It had to be, if he were to keep on eating after a week or so.

He went to sleep, and dreamed—the poor goof—of Betty. Of Betty dressed (more or less) as he had seen her in the window of her apartment on Thirty-seventh Street, but being chased across the wild, weird landscape of some other world by a bug-eyed monster forty feet long, with nine legs on each side and green tentacles a yard thick.

Only somehow, in the mixed-up manner of dreams, ne, Keith, was the green Bern that was chasing Betty, and he was thwarted when he almost caught her by a tall dashing romantic young man who had muscles of steel and who must be Dopelle, although he looked uncommonly like Errol Flynn.

And Dopelle picked up the green monster that was Keith Winton and said, "Back to Arcturus, spy!" and threw him out into space. And there he was spinning heels (all eighteen of them) over head out into the void, among the planets and then among the stars. Going so fast that there was a ringing sensation in his ears. The sound got louder and louder until he quit being an Arcturian and realized that the ringing was the telephone.

He answered it and a voice said, "Six o'clock, sir."

He didn't dare lie down again or he'd have gone back to sleep, so he sat on the bed awhile, thinking, remembering the dream—which, after all, wasn't any sillier than most of what else had been happening to him.

What *did* Dopelle look like? Like Errol Flynn, as in his dream? Why not? Maybe Dopelle *was* Errol Flynn. If he remembered to do it, he'd check and see whether there *was* an Errol Flynn here.

He wouldn't be surprised if there wasn't.

Could this be some fantastic movie or story or book he'd tangled himself into on some quasi-plane of reality? Why not? Dopelle, he thought, was too perfect, too fantastic a character to be true. He didn't even sound like something out of a pulp magazine. No editor in his right mind would accept a story dealing with so improbable a character. Certainly no editor editing anything above the mental level of a comic book would accept Dopelle as a character.

And if this universe he found himself in was too screwy for fiction, how could he accept it as reality?

And yet hadn't the mechanical brain, Mekky, in brief contact with him, anticipated that very thought?

"... do not make one fatal error. This is real; it is not a figment of your imagination. Your danger here is real and this world is real. . . ."

Mekky—fantastic as Mekky himself had been—had anticipated the very things he was thinking now. And Mekky was right. This universe and the spot it had put him in were plenty real, and if he doubted that fact, the best proof to the contrary was his hunger, at this moment, for breakfast.

He dressed and went out.

At six-thirty in the morning the streets of New York were as busy as—where he'd come from—they would have been at ten or eleven o'clock. The short day necessitated by the mistout demanded an early start.

He bought a paper and read it while he ate breakfast.

The big news story, of course, was the visit of Mekky to New York, and the reception given him. There was a picture splashed over a quarter of the first page showing the sphere poised in mid-air outside the open window and Betty Hadley leaning out of the window, bowing to the crowd below.

A boxed item in ten-point boldface type gave the words Mekky had spoken, telepathically, to the crowd, just as Keith had heard them there, inside his head. "*Friends, I leave you now to bear a message from my master and creator, Dopelle, to ...*"

Yes, word for word. And apparently that had been the only public statement made by the mechanical brain. An hour later it had returned to "Somewhere in Space" as the news story put it.

He skimmed the rest of the paper. There was no news of the war, no mention of the crisis which Mekky had said (privately to Keith) was impending in the war.

If things were going badly, obviously it was being kept from the public. If Mekky had told him a military secret it must have been because Mekky—during Mekky's brief investigation of his thoughts before Mekky had spoken to him ("*An interesting situation, Keith Winton. . . .*")—had recognized that Keith was in no spot to spread the secret farther, even if he wished to.

An item on an inside page about a man being fined five thousand credits and cost of possession of a coin interested him. He read it carefully, but failed to find any answer to the problem of why the possession of coins was illegal. He made a mental note to look up coins in the public library as soon as he had time to do so. But not today. He had too much to do today already.

First thing was to rent a typewriter.

Before he left the restaurant he used the classified directory to locate the nearest typewriter rental agency.

By taking a chance on using the name Keith Winton, for which he still had identification in his wallet, he got one without having to leave a deposit and took it to his room in the hotel.

He put in the hardest day's work he'd ever done in his life.

At the end of it—he was dead tired by seven o'clock and had to quit then—he'd finished seven thousand words. A four-thousand-word story and a three-thousand-word one.

True, they were both rewrites of stories he'd written before, long ago, but he'd done a better job on them this time. One was a straight action story in a Civil War setting. The other was a light romance set against the background of early pioneer days in Kansas.

He fell into bed, too sleepy to phone down to the desk and leave a call for the morning. He knew he wouldn't sleep longer than twelve hours, and seven o'clock would be early enough for him to get up.

But he awoke early, just after five o'clock, in time to watch from his window the action of the sunlight in dissipating the blackness of the mistout. He watched, fascinated, while he dressed and shaved.

He had breakfast at six, and then back in his room he read over the two stories and was more than satisfied with them. They were *good*. What had been wrong with them before, the reason they hadn't sold the first time he'd written them, hadn't been the plots. His plots had always been sound. It had been the writing and the treatment. And five years as an editor had really taught him something.

He could make a living writing; he was sure of that now. Not that he could keep on batting out two stories every day except when he was rewriting his old stuff from memory. But he wouldn't have to do it nearly that fast. Once he'd rewritten the dozen or so stories that would be rewrites, he'd have a backlog. After that, two shorts or one novelette a week would be enough to keep the wolf from the door—even if, as before, his sales average would be fifty-fifty. And it should be better than that now, because these stories were better, definitely better.

One more story, he decided, and he'd start out to peddle them. And start, of course, with Borden Publications. Not only because he knew the ropes better there, but because they were good for quick checks if they liked the stories. Often, to oblige a writer who needed money quickly, he had put through a voucher and got a check into the mail within twenty-four hours after he'd read and accepted the story.

For his third rewrite job, he picked a science-fiction plot he'd tried once, one that had run only two thousand words. He had the plot clear in his mind and knew he could knock out the yarn in a couple of hours. And Marion Blake had told him Borden was in the market for science-fiction for their new magazine in that field, so the chances of a sale should be excellent.

The story required no major changes at all. It was a time-travel story about a man who went back to prehistoric times—told from the point of view of the cave man who encountered the time traveler. None of it was in a modern setting, so it couldn't go wrong.

He started pounding the typewriter again and finished by nine o'clock, despite the fact that the story had run a bit longer this time; he'd put in more characterization and atmosphere and had made it a much stronger and more vivid story. He felt damned proud of himself.

Half an hour later he was smiling at Marion Blake across the mahogany railing in the outer office at Borden Publications.

She smiled back. "Yes, Mr. Winston?"

"Brought in three stories," he said proudly. "One I want to leave with Miss Hadley for her love book. And one—who's running this new science-fiction book you told me about?"

"Keith Winton. Temporarily, anyway. After it's really on the stands they may put someone else on it."

"Good. I'll leave one with him. And who's running *Romantic Adventure Stories*?"

"Mr. Winton runs that, too. That and *Surprising Stories* are his regular books. I think he's free now; I'll see if he can talk to you. Miss Hadley's busy right now but maybe she'll be free by the time you've talked to Mr. Winton, Mr. Winston. Oh, by the way, did you decide on a pen name for yourself?"

He snapped his fingers in annoyance. "Forgot it. Put Karl Winston as a by-line. Well, we'll see if Mr. Winton minds. I'll mention it to him and tell him I've not used my right name on anything but feature articles, so it's perfectly okay if he wants me to use a *nom de plume* instead."

Marion had already pushed a plug into a hole in the switchboard. She talked a moment into the mouthpiece; Keith couldn't hear what she was saying.

She pulled the plug and smiled up at him again. "He'll see you," she told him. "I—uh—told him you were a friend of mine."

He said "Thanks a lot," and meant it. He knew that little things like that mattered sometimes. Not that an *in* of any kind would enable him to sell an unsalable story. But it would help in getting a quick reading and—if the story was accepted—a quick check for it.

After he'd started for Keith Winton's office he realized that he wasn't supposed to know the way until Marion had directed him, but it was too late by the time he remembered, so he kept on going.

A moment later Keith Winton sat down opposite Keith Winton, reached across the desk to shake hands with him and said, "I'm Karl Winston, Mr. Winton. Have a couple of stories to leave with you. I could have mailed them in, of course, but I thought I'd like to meet you while I'm in town."

## 10

### *Slade of the W. B. I.*

Keith was studying Winton as he spoke. Winton wasn't a bad-looking guy. He was about Keith's age, an inch or so taller but a few pounds lighter. His hair was darker and a bit curlier. Facially, there wasn't any noticeable resemblance at all. And he wore shell-rimmed glasses, fairly thick ones. Keith had never worn glasses in his life and had perfect vision.

"You don't live in New York?" Winton was asking him.

"Yes and no," Keith said. "I mean, I haven't been, but I may decide to stay here from now on. Or I may decide to return to Boston. I've been working on a paper there and doing quite a bit of free-lancing on the side." He'd thought out his story and didn't have to hesitate. "Got a leave of absence for a while and, if I can make a go of free-lancing here in New York, I probably won't go back."

"I brought in two shorts I'd like you to consider—one for *Romantic Adventure* and one for the new science-fiction book Marion tells me you're starting."

He took two of his three stories from the envelope and handed them across the desk.

"I know it's imposing on you to ask it," he said, "but I'd greatly appreciate a reading as quickly as you can get to it. Because I want to write some more I have planned along these lines. And I don't want to start them until I know—from your reaction to these—whether I'm on the right track or not."

Winton smiled. "I'll keep them out of the slushpile."

He glanced at the top right-hand corners of the title pages of the two scripts. "Three and four thousand. Well, those are lengths we need, and both books are wide open if the stories fit."

"Fine," Keith said. He decided to crowd his luck a little. "I happen to have an appointment here in the building on Friday, day after tomorrow. Since I'll be so close, do you mind if I drop in to see whether or not you've had time to read them?"

Winton frowned slightly. "Can't promise for sure that I'll get to them that soon, but I'll try to. If you're going to be in the building anyway, you might as well drop in."

Keith said, "Swell, thanks." Despite the lack of a promise he knew it was odds-on that the stories would be read by Friday. And if one or both of them rated acceptance, then would be the time to bring up the matter of putting through a voucher for a quick check. He'd have a story ready to account for his need of money in a hurry.

"Oh, by the way," he said. "About a by-line—" And he pointed out the similarity between Karl Winston and Keith Winton, and explained his willingness to use a pen name if Winton thought he should.

Winton smiled. He said, "It's not really important. If Karl Winston's your name, you have every right to use it. And I'm not doing any writing myself—and who notices the name of the editor of a magazine?"

"Other editors do," Keith said.

"And if you're really going in for pulp, you'll be sending stories to them, so they'll know Karl Winston's not a pen name of mine. So don't worry about it unless you *want* to pick up a *nom de plume* for your fiction work."

"And also," Keith said, "unless I sell a story to put a by-line on." He stood up. "Thanks a lot. And I'll drop in Friday about this same time. Good-bye, Mr. Winton."

He went back to Marion Blake's desk.

She said, "Miss Hadley's free now; you can go in, I think, as soon as I ring her." But she didn't push a plug; she looked at him curiously. "How did you know which door was Mr. Win-ton's office?"

He grinned at her. "I'm psychic."

"Seriously. I'm curious."

"Seriously, you glanced at that door the first time we mentioned Mr. Winton's name. Maybe you don't remember it, but you did. So I thought it was his, and if I'd been wrong you'd have called me back."

She dimpled at him; he'd passed *that* examination with flying colors. But, he thought, he'd have to remember to be on guard every second. Little mistakes like that could spoil everything.

She'd put in a plug and again was talking inaudibly into the mouthpiece. She pulled the plug out again. "Miss Hadley will see you," she told him.

And this time Keith remembered to wait until she pointed out the proper door to him.

On the way to it, he felt as though he was wading through thick molasses. He thought, "I shouldn't do this; I should have my head examined. I should leave the story for her, or mail it in, or take it to another love story magazine editor."

He took a deep breath and opened the door.

And then he *knew* he should have stayed away. His heart did a double somersault when he saw her sitting there at her desk, looking up at him with a slight, impersonal smile.

Incredibly, she was wearing a costume like the one she'd been wearing when he'd seen her at the window of her Thirty-seventh Street apartment. That is, she was wearing a green bra this time; nothing else showed above the top of the desk.

And, at close range, she was twice as beautiful as he remembered her to be. But of course that was silly—

Or *was* it silly? This was, somehow, a completely different universe. It had a completely different Keith Winton in it. Why couldn't it have at least a slightly different Betty Hadley? A few days ago he couldn't have imagined an edition of Betty more beautiful than the origin!. But this one *was*. The costume, of course, didn't make her any less attractive, but it was more than that.

And he was twice as much in love with this one as with the original.

Without realizing that he was staring at her, he stared, wondering just what the difference was. Feature for feature, she was the same. Of course, with this Betty Hadley, more features were visible because of the costume, but even that didn't account for it.

It was as subtle as the difference between the girls on the magazine covers back there and the ones on the covers here. Here they had more—well, you name it.

And it was like that with Betty; she was the same girl but subtly twice as beautiful and twice as desirable, and he was twice as much in love with her.

But slowly her smile faded and when she asked, "Yes?" he realized how long he'd been staring at her.

He said, "My name is Kei—Karl Winston, Miss Hadley. I— uh—"

She saw, obviously, how badly he was floundering and helped him out. "Miss Blake tells me you're a friend of hers and a writer. Won't you sit down, Mr. Winston?"

"Thank you," he said, taking the chair opposite her desk. "Yes, I brought in a story which . . ." And, once started, he managed to continue to talk intelligibly, telling her substantially the same story he'd told Keith Winton.

Even though his mind wasn't on what he was saying at all.

And then, somehow, he was making his getaway without falling over his own feet, and the interview was over, and he was out of the door.

But he decided then and there that he'd never again torture himself by coming that close to her. Not that it wouldn't be worth the torture if there was a chance in a million— But there wasn't; there couldn't be.

He was so miserable that he almost walked past the switchboard blindly and without speaking, but Marion Blake called out, "Oh, Mr. Winston!"

He turned and managed to make himself smile. He said, "Thanks a lot, Miss Blake, for telling both of them that I'm a friend of yours, and—"

"Oh, don't mention that. That's all right. But I have a message for you from Mr. Winton."

"Huh? But I just talked to him."

"Yes, I know. He just left, a minute ago, to keep an important appointment. But he said there was something he wanted to ask you, and he'll be back by half past twelve. And could you phone him then—that is, between then and one o'clock, when we close?"

"Why sure. I'll be glad to. And again, thanks a lot."

He should, he knew, invite her out for another drink or ask if he could *take* her to a show or a dance or something. He would, in fact, if even one of the three stories he'd just left turned out to be a sale. Until then, his dwindling capital didn't let him chance repaying the favor she'd done him.

He walked to the door, wondering what Keith Winton wanted to talk to him about so soon. He'd been in Betty's office less than fifteen minutes; Winton couldn't possibly have read even one of the two stories.

But—well, why wonder? He'd phone at half past twelve and find out.

As he walked toward the elevators in the hallway outside Borden Publications, Inc., the door of an up elevator slid open. Mr. and Mrs. L. A. Borden came out and the door slid shut behind them.

Caught unaware, Keith nodded and spoke to them. Each of them nodded slightly and Mr. Borden murmured something inaudible, as one does when spoken to by someone one cannot recall.

They went past him and entered the offices he'd just left.

Keith frowned as he waited for a down elevator. Of course they didn't know him, and he shouldn't have spoken. It was a very slight slip, but he'd have to be on the alert to avoid even slight ones.

He'd almost made a bad one back in Betty's office, too, when he'd started to introduce himself as Keith Winton instead of Karl Winston. And, now that he thought of it, Betty had given him a very peculiar look when he'd started to make that slip, when he'd got as far as "Kei—" before he caught himself. Almost as though—but that was silly. He put the thought out of his mind.

*Why*, though, did Betty Hadley wear that costume, or lack of a costume, even at the Borden offices? He hadn't seen any other women dressed that way—and surely he'd have noticed. It was one of the most puzzling of the minor mysteries he'd encountered. He wondered how he could find the answer without asking.

Such wide differences, and such amazing similarities. And it came to him again, as he walked into the elevator, that the similarities of this universe might be more dangerous to him than the differences; familiar things might trap him into un-considered reactions, like speaking to the Bordens.

That particular one undoubtedly didn't matter, but how easy it would be to make a similar mistake that did matter, that would give him away completely as the fake and phony he had to be in order to survive. The ever-present possibility of making a *big* mistake worried him.

He'd have worried about it more if he'd known that he already had.

He stood for a moment outside the building, wondering what he should do next. He didn't feel up to going back to his hotel and grinding out another story, not just yet. Late this afternoon and during the evening—when he'd have to stay indoors anyway on account of the mistout—would be time enough. Three stories—even though they were all rewrites and all fairly short—was plenty for two days' work. And he knew those stories were good; it would be better to keep up the quality rather than to drive himself and turn out junk. Yes, he'd take the afternoon off and resume writing this evening.

If he did a story tonight and another tomorrow he'd have something more to take with him when he kept his appointment at Borden. It seemed funny, he thought, to be on the other side of the fence there, to be taking stories in instead of having writers and agents bring them to him. Maybe he should get himself an agent—no, let that wait until he had a sale or two he could report, and a foot inside the door. And right now he could push his first stories harder than any agent would.

He strolled over to Broadway and north to Times Square. He stood looking up at the Times Building, wondering what was strange about it; then he realized that the strips of current news headlines in electric lights weren't flashing around as they should have been. Why not?

Probably because New York used a minimum of electric lighting by day. Probably because those whatever-they-were rays emitted by electrical incandescence and detectable by Arcturian spaceships weren't as completely blanked out by sunlight as they were by the mistout at night.

And that would account for the comparatively dim lighting he'd noticed in restaurants and offices and stores by day. Come to think of it, there'd been just about an irreducible minimum of li<sup>h</sup>tin<sup>ct</sup> in all of them.

He'd have to watch little things like that, to keep from giv- ing himself away. He'd had the electric light on in his hotel room most of the time he'd worked or read by day. Luckily, he hadn't been called on it. But hereafter he'd move the desk and chair over to the window and leave the light off except at night. He walked past a newsstand slowly and read the headlines:

FLEET BLASTS ARCTURIAN OUTPOST big victoby for solar forces

That ought to give him a kick, Keith thought, but it didn't. He couldn't hate Arcturians; he didn't even know what they looked like. And this war with Arcturus might be real, but it couldn't *seem* real to him; he couldn't believe in it yet. It still seemed like a dream to him, a nightmare that he'd wake up from, despite the fact that he'd waked up four times here and the war with Arcturus was still on.

He stood staring moodily at a window of hand-painted neckties. Something touched his shoulder, and he turned around. He jumped back, almost into the glass of the window. It was one of the tall, purple, hairy Lunans.

It said, in a shrill voice, "Pardon me, sir; do you have a match?"

Keith wanted to laugh, and yet his hand trembled a little as he handed over a package of matches and then took it back when the Lunan had lighted a cigarette.

It said, "Thank you," and walked on.

Keith watched its back and the way it walked. Despite bulging muscles, it walked like a man wading through waist-deep water. Heavy gravity, of course, Keith thought. On the moon, it'd be strong enough to throw Gargantua around. Here on Earth it was slumped down, pulled together, by a gravity several times what it was used to. Not an inch over eight feet tall; on the moon it would probably stand eight and a half or nine feet.

But wasn't there supposed to be no air on the moon? That must be wrong—or at least not true here. Lunans must breathe or they couldn't smoke cigarettes. No creature can smoke without breathing.

Suddenly—and actually for the first time—something occurred to Keith Winton. He could go to the moon if he wanted! *To Mars! To Venus!* And why not? If he was in a universe that had space travel, why shouldn't he take advantage of the fact? A little chill of excitement went down his spine. Somehow he hadn't, in the few days he'd been here, thought of space travel in connection with himself. Now the very thought of it excited him.

He couldn't do it right away, of course; it would take money, probably lots of money. He'd have to write plenty. But why shouldn't he?

And there was another possibility, once he'd learned the ropes enough to take a chance on it: those coins he still had. If a quarter picked at random had brought him two thousand credits, maybe one of the others would turn out to be really rare—valuable enough to finance a vacation on the planets. Come to think of it, the Greeneville druggist had admitted that the quarter was worth more than two thousand, but had said that was all he could afford to pay for it.

There must be a black market somewhere for those other coins. But it was too dangerous, until he'd learned more about them.

He strolled up Broadway as far as Forty-sixth and then saw by a clock in a window that it was almost twelve-thirty. He went into a drugstore and phoned Keith Winton at Borden Publications.

Winton's voice said, "Oh, yes, Mr. Winston. I thought of something else I wanted to talk to you about, something you might be able to do for us. You say you've done quite a bit of feature and non-fiction writing?"

"Yes."

"There's a non-fiction feature I've been wanting to run, and I'd like to talk to you about it to see if you'd care to tackle it for me. Only I'll need it within a day or two. Would you be interested? And could you do it that quickly?"

Keith said, "If I can do it at all, I can do it that quickly. But I'm not sure—What is the subject matter?"

"A bit complicated to explain over the phone. Are you free this afternoon?"

"Yes."

"I'm leaving here pretty soon; hardly be time for you to come back here. But I wonder if you'd mind dropping around to my place in the Village? We can have a drink and talk it over."

"Fine," Keith said. "Where and when?"

"Four o'clock all right? And I'm in Apartment 6 at three-one-eight Gresham, down in the Village. You'd probably better take a cab unless you know the district down there."

Keith grinned, but kept his voice serious. "I think I can find it all right," he said.

He ought to be able to. He'd lived there for four years.

He put the receiver back and went out to Broadway again, this time walking south. He stopped in front of the window of a travel agency.

"*Vacation Trips*," the sign read. "*Mi-Expense Tours to Mars and Venus. One Month. 5,000 cr.*"

Only five hundred bucks, he thought. Dirt cheap, as soon as he could earn enough to get five hundred bucks ahead. And maybe it would help take his mind off Betty.

Suddenly he was impatient to start writing again. He went back to his hotel, walking fast. He could get in about three hours' work before he had to leave for his appointment with Keith Winton.

He jerked paper and carbon into the typewriter and started working on the fourth story. He worked until the last minute, then hurried out and caught a downtown subway train.

He wondered what kind of a feature article Keith Winton wanted written in a hurry; he hoped it was something that he could handle, for it would mean a reasonably sure and reasonably quick check. Only if the feature was to be about something he didn't know anything about—like the training of space cadets or conditions on the moon—he'd have to have an explanation ready to enable him to turn down the assignment. Of course, he wouldn't turn it down if there was any chance of his handling it, possibly with the aid of a morning spent in research at the public library.

But he spent the subway ride and the walk from the subway to Gresham Street thinking up some plausible excuses to use in case the article was about something he didn't dare tackle.

The building was familiar and so was the name *Keith Win-ton* on the mailbox of Apartment 6 in the hallway downstairs.

He pressed the button and waited, with his hand on the latch, until the lock clicked.

Keith Winton—the *other* Keith Winton—was standing in the doorway of the apartment as Keith walked back along the hall.

"Come in, Winston," he said. He stepped back and opened the door wider. Keith walked in—and stopped suddenly.

A big man with iron-gray hair and cold iron-gray eyes was standing there in front of the bookcase. There was a deadly looking forty-five caliber automatic in his hand and it was pointed at the middle button of Keith's vest.

Keith stood very still, and raised his hands slowly.

The big man said, "Better frisk him, Mr. Winton. From behind. Don't step in front of him. And be careful."

Keith felt hands running lightly over him, touching all his pockets.

He managed to keep his voice steady. "May I ask what this is all about?"

"No gun," Winton said. He stepped around where Keith could see him again, but kept out of the line between Keith and the automatic in the big man's hand.

He stood there looking at Keith with puzzled eyes. He said, "I guess I owe you an explanation, sure. And then you owe me one. Okay, Karl Winston—if that's really your name—meet Mr. Gerald Slade of the W. B. I."

"Glad to know you, Mr. Slade," Keith said. What, he wondered, was the W. B. I.? World Bureau of Investigation? It seemed like a good guess. He looked back at his host. "Is that all the explanation you owe me?"

Where, he wondered desperately, had he made a mistake that had led to this?

Winton glanced at Slade and then back at Keith. He said, "I—uh—thought it best to have Mr. Slade here while I asked you certain questions. You brought me two stories this morning at the Borden office. Where did you get them?"

"Get them? I wrote them. And this business about wanting me to write a feature article for you—was that a gag?"

"It was," Winton said grimly. "It seemed the easiest way to get you out here without making you suspicious that we wanted to question you. Mr. Slarlf suggested it, after I called him and told him what you'd done."

"And what, may I ask, have I done?"

Winton looked at him curiously. "The only legal count thus far is plagiarism—but plagiarism in such an incredible manner that I thought the W. B. I. should look into it to find out *why* you even tried it."

Keith looked at him blankly. "Plagiarism?" he echoed.

"Those two stories you left were stories I wrote, five or six years ago. You did a nice rewrite job on them; I'll say that for you. They're better than the originals. But what made you think you could get away with selling me two of my own stories? It's the most unbelievable thing I've ever run into."

Keith opened his mouth and closed it again. The roof of it felt dry and he thought that if he tried to say anything only a croaking noise would come out. And what was there to say?

It was so completely obvious, now that he thought of it. Why *shouldn't* the Keith Winton who lived here—who had his job and lived in his apartment—have written the same stories?

He damned himself for a fool for not having thought of the possibility.

The pause was getting too long. He moistened his lips with his tongue. He had to say something, or silence would be construed as admission of guilt.



## *Gun Jump*

Keith Winton moistened his lips with his tongue a second time. He said, weakly, "Lots of stories have similar plots. There have been lots of cases where—"

Winton interrupted him. "These aren't just cases of similar plots. That I could understand. But too many of the minor details are identical. In one of the two stories the *names of both of my main characters* are the same. One of the stories has the same title as I used for it. And throughout both of them there are too many little things that are identical. Coincidence won't wash, Winston; coincidence could account for similarities—even pretty close similarities—in basic plots, but not for so many names and minor things being identical.

"No, those stories were *plagiarized*." He waved a hand toward a file cabinet standing beside the bookcase. "I've got copies of the original versions in my file there to prove it."

He frowned at Keith. "I suspected something before I finished reading the first page of one story. When I'd read all of both stories I was sure of it—but what I was sure of puzzled me. I don't get it. Why would a plagiarist have the colossal gall to try to sell stolen stories to the very man who wrote them? However or whenever you stole them—and that puzzles me too—you must have known I'd recognize them. And another thing—Is Winston your real name?"

"Of course."

"That's funny, too. A man calling himself Karl Winston offering stories written by a man named Keith Winton. What

I can't understand is why, if it's a fake name, you didn't pick one that wasn't so close—same initials and one letter added in the last name."

Keith wondered about that himself. His only excuse was that he'd had to think of a name on the spur of the moment while he was talking to Marion Blake. Even so, he should have had a better name ready, just in case he had to use one.

The man with the automatic asked, "Got any identification with you?"

Keith shook his head slowly. He had to stall, somehow, until he could figure an out—if there was one. He said, "Not with me. I can prove my identity, though. I'm staying at the Wat-sonia Hotel. If you phone there—"

Slade said dryly, "If I phone there I'll be told there's a Karl Winston registered. I know that; I phoned there already. You gave that return address on the stories you left with Mr. Win-ton." He cleared his throat. "That doesn't prove a thing except that you've been using the name Karl Winston during the two days you've registered there."

He clicked the safety catch on the big automatic. His eyes hardened. He said, "I don't like to shoot a man in cold blood but—"

Keith took an involuntary step backwards. "I don't get it," he protested. "Since when is plagiarism—even if I were guilty of it—something to shoot a man for?"

"We're not worried about plagiarism," Slade told him, grimly. "But we're under orders to shoot on sight anybody suspected of being an Arc spy. And there's one loose, last seen in Greenville upstate. We got a kind of punk description, but such as it is, you could fit it. And if you can't account for yourself any better than you have—"

"Wait a minute," Keith said desperately. "There's a simple explanation of this somewhere. There's *got* to be. And if I *were* a spy, wouldn't pulling a dumb stunt like stealing an editor's stories and trying to sell them back to him be the last thing I'd do?"

Winton said, "He's got something there, Slade. That's what puzzles me most about the whole thing. And I don't like the idea of shooting him down unless we're sure. Let me ask him one or two more questions before you shoot."

He turned to Keith. "Look, Winston, you can see this is no time to stall. It won't get you anything but bullets. Now if you're an Arc, heaven only knows why you'd have brought me those stories. Maybe I was supposed to react differently—do something else besides call in a W. B. I. man.

"But if you're *not* an Arc, then there must be some explanation. And if there is, you'd better give it quickly."

Keith licked his lips again. For a desperate moment—although an idea had come to him—he couldn't remember any of the places where he'd submitted those stories after he'd first written them five years ago. Then he remembered one.

He said, "There's only one possibility I can think of. Did you ever submit those stories to the Gebhart chain of pulps in Garden City?"

"Ummm—one of them, anyway. Probably both. I've got a record of it."

"About five years ago?"

"Yes, about that."

Keith took a deep breath. He said, "Five years ago I was a reader for Gebhart. I must have read your stories when they came in. I must have liked them—and probably passed them—but the managing editor who gave the final readings must not have bought them. But my subconscious mind must have remembered them—even the small details you say I had the same."

He shook his head as though bewildered. "If that's true, I'd better quit writing. Fiction, anyway. When I wrote those stories recently, I thought they were originals. If it was my subconscious memory of stories I'd read that long ago—"

He saw with relief that Slade's grip on the pistol wasn't quite so tight.

Slade said, "Or you could have taken notes on those stories intending to swipe them sometime later."

Keith shook his head. "If it had been deliberate plagiarism, wouldn't I have changed at least the names of the characters?"

Winton said, "That makes sense to me, Slade. The subconscious mind can do funny things. I'm inclined to

believe him. As he says, if he were plagiarizing deliberately, he'd at least change the name of the characters. And he wouldn't have kept the same name for one of the stories. He'd have changed more than he did—of the things that don't matter—all the way down the line."

Keith sighed with relief. The worst was over, if he could make the story stick. He said, "Better tear up the stories, Mr. Winton. I'll tear up my carbons. If my mind can play tricks like that on me, I stick to feature writing."

His host was looking at him curiously. He said, "The funny thing is, Winston, that those stories—as you've rewritten them—are plenty good enough to use. And, since the plots are mine and the writing is yours, damned if I'm not tempted to buy and print them, on a collaboration basis. In other words, to split with you. I'd have to explain things to Borden, but—"

"Just a minute, please," Slade interrupted. "Before you gentlemen get down to business, *I'm* not convinced. Or anyway I'm only ninety per cent convinced, and that's not enough. On a ten per cent doubt, I'm supposed to shoot—and you both know that."

Winton said, "We can check his story, Slade. Part of it, anyway."

"That's what I'm leading up to. And I'm not taking this gun off him until we check it forty ways for Sunday. For a start, do you want to put through a call to Garden City to check—no, they'd be closed hours ago; they're in the area that follows New York working hours even though they're out of the mist-out."

Winton said, "I've got an idea, Slade. When I frisked him a few minutes ago, I was looking only for a gun. I didn't feel one, but I did feel a billfold."

Slade's eyes got even harder than they'd been before as he stared at Keith. His fingers were again white on the gun.

"A billfold?" he said coldly. "And no identification in it?"

There was, Keith thought, plenty of identification in it—but not as Karl Winston. Would Slade hesitate even a second to shoot when he saw that the identification in the billfold would seem to indicate that he had impersonated or intended to impersonate Keith Winton?

That identification had saved his life in Greenville; it was going to cost him his life in New York City. He should have gotten rid of it the minute he quit using the name Keith Winton. He saw now, clearly, the string of mistakes he'd been making ever since his first trip to the Borden office.

And it was too late now to correct any of them. Probably he had only seconds to live.

The W. B. I. man wasn't waiting for him to explain why there wasn't identification in the wallet. It had been a rhetorical question. He said to Winton, without taking his eyes off Keith: "Get behind him again and get the wallet. And see what else is in his pockets. This is the last chance I'm going to give him—and I'm softhearted and softheaded to do that much."

The other Keith Winton circled to approach him from the back.

Keith took a deep breath. This was going to be *it*. Besides the identification in the wallet, he still had the incriminating coins wrapped in the paper money—probably equally incriminating—so it wouldn't rattle. He hadn't dared leave the stuff in his hotel room, and it was still in a tight little wad in the fob pocket of his trousers.

Not that it would be needed. The contents of the wallet would be enough.

Yes, this was *it*. Either he was going to die here and now or—he'd have to try to jump that gun. Heroes in the stories he had bought—back in a sane universe where he'd been a Borden editor instead of an Arcturian spy—always managed to jump a gun whenever it became necessary.

Was there a chance in a thousand that it could really be done?

The other Keith Winton was behind him now. Keith stood very still with the muzzle of the pistol aiming right at him. His mind was going like a millrace, but it wasn't thinking of anything that offered much promise of keeping him from being shot within the next minute or two. As soon as that wallet was opened and the identification in it was read. . .

All Keith's attention was on the automatic. A gun like that, he knew, shot steel-jacketed bullets that would go right through a man at close range. If Slade fired now he'd probably kill both of them, both Keith Wintons.

And then what? Would he wake up back on Borden's farm in Greenville, in a sensible world? No, not according to Mekky, the mechanical brain. "*This is real. . . . Your danger here is real. If you are killed here . . .*"

And, wildly improbable as Mekky himself was, Keith knew somehow that Mekky was dead right. Somehow there were two universes and two Keith Wintons—but this one was just as real as the one he'd grown up in. The other Keith Winton was just as real as he was, too.

And would the fact that one shot would probably kill them both while the other Winton was behind him delay the W. B. I. man's finger on the trigger for a single second? It might, or it might not.

A hand was reaching into his hip pocket. It came out, and he felt the billfold coming out with it. Keith found that he was holding his breath. A hand went into his side trouser pocket; apparently his host was going to finish the search before studying any of the objects he found.

Keith quit thinking and moved.

His hand closed on Winton's wrist, and he pivoted and swung Winton around in front of him, between himself and Slade. His trouser pocket ripped. Over Winton's shoulder he saw the W. B. I. man moving to the side to get a clear shot. He moved, keeping Winton between them.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw one of Winton's fists coming for his face and he jerked aside,

letting the fist pass over his shoulder. Then—with Winton still between him and Slade—he stepped in low, butting his head against Winton's chest. And, with both hands and with all the weight of his body and the momentum of his forward rush, he bulled Winton backward against Slade, following close.

Slade stumbled backward into the bookcase and glass crashed. The automatic went off, making a noise like a blockbuster in the confined space of the room.

Keith clung with both hands to Winton's lapels while, alongside Winton's legs, Keith's foot kicked upward at the automatic. He missed the gun but the toe of his shoe hit Slade's wrist and the automatic went out of Slade's hand.

It clunked against the carpeted floor. Keith gave a final shove against Winton, pushing him and Slade back against the tottering bookcase, and then dived for the gun. He got it.

He backed off, holding the gun to cover both of them. He was breathing hard and, now that the immediate action was over, his hand was trembling. It had worked; a gun *could* be jumped, just as in the stories he used to buy, when the gun-jumper had nothing to lose in trying.

Keith moved the gun menacingly and both Winton and Slade stood still.

A voice called out, "Are you all right, Mr. Winton?" Keith recognized the voice—that of Mrs. Flanders, who lived in the adjoining apartment.

He tried to make his voice sound as much as possible like the other Keith Winton's, trusting to the muffling action of the door to disguise any difference in the overtones. He called, "Everything's okay, Mrs. Flanders. Gun went off while I was starting to clean it. The recoil knocked me over."

He stood still, waiting, knowing she'd be wondering why he didn't open the door. But all his attention had to be on the two men in front of him and he didn't take his eyes off them for a second.

He saw the puzzled look in Winton's eyes; Winton was wondering how he had known Mrs. Flanders' name and how he had recognized her voice.

There was a few seconds' silence and then Mrs. Flanders' voice came through the door again. "All right, Mr. Winton. I just wondered—"

He considered calling out again, to tell her he couldn't open the door because he wasn't dressed. But he decided not to. This time she might be listening more critically to the sound of his voice and realize that it wasn't that of the Keith Winton she knew. And besides it wasn't too logical that he'd be cleaning a gun while he was undressed.

Better to let her wonder and to quit while he was ahead. He heard her walking back to her own apartment and from the slowness of her steps, he knew she *was* wondering. Why he hadn't opened the door, and why there'd been so much noise just from his falling over from the recoil.

He didn't think she'd call a copper right away; she'd keep on wondering awhile first. But some other tenant might be calling right now to report the sound of a gunshot. He had to do something quickly about Winton and the W. B. I. man, so he could get away before the police came.

It was something of a problem. He couldn't just shoot them—nor could he simply walk out and leave them to start an immediate pursuit. Tying up would take too long and be too risky.

But he needed at least a few minutes' grace to start his getaway. Getaway to where? he wondered; then shoved that thought out of his mind. Right now he couldn't afford to figure more than minutes ahead.

"Turn around," he ordered, making his voice sound grim and deadly—as grim and deadly as Slade's voice had sounded when Slade had had the gun.

He stepped in close when they had turned, keeping the muzzle of the gun in the W. B. I. man's back; he was much more afraid of Slade than of Winton. His left hand felt Slade's hip pockets. Yes, there was a pair of handcuffs there, as he had hoped. He took them and stepped back again.

He said, "All right, step over by that post in the archway. You, Winton, reach through it. Then cuff yourselves together. First, toss me your keys, Slade."

He watched their every move until he heard the cuffs click twice.

Then he backed to the door and slid the gun into his pocket, keeping his hand on it, but throwing on the safety catch with his thumb. He looked back at his prisoners as he opened the door, thought of telling them not to yell, but didn't bother. They'd yell anyway.

They started almost as soon as he pulled the door shut from the outside. Doors started popping open on either side as he strode along the hallway to the front. He walked fast, but wouldn't let himself run. Nobody, he thought, would actually try to stop him, although phone calls to the police were undoubtedly being made right now in more than one apartment.

Nobody did stop him. He made the street and kept up his fast walk. He was a block away when he heard sirens. He slowed down instead of hurrying faster, but he turned off Gresham Street at the next corner.

A squad car passed him, heading toward the apartment, but he knew he didn't have to worry about it just yet; within five or ten minutes they'd have his description and that would be a different matter. But by that time he could be on Fifth Avenue, walking north from Washington Square, and they wouldn't be able to pick him out of the crowd even

if they came that way. Or better yet, if he could get a taxi—One came along, empty, and he started to hail it. Then he put his hand down quickly and stepped back to the curb before the driver saw him. He swore at himself, remembering now that he'd forgotten, in the excitement, to get his wallet back from Winton.

On top of everything else, now, he was broke! He couldn't even take the subway!

He swore at himself again when he realized that he might just as well have taken advantage of the situation back there, while he'd held the upper hand, to augment his fortunes. Why hadn't he taken Winton's billfold—and even Slade's—as well as his own? Ordinary rules of honesty scarcely apply when one is already wanted for an offense that carries a shoot-on-sight penalty!

With the combined contents of his own, Winton's and Slade's wallets, he'd have been solvent. And even if he had money, his situation was desperate enough now. He couldn't even go back to his hotel to get his pitifully few clothes and possessions.

He kept walking north, and by the time he'd crossed Fourteenth Street, he began to feel fairly safe from the squad cars that would be looking for him. Several might have passed; he studiously kept from watching the traffic that streamed past on Fifth Avenue.

The sidewalks were still crowded—possibly a little more so now than at any other time since he'd started walking. It might have been because he was a little nearer the center of town, but he didn't think that was the reason.

Also, he noticed, there was a change in the way people were walking. There were no strollers; everybody walked as though in a hurry to get somewhere. Unconsciously, he'd increased his own pace to match, to avoid being conspicuous as the only stroller. There seemed to be hurry in the air.

And suddenly he realized why. Twilight was falling, and all these people were hurrying to be home before dark. Before the mistout.

## 12

### *Girl of Space*

All these people were hurrying-scurrying to get home and under cover, to lock and bar the doors of their apartments, and to leave the streets to blackness and to murder.

And for the first time since he'd made his getaway from the apartment he stopped and wondered seriously where he was going, where he *could* go.

If only he'd had the sense not to give his right address on those manuscripts he'd turned in, then they wouldn't be waiting for him at his hotel. A minor annoyance that seemed major was the fact that he was paid in advance there for the rest of the week.

It looked as though he were going to have to try to capitalize on the coins in his pocket. If it were only earlier in the day, he could go to the library and study up on coinage, try to find out what it was all about. Why hadn't he done that while he was in the library, while he had the chance? Why, for that matter, hadn't he done a lot of things he hadn't?

Aside from getting capital by disposing of the coins, there was just one possibility he could think of. If only he could get in touch with Mekky! Mekky had been inside his mind. Mekky could vouch for him, could assure the forces of law and order that he was not an Arcturian spy, whatever he was.

And surely, if he could get a message through to Mekky, Mekky wouldn't refuse to help him *in extremis*.

He was still walking northward, in the Twenties, when he realized where he must go. He started walking faster.

It was dusk when he reached the apartment house on Thirty-seventh Street; the few people left on the streets were almost running now in their haste to beat the mistout.

A janitor was just reaching to lock the outer door as Keith opened it. The man's hand went quickly to his back pocket, but he didn't draw the gun or whatever was there. He asked suspiciously, "Who do you want to see?"

"Miss Hadley," Keith said. "Just staying a minute."

"Okay." The janitor stepped aside and let him past.

Keith started back for the door of what looked like a self-service elevator, but the janitor's voice came back after him. "You'll have to walk. Juice is off already, mister. And hurry back down if you want me to take a chance of opening the door to let you out."

Keith nodded and took the stairs instead. He ran up them so fast that on the landing of the fifth floor he had to stop, panting, to get his breath back so he'd be able to talk.

After a minute he rang the bell of the front apartment. There were footsteps toward the door and Betty Hadley's voice called out, "Who is it?"

"Karl Winston, Miss Hadley. Sorry to bother you, but it's important. It's—a matter of life and death."

The door opened on the chain and Betty's face looked at him through the three-inch opening. Her eyes looked a little frightened.

He said, "I know it's awfully late, Miss Hadley—but I've got to get in touch with Mekky right away. It's terribly important; is there any way it can be done?"

The door started to close and for a moment he thought she was going to shut him out without speaking again; then he heard the rattle of the chain and knew that she'd pulled the door nearer shut only so that she could unbolt the chain.

The bolt slid out of the groove and the door opened.

Betty said, "Come in, *K-Keith Winton*."

He didn't even notice at first that she'd called him by his right name. She still wore the costume she'd worn at her desk that morning at the Borden offices. Yes, there were green trunks to go with the green bra. They were very brief trunks, very well shaped. Green leather boots came halfway up shapely calves. Between the boots and the trunks, the bare golden flesh of dimpled knees and rounded thighs.

She stepped back and, scarcely daring to breathe, Keith went into the room. He closed the door behind him and stood leaning against it, staring at Betty, not quite believing.

The room was dim, the shades already pulled down. The light came from a pair of candles in a candelabrum on the table behind Betty. Her face was shadowed, but the soft light behind her made a golden aura of her blond hair and silhouetted her slim, beautiful body. An artist could not have posed her better.

She said, "You're in trouble, Keith Winton? They found out—about you?"

His voice surprised him by being a bit hoarse. "How—how did you know my name?"

"Mekky told me."

"Oh. Just what did Mekky tell you?"

Instead of answering, she asked, "You haven't mentioned Mekky to anyone else? No one would think of your coming here?"

"No."

She nodded, and then turned, and Keith saw for the first time that a colored maid was standing in the far doorway. Betty said, "It's all right, Delia. You may go to your room."

"But, Miss—" The maid's voice was worried.

"It's all right, Delia."

The door closed quietly behind the maid and Betty turned back to Keith.

He took a step toward her, and then made himself stop. He asked, "Don't you remember—I don't understand. Which Betty Hadley are you? Even if Mekky told you—how could you have known—"

It sounded inarticulate and confused, even to him.

Her voice was cool, but friendly. She said, "Sit down, Mr. Winton. I'm going to call you that to avoid confusing you with the Keith Winton I know. What happened? Was it Keith who found you out?"

Keith nodded gloomily. "Yes, the two stories I gave him were his own stories. I didn't even try to explain they were mine, too. It wouldn't have made sense to him; it doesn't make much sense to me, either, even though I know it's true. And I'd have been shot long before I got halfway through trying to tell the truth."

Do you know what the truth *is*?

"No. Do you? Did Mekky tell you?"

"He doesn't know either. What about the stories? What do you mean, he wrote them and you wrote them too?"

"Something like that. In the universe I came from, I am—I was—Keith Winton. Here *he's* Keith Winton. Our lives were approximately parallel up to last Sunday evening.

"But about my stories— Please tear up that one I left with you this morning. Technically, it's plagiarized. But—about reaching Mekky. I've *got* to. Is there any way?"

She shook her head. "You can't possibly reach Mekky. He's with the fleet. The Arcs are—" She stopped short.

"The Arcs are going to attack," Keith said. "Mekky told me there was a crisis in the war. That the Arcs might win." He laughed a little, bitterly. "But I can't get excited about the war. I can't believe in it enough to get excited about it. I can't seem to believe in anything here, really, except— No, I don't even believe in you—in that costume. What is it? Do you wear it all the time?"

"Of course."

"Why? I mean, other women here—"

She looked at him in bewilderment. "Not all of them, of course. Only a very few in fact. Only the space girls."

"Space girls?"

"Of course. Girls who work, or have worked, on spaceships. Or ones who are fiancées of space men. Being Dopelle's fiancée would entitle me to wear it, even if I hadn't done exploring in space, on leaves of absence from Borden."

"But *why*?" He floundered. "I mean, is it so hot in a spaceship that such an— an abbreviated costume is necessary? Or what?"

"I don't know what you mean. Of course it isn't hot in spaceships. Mostly we wear heated plastic coveralls."

"Transparent plastic?"

"Naturally. Mr. Winton, what are you getting at?"

He ran a hand through his hair. "I wish I knew. The costumes. Transparent plastic— Like the covers on *Surprising Stories*"

"Why, of course. Why would cover pictures like that be *put* on *Surprising Stories* unless we really wore such costumes?"

He tried to think of an answer to that; there wasn't any.

And anyway, he could stay here only a few minutes and there were important things he had to know. Things that might make the difference of his being alive or dead twenty-four hours from now.

Resolutely he looked *at* her costume instead of the parts of her that weren't covered by it. That helped a little. A damned little.

He asked, "What did Mekky tell you about me?" That was safer ground, and besides he had to know.

"He didn't know much himself," she told him. "He said he hadn't time to go really deep under the surface of your

mind. But he learned that you really were from—somewhere else. He didn't know where, or how you got here or what had happened. He said that if you tried to explain yourself to anyone else, you'd be judged insane, but that you weren't. He could tell that.

"He knew that where you came from you were called Keith Winton and were an editor—although you don't look like the Keith Winton you found here, and you were smart enough to use a different name."

"But not smart enough," Keith said, "to use a completely different one. And not smart enough not to try to sell Keith Winton his own stories. But go on."

"He knew you were in a jam here because—well, because you don't know enough about things not to make mistakes. He knew you'd get yourself shot for a spy unless you were awfully careful. He said he warned you about that."

Keith leaned forward. "What *is* Mekky? Is he really only a machine, a robot? Or did—Dopelle put a real brain into a sphere?"

"He's a machine—not a real brain in the sense you mean it. But he's more than a machine, somehow. Even *Dopelle* doesn't understand all of that part of it, how *he* did it, but Mekky has emotions. He even has a sense of humor."

Keith noticed the almost reverent way she'd said *Dopelle* and the way she'd emphasized the personal pronoun, almost capitalizing it. Damn him, he thought, she almost worships him.

He closed his eyes a second and when he opened them he didn't look at her. But looking away made him think of her even more strongly, and he hardly knew that she was talking again until he realized she was asking a question.

"What can I do? Mekky told me he saw in your mind that you might come to me for help if things got hopeless for you. And he said it would be all right for me to help and advise you if I didn't take any risk myself."

Keith said, "I wouldn't let you do that. I wouldn't have come here if anybody could have followed me, or even have suspected that I might come to you. But what I wanted was to find out how to get in touch with Mekky. My masquerade here has blown up higher than a kite, and I haven't any believable answers for the questions the cops would ask me—even if they stopped to ask questions. I hoped Mekky could do something."

"But there's no way you could get in touch with Mekky unless you could get to the fleet."

"And where is the fleet?"

She hesitated, frowning, before she decided to speak. "I guess it doesn't matter if I tell you. It's not exactly public knowledge, but a lot of people know. It's near Saturn. But you couldn't possibly get there; you'll have to wait it out until Mekky returns. Do you have any money?"

"No, but I don't— Wait, there's something you can tell me, I hope. I could look it up at the library tomorrow, but if you can tell me now, it'll save time. What's the score on coinage-metal coins?"

"Metal coins? There haven't been any since nineteen thirty-five. They were called in then, at the time of the change over from dollars-and-cents currency to credits."

"Why?"

"The change to credits? To establish a world-wide monetary standard. All countries made the change at the same time, so the war effort would be—"

Keith interrupted. "Not that; I mean why no metal coins?"

"The Arcs were counterfeiting them—and nearly succeeding in upsetting our economy by doing so. Counterfeiting paper currency, too. They discovered Earth was a capitalist economy and—"

"All of it? Russia?"

"Of course, all of it. What do you mean about Russia?"

"Never mind," Keith said. "Go on."

They were able to make counterfeit money that couldn't be told from real—not even by experts. It started an inflation that looked like it was going to lead to a smashup of the whole world economy.

"So the war council of the nations appealed to the scientists, and a group of scientists worked out a kind of paper currency that the Arcs couldn't counterfeit. I don't know what the secret of the currency is; nobody does except a few top men in the various countries' bureaus of engraving."

"Why can't it be counterfeited?" Keith asked.

"The paper. Something secret—a process, rather than an ingredient that the Arcs could analyze—makes the paper give off a faint yellowish glow in the dark. Anybody can spot counterfeit money now, just by holding it somewhere in a deep shadow. And no counterfeiters, including the Arcs, can duplicate the paper that gives off the glow."

Keith nodded. "And that was when the change was made from dollars to credits?"

"Yes, in all countries simultaneously when the new paper was introduced. Each country backs its own currency, but it's all in credits and all kept at par so it's interchangeable."

"And they called in all the old money, and made it illegal to possess any?"

"Yes. And there's a pretty stiff fine—a jail sentence, in some countries—for possessing any. But there are coin collectors, a great many of them, who are willing to take a chance because they're so enthusiastic about their hobby. And, because the traffic in coins is black market, they bring high prices. Collecting coins is illegal and dangerous, but it's not considered really a moral crime by most people."

"Like drinking during Prohibition?"

Betty looked puzzled. "Like what?"

Keith said, "Never mind." He took the little wad of money out of his pocket, the coins wrapped in the bills. He opened them out and studied them, first the bills and then the coins.

He said, "I've got five coins here and two bills that are dated before nineteen thirty-five. Got any idea what they might be worth?"

He handed them to Betty, who held them near the candle to look at them closely. She said, "I don't know just what prices are paid; it depends on the dates and the condition. But very roughly, I'd guess they're worth ten thousand credits—a thousand dollars by the old scale."

"Is that all?" Keith asked. "A druggist in Greeneville gave me two thousand credits for just one coin, and he said it was worth a lot more than that."

She handed the money back to him. "It was probably a rare date. Of course, one of these could be rare, too. I just made a guess on a basis of their being about average as far as rareness of dates is concerned. But one of them alone might be worth ten thousand credits if it's a rare date. What are those other bills and coins you separated these from?"

"The ones that could have got me in real trouble. They're all dated after nineteen thirty-five."

"Then they must be counterfeits, Arc counterfeits. You'd better get rid of them and not have any of them found on you."

Keith said, "That's what I don't understand. These *aren't* Arc counterfeits, but why would the Arcs have counterfeited coins of dates after the Earth governments quit *making* coins?"

"They do stupid things as well as brilliant ones. After the currency change cut off their chance of counterfeiting in the ordinary way, they had their spies here raise money for their operations by selling coins to collectors. Only they pulled the stupid boner of continuing to make coins and bills of the obsolete type but of current dates.

"About twenty Arc spies have been caught because they tried to sell misdated coins to collectors. Why, just last Sunday, somewhere upstate, an Arc spy tried to—" She stopped and stared at him. "Oh. That would have been you, wouldn't it?"

"That would have been I," Keith said. "Only I'm not an Arc spy, and the coin wasn't a counterfeit—Arc or otherwise."

"But if it wasn't counterfeit, how *could* it have been dated after thirty-five?"

Keith sighed. "If I knew that, I'd have answers to a lot of other questions. Anyway, I'll drop the unsalable coins and bills out of this lot down the first sewer after I leave here. But look—about Arcturian spies. Are Arcturians human beings? Are they so like us physically that they can pass as humans?"

The girl shuddered. "They're *horribly* different. Monsters.

More like insects in appearance, bigger of course, and as intelligent as we are. But evil. Back in the early days of the war, they captured quite a few human beings alive. And they can—*take over* people, put their minds into human bodies and use them as spies and saboteurs.

"There aren't so many now. Most of them have been killed. Sooner or later they give themselves away because their minds are alien and they don't completely understand the details of our civilization. They make some mistake that exposes them."

"I can see how they'd do that," Keith said grimly.

"Anyway, it's a diminishing danger. Our defenses are good enough now that it's been years since any human beings have been captured alive. Sometimes they can get through to kill, but not to capture. And they can't have many left alive out of the people they captured early in the war."

"But even so," Keith said, "why shoot on suspicion? Why aren't they arrested? If their minds are really alien, a psychiatrist should be able to tell for sure whether they're Arcturians or not. Don't a lot of innocent people get killed because of that shoot-on-suspicion business?"

"Of course. Maybe a hundred for every real spy that's killed. But—well, they're so dangerous, so capable of doing things that can result in the death of a million or more people, that it's better, *really* better, not to take the slightest chance with one. Even if a thousand humans were killed to get one Arc spy, it'd be worth it.

"You see if they got even a few of our scientific secrets to add to their own science it would change the tide of the war—and it's pretty evenly balanced now. That is, I thought it was pretty even until Mekky told me, as he told you, that there's a crisis right now. Maybe they have an edge already. And if we lose the war, it means annihilation for the human race. They don't want even to rule us; they want to exterminate us and take over the Solar System for their own use."

"That would be nasty of them," Keith said.

Betty's face flamed with sudden anger. "Don't joke about it. Do you think the end of the human race is a joke?"

"I'm sorry," Keith said contritely. "It's just that somehow I can't— Let's skip that. I guess I see what you mean about how dangerous a spy can be. But I still don't see what's to lose by being sure before you shoot one. If you've

got a gun on him, he can't get away."

"Oh, but he can, a good fraction of the time. They tried arresting them until too many escaped on the way to jail or even while they were locked up. They've got special powers, physical and mental. Having a gun on one of them isn't enough."

Keith grinned wryly. "So one of them could take a gun away from a W. B. I. man who was holding it on him. Well—in my case, if they had any doubts before this afternoon, they haven't now."

He stood up. For a long moment he stared at Betty, at the gleam of candlelight on her golden hair and golden skin, at the incredible beauty of her face and the incredible wonder of her body. He stared at her as though he might never see her again—as, indeed, seemed very probable.

He formed a mental picture of her that he would carry with him, he knew, for the rest of his life—whether the rest of his life was forty minutes or forty years. The former seemed the more likely.

He turned his head and looked at the window, the window from which Betty had leaned on the occasion of Mekky's visit. The pane of the window was black, blank.

The mistout had started.

He said, "Thank you, Miss Hadley. Good-bye."

She stood up, and her eyes went to the window, as his had. "But where are you going to go? You might take a chance for a block or two if you're careful, but—"

"Don't worry about me. I'm armed."

"But you haven't any place to go, have you? You can't stay here, of course; there's just Delia and I. But there's a vacant apartment on the floor below. I can fix it with the janitor so—"

"No!"

Keith's answer was so explosive that he felt foolish after he had said it.

She said, "But tomorrow I can talk to the W. B. I. I can explain to them that Mekky vouched for you to me. Until Mekky gets back a few months from now, it won't be safe for you to be running loose—but on my word they might hold you in protective custody until Mekky does come back."

It made sense and a shade of doubt must have showed on

Keith's face. Little as he liked the idea of several months in protective custody, it wouldn't last forever, and it was better to be alive than to be dead.

She must have seen she was gaining her point. She said, "I'm almost sure they'll believe me—at least enough to give you the benefit of the doubt. As Dopelle's fiancée—"

"No," Keith said. She couldn't have known it, but it had been the wrong thing to say. He shook his head very definitely.

"I can't stay," he said. "I can't explain—but I can't stay."

He looked at her again, filling his eyes with her for what would quite likely be the last time. "Good-bye," he said.

"Good-bye, then." She held out her hand to him but he pretended not to see it. He didn't trust himself to touch her.

He got out quickly.

On his way down the stairs he began to realize how foolish he had been, and to be glad that he'd been foolish. He was glad he hadn't accepted any help from Betty Hadley. Advice, yes; that was all right. And answers to questions he couldn't have asked anyone but her or Mekky. His picture of this universe was a lot clearer now, especially his understanding of the coinage matter.

Other things were still puzzling. That matter of the costume she wore. Didn't she know she must drive men crazy, dressing like that? And yet the costume had seemed to her so natural that she was puzzled why he had wondered about it.

Well, that matter would have to be filed away for future curiosity. Maybe Mekky would be able to explain a lot of minor things to him, if and when he ever got to Mekky, and if and when Mekky condescended to give him enough time to solve his major problem.

Anyway, he was glad he'd had the guts not to accept Betty's offer of help.

It was silly not to have, but he was tired, very tired, of being pushed around by this mad universe of disguised Arcturians and flying sewing machines.

The more cautious and careful he'd tried to be, the more slips he'd made and the more trouble he got into. He was mad, now. And he had a gun in his pocket, a big gun, a forty-five automatic that would stop even an eight-foot purple Lunan.

He was in a mood to use that gun, too. Anybody who gave him any trouble in the mistout was going to get some trouble back. Even if he ran afoul of the Nighters, he'd get a few of them before they got him.

The hell with being cautious. What did he have to lose?

The janitor was still in the downstairs hallway. He looked in amazement as Keith came down the stairs.

"Y'ain't going *out*, are you, mister?" he wanted to know.

Keith grinned at him. "Got to. Got to see a man about a sphere."

"You mean *Mekky*? You going to see *DopelleP*?" There was awe in the man's voice. He went to the door to open it, drawing a revolver from his hip pocket as he did so. He said, "Well, if you know *him*—and I shoulda guessed it, since you was seeing Miss Hadley—maybe you know what you're doing. I hope so."

Keith said, "We both hope so."

He slid through the doorway into the blackness and heard the door quickly slammed shut and bolted after him.



He stood there, just outside the door, and listened. After the scrape of the bolt going shut, there wasn't a sound. The silence was as dense as the darkness.

Finally, he took a deep breath. He couldn't stand there all night; might as well get going. This time he was going to take a smarter way of traversing the mistout, though, than the one he'd used Sunday night after his arrival from Greenville.

He felt his way out to the curb and sat down on it long enough to take off his shoes, tie the laces of them together, and to hang them around his neck. Without them, he wouldn't make enough noise for anyone to hear and stalk him.

He stood up and found that it was easy, if awkward, to follow the curb line by walking with one foot on the curbing and the other foot down in the gutter.

The feel of a sewer grating under his foot reminded him of the misdated coins and bills he had to get rid of. He'd put them back in a different pocket from the others so he didn't have to strike a match to identify them as he took them out and shoved them through the grating of the sewer. He heard them splash into water several feet down.

With that out of the way, he went on, listening. He shifted the forty-five automatic to his right coat pocket and kept his hand in the pocket and on the gun, his thumb ready to flick the safety catch.

He wasn't afraid now, as he'd been the last time he'd been in the mistout. Having the gun was a factor in that, but it wasn't all of the explanation. Nor was it because the last time the mistout itself had been a mystery and now he understood what it was and why it was there.

The difference was simpler than that: last time, he had been the hunted and this time he was the hunter. His role now was active, not passive, and the mistout was his friend and not his enemy.

His plans were necessarily vague and would have to adapt themselves to circumstances, but the first step was clear. The first thing he needed was money, a chance to sell several dollars' worth of dollars for ten thousand credits, more or less. And anyone he would encounter would be a criminal—since only criminals were abroad in the mistout—and could be persuaded, with a forty-five if not otherwise, to lead him to a fence who'd buy the illegal coins and bills from him.

Yes, it felt good to be the hunter and not the hunted, and to be taking some more positive action than writing stories merely to survive. He'd always hated writing, anyway.

Hunting was much better. And this kind of hunting, especially. He'd never hunted men before.

## 13

### *Joe*

He turned south on Fifth Avenue. For the first few blocks, he might have been groping through the ruins of Chichen Itza or Ur of the Chaldees. Then, suddenly, he heard his quarry.

It was not the sound of footsteps; whoever it was either was standing still against the front of a building or else had, like Keith, taken off his shoes to walk silently. The sound Keith heard was a slight, barely audible snuffle.

He stood very still, scarcely breathing, until he heard it again, and then he knew the man was moving, going south. The second snuffle had come from further away, in that direction.

He hurried his steps, almost running, until he was sure that he was well ahead of his quarry. Then he cut diagonally across the sidewalk and groped with his hands ahead of him until he came to the building fronts. Then, facing the direction from which his victim was approaching, he drew the automatic from his pocket and stood waiting.

The instant something bumped into the muzzle of the pistol, Keith reached out with his left hand and caught the front of a coat to keep the man from pulling away.

"Don't move," he said sharply. Then, "All right, turn around, very slowly."

There'd been no answer but a sharp intake of breath. The man turned slowly; Keith's hand kept contact with him. When the man's back was toward Keith, Keith's left hand groped, crossed over, and took a revolver out of a right hip pocket. He slid it into his own left coat pocket and quickly put his hand on the man's shoulder again. The most dangerous part was over.

He said, "Don't move yet. We're going to talk. Who are you?"

A tight voice said, "What do you care who I am? All I got on me is about thirty credits and that rod. You got the rod; take the dough too, and let me go."

"I don't want your thirty credits," Keith told him. "I want some information. If I get it straight I might even give you your rod back. Do you know your way around?"

"What do you mean?"

Keith said, "I just got in town, from St. Louis. I don't know the ropes here, and I got to find me a fence. Tonight."

There was a pause, and the voice was a little less tight now. "Jewelry? Or what?"

"Coins. And a few bills. Pre-thirty-five dollars. Who handles the stuff here?"

"What's in it for me?"

Keith said, "Your life, for one thing. Maybe your gun back. And—if you don't try to cross me—maybe a hundred credits. Two hundred, maybe, if you take me to somebody who'll give me a good price."

"Peanuts. Make it five hundred."

Keith laughed. "You're in a swell position to bargain. I'll make it two hundred and thirty, though. You've already got the thirty on account; consider that I took it away from you and gave it back."

Surprisingly, the man laughed, too. He said, "You win, mister. I'll take you to see Ross. He won't cheat you any worse than anybody else would. Come on."

"One thing first," Keith said. "Turn back this way and strike a match, I want a look at you. I want to know you again, if you make a break."

"Okay," the voice said. It was relaxed now, almost friendly.

A match scraped and flared.

Keith's captive, he saw, was a small, slender man of about forty, not too badly dressed but in need of a shave and with slightly bleary eyes. He grinned, a bit lopsidedly.

"You'll know me," he said, "so you might as well have a handle. It's Joe."

"Okay, Joe. How far is this Ross guy?"

"Couple of blocks. He'll be in a poker game." The match died. "Look, St. Louie, how much is this stuff worth, about?"

"Somebody told me ten thousand credits."

"Then you might get five. Ross is square. But listen, gun or no gun, you'll do better to cut me in. There'll be other guys there. We could take you easy, unless I'm on your side."

Keith thought a minute. Then he said, "Maybe you've got something there. I'll cut you in for ten per cent—five hundred if I get five thousand. Fair enough?"

"Yeah, fair enough."

Keith hesitated only a second. He'd need a friend, and there was something in Joe's voice that made him think he could take a chance. His whole plan was a desperate gamble anyway, and a slight risk now might save having to take bigger ones later.

Impulsively, he took Joe's revolver out of his pocket, groped for Joe's hand, and gave the gun back to him.

But there wasn't any surprise in Joe's voice when he said, "Thanks. Two blocks south. I'll lead the way and you stick with me. Better keep a hand on my back."

They single-filed along the building fronts, locked arms while they crossed two streets.

Then Joe said, "Stick close now. We go back in the areaway between the second and third buildings from the corner. Keep touching me or you'll go on past."

Back in the areaway, Joe found a door and knocked three times and then twice.

It opened and a light blinded Keith momentarily. When he could see again, a man in the doorway was lowering a sawed-off shotgun. He said, "Hi, Joe. This mug all right?"

Joe said, "Sure. Pal of mine from St. Louie. We got some business with Ross. Is he in the game?"

The man with the shotgun nodded. "Go on in."

They went along a narrow hallway. Around the corner of it was a man with a submachine gun aimed toward them, standing in front of a chair near a closed door. He said, "Hi, Joe," and sat back down in the chair with the gun in his lap. "Bring a sucker for the game?"

Joe shook his head. "Nope, business. How go things?"

"Ross is going hot tonight. Better not sit in unless you feel plenty lucky."

"I don't. Glad Ross is winning, though; maybe he'll give us a good price."

He opened the door beside which the gunman was sitting, and went into a room that was blue with smoke. Keith followed him.

Five men were sitting around a green poker table. Joe walked up to one of them, a fat man with very thick glasses and no hair whatsoever. He jerked his thumb at Keith.

"Friend of mine from St. Louie, Ross," he said. "Got some coins and bills. I told him you'd give him a square price."

The thick glasses turned on Keith and Keith nodded. He took the coins and bills from his pocket and put them on the green table in front of the fat man.

Ross glanced at each one and then looked up. "Four grand," he said.

"Make it five and it's a deal," Keith said. "They're worth ten easy."

Ross shook his head and took up the cards that had just been dealt him. "Open for a yard," he said.

Keith felt a touch on his arm. Joe pulled him back a step from the table. He said, "I should have told you. Ross is one-price. If he offers you four thou, he won't give you four thousand and one. Any price he makes is strictly take-it-or-leave-it. Won't do any good to argue."

"And if I leave it?" Keith asked.

Joe shrugged. "I know a couple more guys. But it means a lot of traveling in the mistout to get to 'em; we might get there or we might end up in the gutter. And probably they wouldn't give you any more than Ross would. Was whoever told you the coins were worth ten gees an expert on precred?"

"No," Keith admitted. "Okay, I'll take it. He'll give us the cash now, won't he? He carries that much?"

Joe grinned. "Ross? If he's got less than a hundred gees on him, I'll eat an Arc. Don't worry about getting cash on the line. Four grand's peanuts to him."

Keith nodded and turned back to the table. He waited until the hand was over and then said, "Okay. Four grand is all right."

The fat man pulled a fat wallet from his pocket and counted out three thousand-credit bills and ten hundred-credit ones. He folded Keith's coins carefully inside the bills again and put them into his vest pocket.

"Sit in on the game awhile?" he asked.

Keith shook his head. "Sorry. Something I got to do."

He glanced at Joe as he finished counting the money and Joe shook his head almost imperceptibly to indicate that he didn't want to take his cut here.

They went out again, past the man in the hallway with the submachine gun in his lap and the man at the outer door with the sawed-off shotgun. The latter bolted the door after them.

In the mistout again, they moved out of earshot of the door and then Joe said, "A tenth of four gees is four yards. Want me to light a match so you can count it?"

"Okay," Keith said. "Unless you know somewhere we can have a drink and talk a few minutes. Maybe we can do some more business."

"An idea," Joe said. "Guess I can take off this evening anyway, with four hundred in the sock. That'll hold me tomorrow and I got some coming tomorrow night. Gawd, I was down to thirty snicks."

"Which way, Joe?"

"Just keep your hand on my shoulder. I won't lose you—not till you pay off, anyway." He sighed. "Man, I can sure use a snort of moonjuice."

"Me too," said Keith, ungrammatically and not quite truthfully; he wondered what moonjuice was and hoped it didn't taste anything like a Callisto cocktail.

He groped with his hand and found Joe's shoulder as Joe said, "All right, pal. Here we go." They went out of the area-way and turned south. Only half a block farther—they hadn't crossed any streets this time—Joe stopped and said, "This is it. Wait a sec."

Again he knocked on a door, this time twice and then three times. This time the door swung inward into a dimly lighted hallway. No one was in sight.

Joe called out, "It's me, Rello. Joe. And a friend." He walked in and down the hallway. Keith followed him.

"Rello's a Proxie," Joe explained as Keith followed him along the hallway. "On a shelf over the door. Gets you in the back as you go down the hall here, if he don't know you."

Keith turned and looked over his shoulder, and wished that he hadn't. Whatever was on the shelf over the door was in deep shadow and he couldn't see it clearly, but maybe that was just as well for his peace of mind. It looked like a large turtle with tentacles like a devilfish, and with bright red luminous eyes like flashlight bulbs behind big red lenses. It didn't have any weapon that he could see—but he had a hunch it wouldn't need one.

Was a Proxie a being from Proxima Centauri? He wished he could ask Joe about it; maybe he could lead the conversation around to Hello without showing his ignorance on the subject, after they were sitting down drinking.

He turned back and felt chills down his spine all along the hallway until they came to a door with a peephole in it. Just like Prohibition, he thought—and almost said, until he remembered Betty's blank reaction to a mention of Prohibition and stopped himself in time.

Joe knocked two and three again and they were examined through the peephole. Joe jerked a finger over his shoulder and said, "With me, Hank. He's okay," and the door opened for them.

They went into the back room of a tavern; through an open doorway Keith could see the bar, dimly lighted with green and blue neons. The room they were in was filled with tables; card games were going on at three of them.

Joe waved at several men who looked up as they came in, then looked back at Keith. "Sit in here?" he asked. "Or shall we go in the bar? Guess we can talk better in there, and you said something about business."

Keith nodded. "Bar sounds better," he said.

They went through the doorway into the blue and green lighted barroom. Except for a bartender on duty and three women sitting on stools at the bar, it was empty. The three women looked up as they came in; one, Keith noticed, was dressed in the exceedingly brief costume that Betty had been wearing, bra and shorts of blue silk and blue leather calf-boots; nothing else. But she looked nothing like Betty otherwise; she was at least twenty years older, fat, blowsy and slightly drunk. The blue-green light made her look ghastly.

Joe waved at her and said, "Hi, Bessie," then went to the farthest booth and slid into one of the seats. Keith took the seat opposite him.

Keith took out his wallet to take out the four hundred credits for Joe, but the little man said quickly, "Not yet, pal. Wait till the gals have been here."

The gals were coming already, Keith saw. Not the one in the space-girl costume—or lack of costume—but the other two. They were young and not unattractive, both of them, despite what the blue-green light did to their complexions.

Fortunately, Joe stalled them before they could sit down. He said, "We got business to talk, girls. Maybe we'll call you down later, if you're not busy then. Tell Spec to give you each a drink on me, meanwhile, huh? And one for Bessie."

One of them said, "Sure, Joe," and they went back to their stools at the bar.

Keith took out his wallet again and had succeeded in handing over the four hundred credits by the time the bartender came down to see what they wanted. Joe left one of his hundred-credit bills on the table.

He said, "Bring us a couple of moonjuices, Spec. And one around for the gals. How's Little Rello doing tonight?"

The bartender chuckled. "Not bad, Joe. We had to sweep the hallway twice, and it's early yet."

He went away back of the bar and Keith took a chance. He said, "Rello interests me, Joe. Tell me something about him." That was general enough not to get him in trouble.

Joe said, "Relic's a rennie, and just about the toughest of the bunch. He's the toughest in New York, anyway. He was one of the first Proxies to change sides during the little squabble out at Centauri. Want to meet him?"

"Not especially," Keith said. "I was just wondering." He wondered, but not aloud, if rennie was slang for renegade. And if Rello had been one of the Proxima Centaurians to change sides during a war, his being a renegade would make sense.

Joe said, "Don't blame you. But you'd better, if you want to come back here sometime. He can get you with one eye at twenty feet and if he quares through both eyes—brother, there won't be enough of you left to bother mopping. I'll give you a tip."

"Yes?"

Speak to him *as* you come through the door. Don't wait till you're far enough in for him to see you or maybe it'll be too late. I think that's what happens to most of these mugs they have to sweep up here."

Joe shoved his hat back on his head and grinned. "Telling you all this because you're a right guy—I think. I hope we can do more business."

"About that—"

"Not yet," Joe interrupted. "Not till we've had one moon-juice, anyway. Dunno, at that, whether I ought to string with you or do business with you. You trust people too much; you'll get in trouble."

"You mean giving you back your rod?"

Joe nodded.

Keith said, "And if I hadn't?"

Joe's hand rubbed his stubbly chin with a raspy sound. Then he grinned. "Damn if you're not right at that, St. Louie. If you hadn't, I'd have taken you. All I'd have had to do was give the signal, back there where you talked to Ross. But on account of your giving me back my rod, I didn't. Even here, pal, if I didn't want you to, you wouldn't last longer than—"

He broke off as Spec came with two shot glasses of a slightly milky fluid. He picked up Joe's hundred-credit bill and put down some change in paper currency.

Joe lifted his glass. "Death to the Arcs," he said, and took a sip.

"And suddenly," Keith said. He watched Joe carefully, saw that he took only a sip of the milky liquid, and did the same. It was just as well that he did; even one sip burned its way down his throat with the heat of, say, half a tumbler of gin. It was hot as chili powder and, paradoxically, it was cool, too. It was thick as syrup but not sweet; it left a faint mint taste in his mouth, once his tongue had cooled.

"Real stuff," Joe said. "Right off the space freighter. Get much of it out your way?"

"Some," Keith said cautiously. "Not much of it this good, though."

"How are things out that way?"

"Fair," Keith said. He wished he could talk more, but giving more than monosyllabic answers could be dangerous. He stared into his glass of moonjuice and wondered what it was and what effect it was going to have. He felt none, as yet, from the single sip he'd taken.

"Where you staying here?"

Keith said, "Nowhere yet. Just blew in. I should have holed in before the mistout, not knowing the ropes here, but didn't have sense enough to. And I got in a game and lost all the credits I had—that's why I had to cash in on those coins tonight; I was flat broke outside of them. I'd intended to hang onto them and try to get a good price direct from a collector."

That, he thought, would give Joe an explanation of why he'd been alone in the mistout, broke except for coins he had to sell right away. And apparently it was all right. Joe nodded. He said, "Well, if you want to hole in for the night later, I can fix it for you here. A room with or without."

Keith didn't ask with or without what. He said, "Later, maybe. The evening's a pup." And he was surprised to realize that it really was; it couldn't be over an hour and a half since darkness had fallen.

Joe laughed heartily. He said, "The evening's a pup. That's a good one. Never heard that before, but it's a good one. You know, pal, I like you. Well, you ready?"

Keith wondered, for what? He said, "Sure."

Joe picked up his glass. "Then here we go. See you when we get back."

Keith picked his up and said, "Happy landing."

Joe howled with laughter. "That's another good one. Happy landing. You think 'em up, pal; you really think 'em up. Here's mud in your ear."

He tossed the drink down. And held the pose, rigid, glass to his lips. His eyes looked glazed, although they were still open. Keith had brought his own glass to his lips but hadn't yet downed the drink. He didn't,

now. He stared across the table, fascinated, at Joe. Joe wasn't seeing him; Joe wasn't seeing anything in this world.

Keith glanced quickly down the bar and saw that neither the bartender nor any of the three women was looking his way. He reached under the table and poured the rest of the moonjuice on the floor, then put the glass back to his lips.

He was just in time. Joe's eyes flickered once and then, as suddenly as it had come, the rigidity was gone. He put the glass down and sighed deeply.

He said, "Gawd, I was back on Venus again. In one of the slimy swamps, but I loved it. There was a space girl—" He shook his head wonderingly.

Keith watched him, curiously. There seemed to be no aftereffect whatsoever. He'd been completely paralyzed for ten or twenty seconds; now he was completely normal, no different in any way than he'd been before.

Joe took cigarettes out of his pocket and passed one across to Keith. He said, "One more, huh? Then if you want to talk business, okay."

"If it's on me, all right," Keith said. He glanced down the bar and this time caught the bartender's eye. He held up two fingers and the bartender nodded. Apparently that was a signal that couldn't be misunderstood anywhere. Even here.

Keith put a bill of his own on the table. He was aware of a mounting excitement in him as he realized that he'd decided that this time he was going to down the milky liquid as Joe had done; he was going to find out what had happened to Joe during those ten or twenty seconds. Joe had come out of it all right and if Joe could, he could. And being cautious had its limits.

The moonjuice came and he got seventy credits change out of his bill.

Joe picked up his glass and so did Keith, but Joe merely took a sip and smacked his lips, so Keith did likewise. Apparently the preliminary sip and then a bit of conversation was ritual. Probably it would be rudeness to down the drink right away.

The second sip tasted better than the first one had; it burned less and he found out that the aftertaste wasn't quite mint after all; it was something he couldn't identify.

Since there was to be an interval anyway, he thought it wouldn't hurt to lead around gradually to the business he had in mind. He leaned a little across the table. "Joe," he said, "do you happen to know where I can find an ex-space-pilot who'd like to make a little dough on the side?"

Joe started to laugh, and then his eyes narrowed a little. He asked, "You kidding?"

That meant it had been a bad question, but Keith couldn't see why. And anyway, he had to go through with it now; whatever he'd said wrong, he didn't know how to back out.

Casually he let his hand drop toward the pocket in which he had the automatic. He wondered what his chances of shooting his way out of this place—by any door except the one guarded by Hello the Proxie—would be. They wouldn't be too good, he decided, if Joe gave the signal. But maybe, if something was really wrong, he could get the drop on Joe again before Joe could give a signal.

He stared at Joe coolly, his fingertips already touching the butt of the automatic.

"Why should I be kidding?" he demanded.

## 14

### *Spaceward Ho*

To Keith's relief, Joe grinned. He jerked a thumb at the lapel of his coat. Keith saw an emblem there about the size and shape of the ruptured duck he himself had worn for a while.

"You're blind, St. Louie," Joe said.

Keith's hand moved away from his pocket; he hadn't made a major boner after all. He said, "Didn't notice it, Joe. Guess I *am* blind. But we've been in the mistout most of the time; it didn't show up so well out there. How long you been out?"

"Five years. Most of the time I was in, I was based on Kapi, Mars. Glad I wasn't there a few days ago." He shook his head slowly. "Nothing left of Kapi now."

Keith said, "We'll get back at them for that."

"Maybe."

"You sound pessimistic, Joe."

Joe lighted another cigarette from the butt of his last one and took a deep drag. He said, "There's a showdown coming, St. Louie. A big one. Oh, I don't *know* anything or I wouldn't be talking about it. Anyway, I know just what I read between the lines. But when you've been out there bucking the Arcs you get the feel of things. There's a full-scale attack coming. I think the Arcs are going to make it. I think the stalemate is over, and the war's going to be over too, one way or the other. What I'm afraid of—"

"Yes?" Keith prompted.

"What I'm afraid of is that they've got something new.

We're so evenly balanced, that one new weapon— You know what I mean."

Keith nodded gravely. He remembered he'd better stick to the point and talk as little as possible. He couldn't discuss the war intelligently, so he'd better get Joe to safer ground—and closer to the point he wanted to lead up to.

And he wanted to know if Joe could really pilot a ship or if he'd been just a gunner or something.

He asked, "Been to the moon recently?"

"A year ago." Joe's lips twisted. "Hadn't started mistouting yet, then. I fought it longer than most of the boys. Like a chump, I thought I could make an honest living. But about the moon—yeah, I piloted a rich guy there in his own boat. What a brawl that was!"

"Bad?"

"Good. Six of 'em in the party and all as drunk as gracchi miners on a holiday. A six-year-old kid can peelot one of those Ehrling jobs, but none of 'em in the party was sober enough to do it. They'd have ended up in the Pleiades without a paddle.

"I was driving a cab, picked 'em up one afternoon on Times Square and drove 'em to their private port over in Jersey. Guy that owned the boat saw my copper chicken and offered me a thousand to pilot them. I hadn't been off Earth for two whole years and I was itching to hitch a ganser—even in a kiddy-car like an Ehrling. So I just left my cab on the road in Jersey—and that cost me my job and license and put me in the mistout after I got back—and took 'em to the moon. And what a party it was. We went to the Pleasure Caves."

"Like to go there sometime," Keith said.

"Better than Callisto. But don't try the Pleasure Caves unless you've got plenty of what it takes. We were there two weeks." He grinned crookedly. "My thousand credits lasted me exactly a day and that was because they did all the buying. But they kept me with them all the time we were there, and paid everything."

Keith pulled him back to the point at issue. "Those Ehr-lings much different from the hot jobs?"

"Same difference as between a roller skate and a racing car. The Ehrlings are all visual. Direct sight on your objective, push the button. Takes you just outside the air, so you spread your wings and coast in. Automatic compensation, automatic gyros, automatic everything. Complicated as drinking moon-juice. Which reminds me. Ready?"

"Right." Keith lifted his glass. "Death to Arcturus!"

"Here we go, then. Happy landing!"

Keith downed the liquid this time; it didn't burn at all, maybe because there was too much of it in a full drink to burn. All that happened was that a sledge hammer hit him under the chin at the same time a rope around his neck yanked him upward through the ceiling, through the blackness of the mistout and clear up into the cold blue sky above it, so that looking down he could see the mistout itself like a huge black disk. On one side of it the moon shone on towns and fields and on the other it glimmered brightly on the flat expanse of the Atlantic Ocean.

Then the noose around his neck loosened and was gone, but he was going higher and higher, whirling as he went, so that sometimes he could see the Earth, sometimes the stars and the great crescent of the moon. The Earth dwindled to a ball, a monstrous dark ball lighted on one side, a crescent Earth, getting smaller as the moon grew larger. And some of the stars were so bright that they looked like disks, little disks of colored fire.

The moon, when he faced it in his turnings, was a ball now, too. Not as big as the Earth, but bigger than he had ever seen it before. He knew that he was well out of the atmosphere now, in space, but there wasn't any of the cold of space that he'd always read about. It was warm, pleasant, and there was music such as he had never heard before, wonderful music that kept time to his turning—or he was turning in time to the music; it didn't matter which. Nothing mattered except the wonderful sensation of floating and spinning and being freer than he had ever been before.

And then, as he turned again, he saw that something occulted the moon, something long and cigar-shaped that could be only a spaceship. Yes, as he turned again, he saw that there were several lighted ports in it and that it had retractable wings folded along the sides.

And he was going to crash into it.

He did, but it didn't hurt. He went right through the walls of one side of it and there he was sitting, unharmed, on the thickly carpeted floor of what looked like a small but beautifully decorated and tastefully furnished *boudoir*. A *boudoir* in a spaceship? Partly recessed into one white-painted metal wall was a bed with black silk sheets turned back as though ready for occupancy.

He stood up quickly. It was wonderfully easy to get up and to stand there; he felt as though he weighed a little less than half his usual weight and that he was more than twice as strong as he had ever felt before. He felt as though he could move mountains, and wanted to. Light gravity, he thought.

And then he quit thinking, because a door had opened, a steel panel set into the steel wall. Through it Betty Hadley stepped.

She was dressed, again, in the costume that she had told him was the prerogative of a space girl. This time it was of white silk. Narrow—but marvelously twin-rounded—white silk bra. Very short white silk trunks, so tight-fitting that they might have been painted on—and by the brush of a very great artist. And gleaming white patent-leather boots half-way up beautifully molded calves.

Nothing else—except Betty Hadley, Betty Hadley's golden skin and golden hair; her wide blue eyes and soft red lips in a face more beautiful than an angel's.

She was so incredibly beautiful, so incredibly desirable, that, looking at her only a few feet away, he could hardly breathe.

She had come through the door, apparently, without noticing that he was there. Now she saw him and her face became radiant. She raised her white arms toward him and said, "*Darling—oh, my beloved!*"

She ran to him; her arms were around him and her body pressed tightly against his. For an instant her face was buried in his shoulder, and then she lifted her lips for his kiss, her eyes misty with love—

"My Gawd," said Joe. "You were gone forty-fifty seconds. Hadn't you drunk moonjuice before, St. Louie?"

The glass was still at his lips and there was a burn of fire in his mouth, down his throat, under his diaphragm. His eyes slowly focused on Joe's ugly mug. Gradually his body felt the feel of the bench under him, the table on which his elbows rested; gradually, again, his weight changed, this time increasing until he weighed what he had before and felt no stronger.

And the light was blue-green neon, through which he stared blankly at the little ex-spacepilot.

"You hadn't, had you?" Joe asked.

It seemed a full minute before he knew what Joe was talking about, and another minute before he could decide to shake his head, and it seemed that it took him another full minute to get it into motion.

Joe grinned. He said, "It's funny stuff, all right. The more of 'em you've drunk, the shorter a time they knock you out but the longer a time you're gone. Now me, I've been drinking it— whenever I got the dough—for years, and I'm under only five-ten seconds, but I'm gone two-three days. Funny thing is, you came back so quick the first time you took one, a few minutes ago. But that happens, too, on a first try. Sometimes, the first time a guy drinks one, nothing happens at all; he just blacks out. That what happened to you the first time?"

Keith nodded.

"And the second? Did you get as far as the moon?"

Keith found his voice would work again. He said, "Halfway."

"Not bad. And what happened there? None of my damn business, I suppose." He looked at Keith's face and then laughed. "How right I am. And the first few times, you always come back too soon. How well I remember."

He leaned across the table. "Let me give you one chunk of advice, pal; don't have any more of that stuff tonight. You take more than one or two the first time you try it, and the top of your head comes off."

Keith said, "I don't *ever* want to try it again, Joe."

"Next time, you might not come back so soon."

"That's why I don't want to try it again. I want what I want, Joe—but I don't want it in a pipe dream."

Joe shrugged. "Some guys feel that way. I used to be like that myself. Well, that's your business. And speaking of business, you still haven't told me. Let's have a whiskey chaser and then you can spill it."

Joe turned around and called to Spec, and the bartender brought them two shots of whiskey. They were three-ounce shots, but Keith downed his like water.

After the moonjuice, it made him feel better. He saw that Joe downed his as quickly and as easily.

Then Joe's face got businesslike. "All right. What is it?"

Keith said, "I want to get to the moon."

Joe shrugged. "What's tough about that? Every hour on the hour—daytimes—from Kennedy. Three hundred credits round trip. Twelve credits for a passport."

Keith leaned forward and lowered his voice. "Can't do it that way, Joe. I'm hot. There are dodgers out on me from St. Louis, and they've got a good description, even fingerprints."

"They know you headed for New York?"

"If they're smart, they know it."

Joe said, "That's bad. They'll be watching the spaceports, all right. Far as the passport's concerned, I could get you a good forgery job done. But you're dead right; you better stay away from spaceports."

Keith nodded. He said, "And there's another angle. Some friends of mine—on the other side of the fence—are on the moon. They might be watching the spaceports for me there."

Joe said, "That would be bad."

"It wouldn't be good. I'd rather land unannounced—not at a spaceport—in one of these little Ehrlings. Then I could walk in by the back door on the guys who're looking for me. You know what I mean."

"I can guess."

Keith said, "It's a close guess, then. Listen, how good are Ehrlings on distance?"

"Why? If you're going only to the moon, what's the difference how good they are?"

"Might find the moon a little hot for me; that's all."

"Well, an Ehrling'll take you anywhere in the Solar System. Might have to make a few dozen jumps to get to an outer planet, but since a jump takes nothing flat, so what? Only— unless you know navigation, and you're a liar if you do—don't try to get out of the system with one of them. You might get wherever you wanted to go, but you'd never find Sol to get back."

Keith reassured him. "Don't worry; I wouldn't want to get out of the system. Probably nowhere but the moon, for that matter, but I just wondered what an Ehrling would do in an emergency."

"Well, pin it down, St. Louie. Just what do you want me to do?"

"Get me an Ehrling."

Joe whistled softly. "Do you mean fake the registry so you could buy one, or do you mean steal one?"

"What's the matter with that one you know about over in Jersey, the one the rich guy has? Could we get it?"

Joe looked at him thoughtfully. "And would you want me to take you there?"

"Not if you could show me the controls and tell me how to operate it."

"That I could do in ten minutes. But swiping a boat, pal—that isn't peanuts. It's ten years on Venus if we're caught; ten years in the swamps. That is, if you live that long."

Keith laughed. "You wander around in the mistout, and worry about a risk like that? You risk your life out there to pick up a few credits in somebody's pocket, and then squawk at swiping an Ehrling?"

Joe frowned at him. "How much?"

Keith had three and a half thousand credits besides the change left from the moonjuices. He said, "Two or three thousand credits."

"What do you mean, two or three thou? That's a funny way to put it."

Keith said, "Three thousand if I get the Ehrling tonight. Two thousand if I get it tomorrow. That's what I mean."

Joe sighed deeply. "I was afraid that might be what you had in mind, St. Louie. And the money's not enough, either way. But three thou is better than two, so tonight it is. Even though getting out of town from under the mistout is going to be almost as dangerous as swiping the boat—and a hell of a lot harder. Means I got to steal a car too."

"Can you do it?"

"You being funny? But we'll have to crawl in the car, not much faster'n walking. The mistout doesn't taper off until three or four miles into Jersey, either. It'll take us a good three hours to get that far."

"Sounds like good time to me," Keith said.

"Not many guys could do it," Joe said modestly. "You were lucky you picked me, St. Louie. I'll show you a trick not many guys know—how to pilot a car through a mistout by dead reckoning. And a compass. What time is it?"

Keith looked at his watch. "About half past ten."

"Say it'll take me half an hour to get a car; that's eleven. Three hours under the mistout—and if we get out of it at all that'll be two. Half an hour's driving to get to the private spaceport, half an hour to get inside it and show you the controls—that makes three o'clock. Time to the moon, nothing flat. Say ten minutes to land. You'll be on the moon by three-ten tonight."

It was hard for Keith to believe.

He asked, "What about the plane, though? I mean, the spaceship. What if he's using it?"

"Naw. I saw his picture in the paper today. He's under fire from a Congressional committee, so he'll be in Washington. You must have read about it. He makes rajiks."

"Oh," said Keith, as though that explained everything. Maybe it did. Apparently Joe thought that it did.

"One more whiskey, huh? And then we'll go."

Keith said, "Okay, but make mine a short one this time."

But when it came, he rather wished he'd ordered a long one. He was getting a little scared again.

He was still on Manhattan, and Saturn—and Mekky and the fleet—seemed a long, long way off. Thus far, he'd been lucky, unbelievably lucky. But how long would luck like that hold?

It held to the extent that they didn't have to pass Rello, the rennie, on the way out. A man with a pump-action shotgun under his arm let them out a back door into an areaway, out into the impenetrable blackness again.

Again he put his hand on Joe's shoulder and followed. They reached the sidewalk of Fifth Avenue and turned south. At the corner Joe stopped.

He said, "You better wait here. I can make better time swiping a car by myself. I think I know where I can get one, about two blocks from here. Stick right here till you hear me coming in the car."

"How can you drive it in soup like this?"

"I'll show you," Joe said. "Come to think of it, you better not wait here, along the buildings. There's a lamppost out on the corner there. Drape yourself around it; there's less chance of your getting slugged or shot if somebody comes along this way."

He was off again through the blackness, walking so silently that Keith couldn't hear a sound except, once, that faint snuffle that had enabled him to catch Joe in the first place. And catching Joe had been the luckiest thing that had happened to him since last Sunday evening. Joe was turning out to be a godsend.

Keith groped his way to the curb and found the lamppost to lean against. He tried to keep himself calm, not to worry about the slimness of his chances of actually reaching the fleet near Saturn—his real destination, rather than the moon, as he had told Joe in order not to make Joe suspicious of him. And he tried not to worry about the very high probability of his being blown out of space, Ehrling and all, by the first ship of the fleet he approached within a thousand miles.

In fact, there were so many things he tried not to think about that concentrating away from one of them always brought him to another that was just as bad or worse. But, all in all, it made the time go more quickly.

At any rate, it seemed like much less than half an hour before he heard a car coming toward him, inching along the curb, occasionally scraping rubber lightly against the curbstone.

It stopped short of the corner, about a dozen feet from him as nearly as he could judge from the sound. He walked toward it, one foot on the walk and the other in the gutter to enable him to stay along the curb, until his shin cracked painfully into a car's bumper.

"Joe?" he called softly.

"Right, St. Louie. Your chariot awaits. Get the hell in here so we can get going. Took me longer than I thought and I want to get to that spaceport while it's still dark."

Keith groped his way around the car and found the handle of the door. He opened it and got in.

Joe said, "It's slow going when you got to guide by a curb, but with two of us we can make better time, once I show you how. Take this flashlight."

The flashlight poked him in the ribs and Keith took it. He flicked the switch and found he could see Joe's face, a few feet away, and he could see the windshield—but not far enough through the windshield to make out the radiator cap.



"Not that way, stupid," Joe told him. "Aim it down at the floor boards, and keep it aimed down there. Now take this chalk and draw a line parallel with the wheelbase of the car, front to back. Make it as straight as you can."

Keith had to bend over to see the floor clearly, but it was easy to draw the line straight; there was a straightline pattern in the linoleum or whatever it was that covered the floor boards.

Joe bent down and looked, too. He said, "Good. I didn't know that line was there; we'll have it easy with a line we know is dead straight. Now here's the compass. Put it down smack in the center of the line."

Keith did. He said, "Now what?"

"Nothing, yet. I'm going to the corner and turn west. How far back did you walk from the lamppost to the car? About ten steps?"

"Twelve or fifteen, I think."

"Okay, then I can make the corner and the turn all right and get going west. And I think I can make it over to Sixth Avenue by the seat of my pants. We're going south on Sixth Avenue, and we'll start navigating there."

Joe started the car and inched it forward, this time deliberately scraping the curb until the curb wasn't there to scrape. Then he turned right and straightened the car out as nearly at right angles to the direction they'd been going as he could judge. He went forward slowly until a tire—this time the one on the opposite front side of the car—scraped the curb again. He said, "Got it, now." And went a little faster after he'd moved a little out from the curb.

It seemed to Keith that the car had gone several blocks before Joe stopped it.

Joe said, "We ought to be close to Sixth Avenue now. Get out and catch a house number."

Keith got out and made his way to the building fronts and got a number. He remembered that he wasn't supposed to know New York well, so when he got back into the car he merely gave Joe the number without comment.

"Then we overshot by about two buildings," Joe said. "Til back up and cut to the right, and we'll be heading south on Sixth Avenue."

He did, and then drove forward a bit and stopped the car again. He told Keith, "See how far I am from the curb on your side."

Keith got out again and this time, on his return, reported they were about six feet from the west curb.

"Good," Joe said. "Now we get down to business with the flashlight and the compass, and we can make ten miles an hour. Look, that line you drew is the line of direction of the car, see? And Sixth Avenue runs about southeast by south—all the straight streets do. At Minetta Place it turns a trifle more east and then we go straight again to Spring Street; that's where we turn for the tunnel.

"You watch the compass and keep us headed right. I got another flashlight and I'll watch the tenths of miles on the speedometer, so I'll know where we are, roughly. You may have to get me a house number once in a while but not often."

"What if we run into something?"

Joe said, "Won't kill us at ten miles an hour. Worst that could happen is that we'll have to swipe another car. We'll waver from one side of the street to the other, but if you keep good guard over that compass, we shouldn't scrape curbing oftener than about once a block. And they're not our tires."

They started. Joe was a skillful pilot and, as an ex-taxi driver, knew the streets perfectly. They scraped rubber only twice on the long stretch to Spring Street, and only twice did Keith have to get out and check house numbers; the second check he made showed them only a few buildings off where they should be for the turn to the Holland Tunnel.

They scraped rubber quite often in the tunnel itself and once, about under the middle of the river, they heard another car go by them, heading in from Jersey. But they were lucky and didn't even scrape fenders.

Joe knew the Jersey side too and kept them on straight streets where they could navigate by compass. After a couple of miles, he turned the headlights on and Keith could see that they penetrated ten or twelve feet into the blackness.

Joe said, "Okay, pal; it tapers off from here. You can give me back the compass."

Keith straightened his aching back and twisted his neck until the kinks were out of it, and by that time they were in the clear, completely out from under the black mist.

Then, between towns, they were in open country. And through the window on his side of the car, Keith saw the moon and the stars in the blackness of space.

He thought: this is a dream, and I'm not really going there.

But something inside told him: it *isn't*, and you *are*.

And suddenly the very thought of it scared him, scared him worse than purple monsters, the Nighters, Arcturus and the W. B. I. all put together.

But it was too late to back out now. He'd committed himself. For better or worse, he was spaceward bound.

## 15

### *The Moon. So What?*

At two-forty by Keith's watch, Joe pulled the car to the side of the road and turned off the lights. He said, "We're here, pal. End of the line."

He took the flashlight from Keith. "Across the fields there, quarter of a mile back. It's pretty isolated; we won't even have to be careful. Hope nobody steals this car on me before I get back to it."

They climbed a fence and started across the fields, Joe leading the way with the flashlight until they

were through a row of trees that was just inside the fence. After that they could see well enough by moonlight to cross the level fields beyond.

Keith asked, "How'll you get back into town in the car by yourself? Can you manage the car and the compass both?"

"Might, in a pinch, if I went slow enough. But I guess I won't go back to New York tonight. I'll drive the car into Trenton or somewhere and shack up there for the rest of the night. And I probably better not go back tomorrow in that stolen car. It might be reported early. I'll let them find it in Trenton."

They climbed another fence into another field and Joe pointed ahead. "It's just past those next trees."

He used the flashlight again going through the grove, but this time kept it carefully shaded and pointed only at the ground under their feet. Under the shadow of the final clump of trees he turned it off and pocketed it.

Just ahead of them was what looked like a big greenhouse; there were two spaceships inside, both clearly visible through the glass in the bright moonlight. They looked, to Keith, more like airplanes than spaceships; they were not even remotely similar to the cigar-shaped spaceship he'd seen in his moon-juice dream. The bigger one of these two was about the size of a transport plane; the smaller wasn't much bigger than a Piper Cub. The wings didn't appear to be foldable or retractable, and he wondered why he'd imagined that they would be.

Joe said, "Wait here. I'll walk once around and be sure the coast's clear."

When he came back, he nodded and motioned to Keith to join him. They went around a corner of the glass enclosure and came to a small door.

"Hold the flash," Joe told him, "till I get this thing open."

He took a little picklock from his pocket and had the lock open in about two minutes. They stepped inside and Joe closed the door after them.

Keith looked up at the roof over his head; there didn't appear to be any door in it. But the far end of the hangar was a big double door. They'd have to take one of the ships out through it and Keith wondered why Joe hadn't picked the lock on the double door right away and come in through it.

And then he realized, before he asked why, that they wouldn't have to wheel the ship out. It could go right through the solid roof—and that was why the hangar was made of glass. Like the professor's sewing machines, the spaceships would—in effect—dematerialize and go right through a solid wall or roof to rematerialize at their destination. The reason the hangar was transparent was to enable one to take a direct sight on the objective without having to wheel the ship outside.

That made him wonder why the double doors were necessary at all and he almost asked that before he realized that the operation didn't work both ways. Returning to Earth, a spaceship had to materialize outside the atmosphere and then glide down to its landing field on its wings and be wheeled—or taxi itself—into a hangar.

Joe said, "They're both Ehrlings—ten-passenger Skymaster and two-passenger Starover. Which do you want?"

"The little one, I guess. Don't you think so?"

Joe shrugged. "The big one doesn't cost any more, pal. Of course, though, you can't sell it when you're through; they're under tight registry. Whichever you take, you'll just have to abandon it when you're through using it."

"Controls are the same? One handles as easy as the other?"

"Exactly the same," Joe said. "The little one's a bit easier to handle in air, though, and doesn't need as big a field to land in."

Keith said, "The little one it is, then."

He walked around it, seeing that, at close range, it looked less like an airplane than he'd thought. The wings were shorter and stubbier. There wasn't any propeller. The outside of the fuselage, which had looked like canvas, felt more like asbestos.

Joe joined him on the far side of the ship. He said, "Here's the airlock. Just turn this handle; and it has a handle just like it on the inside. But if you have to open it in space for any reason, better put a space suit on first. There's one inside under each seat. And if you open it in space, open the valve in the door first to let the air out gradually or the air'll whoosh out and you with it. And if you let your air out, it takes the airmaker—I'll show you that—about fifteen minutes to build it back up again after your airlock's closed. Get on in and I'll show you."

Keith got in and sat at the controls while Joe, in the other seat, explained them to him. The gliding controls consisted of a stick and a pair of rudder pedals just about like those on a lightplane. Since Keith had

flown a lightplane almost a hundred hours he didn't anticipate any difficulty with that part of it.

"Here's the sighter," Joe was saying. "Just aim that where you want to go. And these dials set the distance. Big one's in hundred-thou-mile units; your top jump is five hundred of them—that's fifty million miles. It'd take you quite a few jumps to get to one of the outer planets; that's the disadvantage of one of these little Ehrling jobs for long-range stuff.

"The next dial is in thousand-mile units, and on down to the little vernier in tenths of a mile. Now about the moon—you said you wanted to land on this side of it, didn't you?"

7es"

"Then just sight on where you want to go. Set the distance for—wait a minute." He opened a compartment in the instrument panel similar to the glove compartment of an automobile and took out a thick paperbound volume about the size and format of a *World Almanac*. He looked at the date on it and said, "Good. For a minute I was worried for fear Old Man Eggers might not have the current edition of the *Astrogators Monthly* in here, since he hasn't been using the ship. But it's all right; this is the current one. It's got tables; you can look up the distance from anything in the Solar System to anything else in the Solar System for any given minute of time during the month."

He flipped it open. "Here are the Earth-moon tables. You pick, say, three-fifteen for your starting time and look up the distance in here and set your dials for then. At three-fifteen you push the button. Got it so far?"

"But maybe my watch is a few minutes off. What then? Would I maybe go too far and end up materializing inside the moon instead of outside it?"

Joe snorted. "You don't use your watch, stupid. That clock on the panel. And it's dead accurate to the fraction of a second; it's got to be. It's rhodomagnetic."

"It's what?"

"Rhodomagnetic," said Joe patiently. "Anyway, you couldn't crash into the moon because you've got a safety factor—this repulsor dial. If you want to materialize ten miles above the moon—and that's about the right distance—you set your repulsor for ten miles and it stops you ten miles short of the objective you're sighted on. You set your repulsor according to how thick an atmosphere you're aiming for. Ten miles for the moon, about twenty-five for Earth, thirty for Venus, fifteen for Mars, and so on. Catch?"

"You push the button and you're there," Keith said. "And then what?"

"Soon as you materialize you start falling, but the gyro keeps you level. You put the nose down in a steep glide and let yourself fall until the wings begin to take hold as you get into the atmosphere. Soon as you've got enough air under your wings you glide in and land. That's all.

"If you see you're going to miss what you're aiming for or make a bad landing—well, you have your finger on the button and you push it. The repulsor flashes you back ten miles high again so you start over. That's all, St. Louie. Got it?"

"Sure," Keith said. It sounded simple enough. And besides he saw a clip on the inside of the airlock door with a book entitled *Manual of Instructions* under it, so he could pick up anything he'd missed or forgotten to ask.

He took out his billfold and counted out the three thousand credits he'd promised Joe. It left him only five hundred and seventy, but then he probably wasn't going to need any money anyway. By morning he'd either be dead or he'd have reached Mekky and, he hoped, have the answer to his problem.

"Better give me your gun, too, St. Louie. Don't forget you can't teleport explosives. They go off in the warp—and that's not comfortable when it happens in your pocket."

Keith remembered what he'd read in Wells' book and knew that Joe was telling the truth about that. He said, "Thanks, Joe, for reminding me. I'd probably have forgotten—and blown myself up. Thanks."

He handed the forty-five automatic to Joe. "Okay, pal," Joe said. "Thanks—and good luck. Happy landing."

They shook hands solemnly.

After Joe had gone, Keith reached for the *Manual of Instructions* and studied it carefully for over half an hour.

The manual explained things better than Joe had, and it seemed unbelievably simple. According to the instructions, there really wasn't any point—unless you wanted to be fancy—in using the distance tables in the *Astrogators Monthly*. One could leave the dials set for maximum distance—fifty million miles—at all times and use the repulsor to stop the ship at the proper distance from the objective. Exact distances and verniers were really necessary only when one spaceship was maneuvering to approach another in space. And he could take care of that, Keith figured, by staying still and letting the other spaceship do the maneuvering.

Gliding in didn't seem any tougher than making a dead-stick landing in a lightplane—and with the added advantage that, if it didn't look as though the landing was going to be a good one, you could flash back up and start over again. He looked up through the glass panel in the top of the Spaceship and the glass roof of the hangar, through the atmosphere of Earth and the nothingness of space—at the stars and the moon.

Should he hunt for Saturn now, or should he go to the moon first, for practice?

The moon seemed so near, and so easy. A step, comparatively. There wasn't any important reason for him to go there. The fleet, near Saturn, was his destination. And yet he knew his chances of getting through to Mekky alive weren't any too good and he knew that if he did reach Mekky, and his hopes were realized, he'd go from there back to his own world, the world he'd left last Sunday evening. And he'd probably never again have the opportunity—in either case—to set foot on the moon or on a planet. And what difference did half an hour or so make?

Yes, he'd be willing to skip the planets, but just once, while he had the chance, he wanted to set foot on soil that was not the soil of Earth. And the moon offered little risk. The *Manual of Instructions* he'd just read had stated, in a paragraph about the moon, that the fertile lands and all the settlements were on the far side where there was water and where the air was denser. On the near side were only barren desert country and mountains.

He took a deep breath and strapped himself into the pilot's seat in front of the controls. It was a few minutes before half past three and he looked up the distance of the moon at that time in the *Astrogators Monthly* and set his dials. At a few seconds before three-thirty he put the sights dead center on the moon, watched the second hand of the rhodomagnetic (whatever that was) clock, and then pressed the button.

Nothing happened, nothing at all. He must have forgotten to turn a switch somewhere.

He realized that he'd closed his eyes when he pressed the button and he opened them again to look over the instrument panel. Nothing was wrong that he could see.

He looked at the sighter to see if it was still centered on the moon. It wasn't. The moon wasn't there any more, anywhere that he could see. But up over his head was a big ball, shining along one edge, that was several times as big as the moon. And it didn't *look* like the moon. With sudden shock, he realized that it wasn't. It was Earth, up there over his head—about two hundred and forty thousand miles over his head. And all through the sky were stars, thousands of stars, several times brighter than he'd ever seen stars before. Brilliant, beautiful stars.

But where was the moon?

Suddenly he was aware, too, of a difference of sensation. A feeling of lightness, of falling, of going down in a very fast elevator.

He remembered that there was a glass panel in the floor between the rudder pedals. He looked down through it and saw the moon rushing up at him, filling the panel, only miles away. The little Starover had turned over—as he had known that it would, had he stopped to think—under the gyro controls so that he would be right side up with reference to his objective when he reached it.

His heart was pounding with excitement as he quickly set the dials again, ready to flash him back again to a point ten miles high if he pressed the button; then he took the stick and put his feet on the rudder pedals. He put the nose down. A forward push of the stick did it; the stick must have been connected to the gyro because there couldn't have been enough air purchase on the tail surfaces as yet to have nosed down the plane as he pushed forward on the wheel.

And then, just as the plane was nosing down, the wings began to catch air and he was in a steep glide for the moon.

But it had been too sudden, too unexpected, he hadn't been ready. He pressed the button.

Again nothing happened, apparently, except that the surface of the moon was a little farther away.

This time he waited it out, going into a glide. He kept his finger on the button until he cleared the edge of a crater and saw he was heading for a flat level plain on which even a dub couldn't miss making a good landing.

He made a perfect one, and rolled to a stop.

Slowly he unstrapped himself. He hesitated just a moment with his hand on the latch of the door, wondering if there really was air outside. Its presence on the moon was against all good opinion on the subject back where he'd come from—but then so were a lot of other things.

And then he realized how silly he'd been even to wonder. If there wasn't any air, then what had he glided down through?

He opened the door and stepped out. Yes, there was air. Thin, cold air, about like that on top of very high mountains on Earth. But breathable. He looked around him, shivering a little, and at first felt disappointed. He might have been standing on a barren desert on Earth, with mountains in the distance. It didn't look any different.

It felt different, though. He felt unbelievably light. He took an experimental little hop that wouldn't have taken him higher than six inches on Earth, and it took him several feet into the air. He came down more slowly and lightly than he'd expected. But doing it gave him a queasy feeling at the pit of his stomach and he didn't feel inclined to try it again.

He was on the moon—and he felt horribly disappointed. It wasn't, somehow, anything like as exciting as he'd expected it to be.

He looked up, wondering what was wrong in that direction. The Earth was still there, but it didn't look nearly as bright and impressive as it had when he'd seen it from the little spaceship, ten miles high above the moon. But that, of course, was because he'd not been looking through an atmosphere then, and he was now.

He wondered if the scientists back in his own universe were wrong about there being no air on the moon. Or was the presence of air on the moon here merely another one of the many variant conditions he'd found?

The stars, from here, looked a little brighter than he'd ever seen them from Earth, but not much. That, too, was because of the presence of air.

The sharp feel of cold air in his throat and lungs reminded him that he'd freeze if he stood out here much longer. It was well below zero and he was dressed for summer weather in New York.

He shivered and looked once more around him at the bleak, uninviting landscape. He was on the moon, he thought and so what? He didn't like it.

He knew now, beyond all doubt, what he did want. He wanted to get back to his own universe, a universe where men hadn't yet reached the moon. And, if he got back there, be damned if he'd suggest to any scientists that they quit trying rocket propulsion and start hitching generators to sewing machines.

He got back into the ship—much more eagerly than he'd got out of it—and closed the airlock. The air inside was cold and thin now, too, but now that the airlock door was closed the airmaker unit and the heater would bring it back to normal in a few minutes.

He strapped himself back in the pilot's seat, thinking, "Well, I'm glad I'm disappointed."

He was glad because—if he hadn't done this—he'd never have been quite satisfied with his own universe again, even if he ever got back there. He'd have thought, all the rest of his Me, how he'd been in a place where space travel was possible, and hadn't taken advantage of it.

Now he had, and that was that.

Maybe, he thought, he was too old to readjust himself to something like this. If it had happened when he was under twenty instead of over thirty, and if he'd been heart-free instead of really, deeply in love, then he'd have thought that this universe was just what he wanted.

But it wasn't, now. He wanted back.

And there was only one mind—a mechanical mind—that might possibly help him get there.

He set the pointer at Earth and the dial at a hundred and twenty thousand miles, halfway between Earth and the moon. Out there in space he could take his time about locating Saturn.

He pressed the button.

## 16

### *The Thing from Arcturus*

By now he was used to nothing seeming to happen when he pressed the button. This time something did happen, almost right away, and it surprised him. It was a strange sensation that didn't come all at once. At first he felt almost normal, and then, as the Starover—midway between Earth and the moon—overcame its inertia and started falling toward Earth, he became completely weightless.

It felt utterly strange. Through his floor port he could see Earth, twice as big a ball as it had seemed from the moon. And through the glass port in the top he could see the moon, twice as big as it looked from Earth.

He knew he was falling toward Earth, but that didn't worry him. It would take him a long time to fall a hundred and twenty thousand miles. And if he hadn't located Saturn by the time he was dangerously close, he could always jump himself back a hundred and twenty thousand miles away again.

Of course, if Saturn happened to be on the other side of the sun he'd have a bit of a problem on his hands, although he didn't doubt that he could solve it with the aid of the *Astrogators Monthly*. But first he might as well see if he could spot it with the naked eye.

He began, first through one panel and then another, to scan the sky. He thought the rings would be visible. Out here in space, with no atmosphere to blunt vision, the stars were monstrous compared to the way they looked from Earth. Mars and Venus, he had noticed, were tiny disks rather than spots of light. He had heard that even on Earth rare people with gifted eyesight were sometimes able to see the rings of Saturn. Normal eyesight ought to do it easily, out here in space.

And even though he didn't know Saturn's present position, he wouldn't have to search the entire sky. He knew enough of elementary astronomy to recognize the plane of the ecliptic and Saturn would be in that plane, somewhere along a single line across the sky.

It took him a minute to get his bearings because there were so many more stars than he was used to seeing. They didn't twinkle; they looked like shining diamonds on a piece of black velvet and the fascination of their brightness prevented him from recognizing the constellations.

But he found the Dipper and then the belt of Orion and, after that, it was easy to locate the constellations of the zodiac, the belt around which the planets revolve.

He followed it carefully, studying each celestial object near the imaginary line of the ecliptic. He found again the reddish disk of Mars and thought this time that he could see faint crackly lines of the canals.

He followed the line through about thirty degrees, and there was Saturn. The rings were almost edge on, but they were unmistakable.

He reached for the *Astrogators Monthly* and looked up the Earth-Saturn tables. He was still over a hundred thousand miles from Earth despite however many miles he'd fallen toward Earth since his jump from the moon, but that was negligible compared to the total distance; the Earth-Saturn table would be close enough. He looked up the distance, as of half past four; it was 968,700,540 miles.

Nineteen jumps at his maximum range of fifty million miles. He set the dials for maximum distance and pressed the button nineteen times, pausing a second or so between jumps to be sure the sighter remained on the ringed planet.

Saturn was gorgeously beautiful at the end of the nineteenth jump, still over eighteen and a half million miles away. He set the dials for eighteen million—this time setting the repulsor for a hundred thousand as a

factor of safety—and pushed the button again.

He didn't have to look for the fleet; it found him the very second he got there.

A voice startled him by saying, "Do not move." It was a physical, actual voice, not one inside his head, as Mekky's had been. This wasn't Mekky.

The voice continued. "You're under arrest. Pleasure craft are forbidden outside the orbit of Mars. What are you doing here?"

This time he located the source of the voice while it was speaking. It came out of a tiny speaker set into the instrument panel. He had noticed a grating there but had not even wondered what it was. There were two of the gratings; the other, he realized, probably covered a pickup mike. At any rate since the voice had asked him a question, there was undoubtedly some equipment that would enable the speaker to hear his answer.

He said, "I must see Mekky. It's important."

While he spoke, he looked out through the vision panels and saw his captors; half a dozen oblong objects that globed him in at close range, occulting big chunks of sky. How big they were he couldn't guess; without knowing their distance he couldn't judge their size, and without knowing their size he had no idea as to their distance.

The voice said sternly, "Under no circumstances whatsoever are civilians or occupants of civilian craft permitted to approach the fleet. You will be escorted back to Earth and turned over to the authorities there for punishment. Do not attempt to touch the controls or your craft will be destroyed instantly. Your ship is pinned anyway; you couldn't move it—but our instruments will show if the controls are touched, and we shall construe it as an attempt to escape."

"I don't want to escape," Keith said. "I came here on purpose so you'd capture me. I want to see Mekky. I've *got* to see him."

"You will be returned to Earth. We are about to enter your ship; one of us will take you back. Are you wearing a space suit?"

"No," said Keith. "Listen, this is important. Does Mekky know I'm here?"

"Mekky knows you're here. He ordered us to englobe and capture you. Otherwise you would have been destroyed within a decisecond of your arrival here. Here are your orders: Put on a space suit so you can let the air out of your ship and open the lock. One of us will enter and take over operation of your ship."

Keith didn't even hear the last part, because he had no intention of obeying it, anyway. Getting sent back to Earth meant sure death; he might as well die arguing.

And Mekky knew he was here. That meant Mekky must have been, probably still was, in mental contact with him.

He spoke directly to Mekky, knowing it didn't matter whether he spoke aloud—but doing so, anyway, because it enabled him to concentrate better.

"Mekky!" he said. "Aren't you forgetting one thing? My death means nothing to you, or to your universe; I don't blame you for not caring about that. But aren't you forgetting that I come from a different—place? That, although we haven't space travel, we might have *something*, some weapon or defense, that might be important to you in—in what you say is coming? I haven't heard anyone here mention radar. Do you have radar?"

The voice that answered him this time was different. Strangely, it spoke both ways at once, inside his head *and* through the speaker on his instrument panel.

"Keith Winton," it said, "I told you not to come here. Yes, we have radar. We have instruments of detection your universe never dreamed of."

Keith said, "But, Mekky, I had to come now or never. The plans—the ones you read in my mind—went wrong. And even you aren't omniscient or you'd have known they couldn't go right—my submitting stories to the man who wrote them! So you haven't been deeply into my mind, or you'd have known that! You can't be sure I haven't got something that would help you. How do you know what you've missed—and that I wouldn't recognize? All you know are my surface thoughts.

"And you're in a jam here right now. You're afraid of the next Arc attack. How can you overlook a bet, however slight a chance it might be?"

"Your universe is relatively primitive. You haven't—"

Keith interrupted. "How do you *know*? You don't even know how I got here; whatever mechanism activated *that* is something that you haven't got, or you'd know about it. And you said you didn't."

A calm voice that Keith hadn't heard before spoke out of the speaker in the instrument panel. It said, "Maybe he's got something there, Mekky. When you told me about him, you told me you didn't know what the score was—except that he was sane and on the level. So why not bring him over to the fleet? You can psych him in ten minutes—and the lines we've been working along haven't been very productive."

It was a youthful but deep voice; authority and confidence were in it. What it had said had been worded as a suggestion, yet, hearing it, one knew that it was an order that would be carried out.

Keith knew that it must be the voice of Dopelle—the great Dopelle, with whom Betty Hadley, *his* Betty Hadley,

was so hopelessly in love. The magnificent Dopelle who held his universe—except for the Arcturians—in the palm of his hand.

*Damn him*, Keith thought.

Mekky's voice, "All right. Bring him to the fleet. To the flagship."

There was dull knocking on the outside of the airlock. Keith quickly unstrapped himself from the pilot's seat. He said, "Just a minute. Getting a space suit on."

He lifted the seat next to his and found a suit. It was thick and awkward to handle, but—except for the confined space he had to work in—there wasn't any difficulty about getting into it. It worked with zippers—perfectly ordinary zippers except that there was a gummy feeling to them that indicated some coating that made them airtight.

The helmet clicked automatically into place against the neck ring. There was a little box over the chest that looked as though it would be the airmaker. He nicked the switch on it before he closed the face plate of the helmet.

Then he opened the valve in the airlock that would release the air in the ship. When it quit hissing, he opened the door.

A man wearing a space suit even thicker and more cumbersome than his own came in. Without speaking he sat down in the pilot's seat and began to work the vernier controls. A few seconds later he pointed to the airlock, and Keith nodded and opened it.

They were against, almost touching, the side of a big ship. From so close, Keith couldn't even guess how big it was.

An airlock the size of an average room stood open, and Keith stepped across into it, and the door closed behind him.

A ship this size, he realized, would have to have an intermediate chamber from which air could be exhausted to admit someone to the ship from space; from such a small craft as the one he'd come here in, it was more practical simply to let the air out of the whole ship.

The outer door swung shut behind him. Something started to hiss, and when the hissing had stopped, a door at the inner end of the room opened.

A tall, very handsome young man, with black curly hair and flashing black eyes, stood just inside the inner door, smiling at Keith. Beyond doubt, it was Dopelle.

He didn't look like Errol Flynn, but he was even more dashing and romantic. Keith knew that he ought to hate him, but somehow he didn't. He rather liked him.

Dopelle stepped forward quickly and helped Keith take off the helmet. He said, "I'm Dopelle. And you're this Winton or Winston Mekky told me about. Let's hurry and get that suit off of you."

His voice was cheerful, but with worry showing through. "We're really in a tough jam. I hope you're right and that you've got something we can use. Otherwise—"

Slipping out of the space suit in the doorway, Keith looked around him. The ship was big all right. The room he was about to enter must be the main chamber; it was about a hundred feet long by thirty or thirty-five feet wide. There were a lot of men in it, mostly working down at the far end in what looked like a completely equipped experimental laboratory.

His eyes went back to Dopelle, but they didn't stay there. For just above Dopelle's head hung Mekky, the basketball-sized sphere that was a mechanical brain.

Inside his head came Mekky's voice. It said, "You just could be right, Keith Winton. I see something about a thing called—in your world—a potentiomotor. Something invented by a man named Burton. It had something, vaguely, to do with a rocket to the moon. Whatever it is, it isn't known here. But do you know the details, the wiring diagram?"

"Don't answer aloud. Just think. It's faster that way, and time counts. . . . Try to remember. . . ."

"Yes, you've seen diagram and formula—the equation. You don't know them consciously, but they're there in your sub-Conscious. I think I can get to them under light hypnosis. You are willing?"

"Yes, of course," Keith said. "What's the score?"

"The score is this," said Dopelle, answering for Mekky. "The Arcs are going to attack soon. We don't know the exact time, but it will be within hours.

"And they've got something new. We don't know how to buck it yet—we got some things about it from an Arc prisoner we managed to capture, but he didn't know the details.

"It's a single ship, not a fleet—but their whole effort for years has gone into it. And, in one way, that's good news; if we can destroy this ship the way will be clear for us to take the fleet to Arcturus and end the war. But—"

"But what?" Keith asked. "Is this one ship too big for you to handle?"

Dopelle waved a hand impatiently. "Size doesn't matter—although this one is really a monster. Ten thousand feet long, ten times the size of anything we've ever tried to build. But that isn't the point.

"It's coated with a new metal, something impervious to anything we know. We can A-bomb it all day and not scratch the finish."

Keith nodded. He said, "We had that stuff, too—in our science-fiction magazines. I used to edit one of them."

Dopelle's face lighted with sudden interest. "I used to read them," he said, "when I was younger. Used to be crazy about them. Of course now—"

Something in the expression on Dopelle's face registered.

Keith had seen a face that looked like that somewhere—not long ago. No, he hadn't seen the face either; it had been a photograph. A photograph of a much younger and far less handsome edition of—

"Joe Doppelberg" he said. His mouth fell open.

"What?" Dopelle looked at him in bewilderment. "What do you mean?"

Keith's mouth snapped shut. He stared at Dopelle for seconds.

Then, "I know you now," he said. "At last I've got a clue to this setup and some of it makes sense. You're Joe Doppelberg—or Doppelberg's Doppelganger."

"And who is Joe Doppelberg?"

Keith said, "A science-fiction fan of—of back where I came from. You look like him—and you're what he would want to be! You're older, of course, and a thousand times handsomer and more romantic and more intelligent—

"You're just what he'd have dreamed himself to be. You—he —used to write me long letters, full of corny humor, to my Rocketalk Department, and you called me Rocky and you didn't like our covers because the monsters weren't horrible enough, and—"

He stopped, and again his mouth fell open.

Dopelle's forehead was creased with lines of puzzlement. He said, "Mekky, he's insane. You won't get anything out of him. He's stark crazy."

"No," the mechanical voice said, "he isn't insane. He's *wrong*, of course, but he isn't insane. I can follow his thought processes and see why he thinks what he just said—and it isn't illogical; it's merely wrong.

"I can straighten him out on it; I see most of the truth now, except the diagram and the formula that we need. And that is the thing that comes first, before explanations, or none of us may survive."

Mekky floated down from over Dopelle's head to a point just in front of Keith Winton. He said, "Come, stranger from another universe, and follow me. You must go under light hypnosis so I can get from your mind, from your deep subconscious, what we need. Then, after we have started work on it, I'll tell you everything you need to know."

"How to get back?"

"Possibly. I'm not sure of that. But I can see now that the thing you know that we do not know—the Burton potentiomo-tor which, in your universe, was attached to the first moon-bound rocket—may be the means of saving Earth from Arc-turus.

"And I tell you again that you are wrong; that this world is as real as the one you came from, and is not the dream of someone in your world. And that if the Arcturians win here, you will not survive even to try to get back where you came from. Do you believe me?"

"I—don't—know."

"Come, let me show you what you may be saving Earth from. Would you like to see an Arcturian? A live Arcturian?"

"Why- Sure, why not?"

"Follow."

The sphere that was Mekky floated across the room, and Keith followed. The voice was saying inside his head, "This is one we captured near Alpha Centauri, in a scouting ship. It's the first we've captured alive in a long time. It was from its mind—if one can call it a mind—that I learned of the monster ship that is to come, the ship that is capable of destroying our entire fleet unless we destroy it first, and of the armament and the defensive hull it will have. Perhaps, after you see it—"

A door swung open, revealing, just beyond it, a second steel-barred door that led to a cell. With the opening of the door a light flashed on just inside the cell.

"That," said the voice of Mekky, "is an Arcturian."

Keith took a step closer to look through the bars. He stepped back—several steps—even more quickly. He felt as though he were going to be sick at his stomach. He closed his eyes and swayed dizzily. Horror and nausea almost blanked him out.

And he'd had only a quick, indistinct glimpse of part of the Arcturian. He didn't really know, even now, what an Arcturian looked like. But he knew that he didn't *want* to know; that even seeing one behind bars and helpless might drive a human being mad.

It was alien beyond all imagining. Even Joe Doppelberg couldn't have imagined *that*.

The steel door swung shut.

"That," said Mekky, "is an Arcturian in his own body. Possibly now you will understand why Arcturian spies—one of *those*—disguised in the body of a human being is shot on suspicion. Back in the early days of the war, a few Arcturians were taken to Earth and shown there, to steel Earth for the long and bitter struggle it faced to avoid annihilation.

"People of Earth have seen *those*. They know the power a disguised Arcturian, one who has taken over the body of a captured human, has. That is why Earthmen shoot at possible Arcturian spies on mere suspicion. Do you understand, now that you have seen?"

Keith's throat was dry and his lips were dry. He said, "Yes," and his voice was almost a croak. He was still filled with the horror and loathing that even a quick glimpse of the monster had given him; he was scarcely conscious of what Mekky was saying.

"*That*" said Mekky, "is what will destroy the human race and populate the Solar System, unless we can destroy the monster ship that will be here soon.

"Come, Keith Winton."

**M**



## *Huckleberry Infinity*

Keith Winton felt a little dazed. He felt as though he'd been drunk and was just sobering up, or as though he'd been under ether and hadn't quite come out of it yet.

But it wasn't quite like either of those things. Though he felt physically lethargic, his mind was clear, crystalline, in fact. It was just that too much strong meat was being fed to it all at once. It was having difficulty absorbing more.

He sat on a little steel-railed balcony, looking out over the big room of the flagship, watching Dopelle and a varying number of other men swiftly and efficiently making something that looked like a tremendously large and quite modified edition of something he'd seen a picture of in a science magazine back on Earth, his own Earth. It was a Burton potentiomotor. And it had been in the science magazine that he'd seen the wiring diagram and the formula that covered the electrical field.

The sphere that was Mekky floated above the operation, just over Dopelle's shoulder and a good fifty feet away from Keith. But it was talking to Keith, inside Keith's mind. Apparently distance didn't make any difference to Mekky.

And Keith had a hunch that Mekky was carrying on more than one of those telepathic conversations at the same time, for it was pretty obvious that Mekky was directing Dopelle and the workmen even while he talked to Keith.

"You find it difficult to grasp, of course," Mekky's voice was saying. "Infinity is, in fact, impossible fully to grasp. Yet there is an infinite number of universes."

"But where?" Keith's mind asked. "In parallel dimensions—or what?"

"Dimension is merely an attribute of a universe," Mekky said, "having validity only within that particular universe. From elsewhere, a universe—itsself an infinity of space—is but a point, a dimensionless point.

"There are an infinite number of points on the head of a pin. There are as many points on the head of a pin, therefore, as in an infinite universe—or in an infinity of infinite universes. And infinity to the infinite power is still only infinity. Do you understand?"

"Almost."

"There are, then, *an infinite number of coexistent universes*. They include this one and the one you came from. They are equally real, and equally true. But do you conceive what an infinity of universes means, Keith Winton?"

"Well—yes and no."

"It means that, out of infinity, *all conceivable universes exist*."

"There is, for instance, a universe in which this exact scene is being repeated except that you—or the equivalent of you—are wearing brown shoes instead of black ones.

"There are an infinite number of permutations of that variation, such as one in which you have a slight scratch on your left forefinger and one in which you have purple horns and—"

"But are they all me?"

Mekky said, "No, none of them is you—any more than the Keith Winton in this universe is you. I should not have used that pronoun. They are separate individual entities. As the Keith Winton here is; in this particular variation, there is a wide physical difference—no resemblance, in fact.

"But you and your prototype here had roughly the same history. And you found, to your sorrow, each of you wrote the same stories once. And there are similarities between my master, Dopelle, here and a science-fiction fan named Doppel-berg in your universe, but they are *not* the same person."

Keith said thoughtfully, "If there are infinite universes, then all possible combinations must exist. Then, somewhere, *everything must be true*. I mean, it would be impossible to write a fiction story—because no matter how wild it sounds, that very thing must be happening somewhere. Is that true?"

"Of course it's true. There is a universe in which Huckleberry Finn is a real person, doing the exact things Mark Twain described him as doing. There are, in fact, an infinite number of universes in which a Huckleberry Finn is doing every possible variation of what Mark Twain *might* have described him as doing. No matter what variation, major or minor, Mark Twain might have made in the writing of that book it would have been true."

Keith Winton's mind staggered a little.

He said, "Then there are an infinite number of universes in which we—or our equivalents—are making Burton outfits to defeat attacking Arcturians? And in some of them we'll succeed and in others we'll fail?"

"True. And there are an infinite number of universes, of course, in which we don't exist at all—that is, no creatures similar to us exist at all. In which the human race doesn't exist at all. There are an infinite number of universes, for instance, in which flowers are the predominant form of life—or in which no form of life has ever developed or will develop.

"And infinite universes in which the states of existence are such that we would have no words or thoughts to describe them or to imagine them."

Keith closed his eyes and tried to visualize universes which he could not visualize because he couldn't even imagine them. He snapped his eyes open again when Mekky said:

"All possible combinations must exist in infinity. Therefore there are an infinite number of universes in which you're going to die within the next hour, piloting a rocket against the monster ship from Arcturus. As you are going to pilot one here."

"What?"

"Of course. At your own request. It may get you back to your own universe. And you want to get back there; I can see that very clearly in your mind. You will be given the chance if you wish. But do not ask me whether you will succeed in this particular universe. I cannot read the future."

Keith shook his head to clear it again. There were still a million questions he wanted to ask. He went back to the beginning, and asked again one of the first questions he'd asked after the hypnosis. Maybe, with a little better basis of overall understanding, the answer to it would mean more now than it had the first time.

"Will you please explain again, Mekky, how I got here?"

"The moon rocket from your Earth must have fallen back and landed very near you. Probably within a few yards. The Burton machine functioned upon landing—not exactly an explosion, although some of the effects were similar. But I can see, from my study of the machine, that some of the electrical effects would be peculiar. Anyone caught in the flash—directly in it, and not at the edges—is not killed. He is simply knocked out of his universe and into another one of the infinite number of universes."

"But how can you *know* that, if the Burton effect is new here?"

"Partly by deduction from what happened to you. Partly by analysis—a much deeper analysis than could have been given to it on your Earth—of the Burton formula and the Burton effect. The first alone would be enough, without the theoretical justification. You were there; you are here. Q. E. D.

"And, from your mind, I can see why, out of an infinity of universes, you landed in this one."

"You mean it wasn't random?"

"Nothing is random. It is because you chanced, at the exact instant of the flash, to be *thinking* about this particular universe. That is, you were thinking about your science-fiction fan, Joe Doppelberg, and you were wondering what kind of a universe he would dream about, what kind of a universe he would really *like*. And this is it.

"That doesn't mean that this isn't a real universe, as real as your own. Neither Joe Doppelberg nor you *thought up* this universe. It was; it existed. But it is *the* universe out of infinite universes which happens to be the one exactly like what you were thinking of at the time of the flash—thinking of, that is, as the universe you thought Joe Doppelberg would dream up."

Keith said, "I think I understand now. And it explains a lot of things. Such as why 'space girls' wear the costumes they wear here. Joe *would* think of that—or I would have thought he would. And—"

He thought of so many things at once—and all of them fitted—that he couldn't say them all.

Dopelle was *exactly* what Doppelberg would have dreamed himself to be. Down to the romanticizing of his name.

And so many little things were explicable now. Joe Doppelberg had been at the Borden office in his, Keith's absence. Therefore he had never seen Keith and didn't know what he looked like. But he'd had a mental picture of him, from having corresponded, and the Keith Winton of this universe would be like that mental picture—taller, more slender than Keith, more studious-looking because of the glasses—more typically an editor, in brief. If Joe had seen Keith, then the picture would have corresponded; Keith Winton here would have been the physical double of Keith Winton there. Or, more accurately, Keith would have been transported to the universe (otherwise identical to this one) in which Keith Win-ton *was* his physical double.

Joe Doppelberg had undoubtedly seen Betty Hadley at the Borden offices. He hadn't known she'd worked there only a few days—so, in this universe, that wasn't true. He hadn't known of Borden's Greeneville estate and so, here, Borden's estate wasn't in Greeneville, wherever it was. He must have one somewhere.

Yes, it *all* fitted—even to the improvement of the bug-eyed monsters on the covers of *Surprising Stories*—Bems with the subtle horror that Doppelberg demanded of them.

And otherwise—in so many ways—this was the universe that *a* space-stricken adolescent would dream up. Jalopies and spaceships. The Nighters. Air on the moon. Ordinary forty-five automatics on Earth, and God knows what weapons in in-tragalactic warfare. Moonjuice and the W. B. I.

And Doppelberg as Dopelle, master of a universe except for the opposition of Arcturus. Dopelle, super-scientist, creator of Mekky, the only man who'd been to Arcturus and returned alive.

Dopelle, fiance of Betty Hadley. Of course he'd fallen in love with her on sight, the day he'd seen her at the Borden office. And that was one thing Keith couldn't blame him for.

Universe *d la* Doppelberg.

Again Keith corrected himself: Universe *a la* Doppelberg as he, Keith, could have conceived it, consciously and subcon- sciously. Joe himself really didn't have anything to do with it at all. This was merely the universe Keith had imagined that Doppelberg would dream up. Even to the details he hadn't thought out.

Mekky was right; it fitted too well to be wrong.

The men in the big room down below the balcony were now putting the finishing touches on the thing they were making—a thing of complicated coils that only vaguely resembled the picture he'd once seen of the Burton potentiometer. Obviously Mekky had, once he understood the principle, made it vastly more powerful and more efficient.

Mekky floated up to the balcony now and hovered near Keith's shoulder.

He said, "Now they'll install it as a warhead on a lifeboat—a rocket-propelled craft. I cannot foresee what effect a tele-ported space hop would have on the Burton field, so we cannot chance putting it on anything larger. And there is no time for experimentation.

"Someone—and you will have the first privilege of volunteering—must take the lifeboat out of its mother ship, this ship, and run it around awhile until a sufficient charge is built up in the Burton apparatus. It will be a tremendous charge."

"How long will that take?" Keith asked. He knew already that he was going to volunteer.

"Only minutes. To be exact, it will be fully charged within four and a quarter minutes. Running the rocket ship longer than that will neither add to nor diminish the potential that has been built up.

"Thereafter the rocket must hover near the flagship—which will be the first objective of the monster ship from Arcturus. And when it materializes here to attack us, the rocket ship must crash into the Arcturian monster.

"The Arcturian ship will be inertialess; any other ship we have can crash into it without harming it. Nothing in our armaments can touch it. It will blaze a path of death and destruction through the fleet—and then the planets, including Earth, after it has destroyed the fleet. Unless the Burton apparatus—which is as new to them as it is to us—can destroy it."

"But *can* it?"

If it was possible for Mekky's mechanical voice to be grim, then it sounded grim in Keith's mind. "I think it will. You will know when you crash the lifeboat. I see in your mind that you do volunteer to do that—as a chance to get back to your own world.

"It is a great privilege. Every man in the fleet would volunteer, if you did not wish to."

"Will I be able to operate the lifeboat? I have no idea of the controls; I've never even seen one. Are they more difficult than an Ehrling?"

"That is irrelevant," Mekky's voice said. "I shall implant knowledge of how to operate it in your mind before you enter. You will have automatic reflexes that you won't even have to think about. In fact, you *must* have them if you are to get back to your own universe—instead of merely out of this one. Your mind must be free from the necessity of concentration on the rocket controls."

"Why?"

"Because you must concentrate on the universe that you wish to get back to, remember things about it. Concentrate on the very spot, in fact, where you were a week ago when the moon rocket landed near you. Not on that *time*, of course, allow for the time lapse. Else you may get back there just in time to be blown away again by the flash of the moon rocket's landing.

"You can explain your absence for this week by pretending that you have had amnesia as a result of the shock of the landing of the rocket. And from Greenville you can go to New York and to Betty Hadley—your Betty Hadley, if you can win her."

Keith reddened a little. There was a disadvantage to having one's mind read so thoroughly, even by a mechanical brain.

The men were wheeling off the thing they had made.

"Will it take them long to install it on the rocket ship?"

"Ten minutes or less. Relax now and close your eyes, Keith Winton. I shall implant in your mind the knowledge of how to control the craft you will operate."

Keith Winton closed his eyes and relaxed.

## 18

### *The Ole Rocketeer*

The rocket-driven lifeboat hovered, half a million miles out from Saturn. A hundred miles from the flagship of the Earth fleet. Keith could see the flagship in his visiplat and he knew that everyone on the flagship who could get near a visiplat was watching him.

Right now, however briefly, he was the hero of this universe. For this brief moment he was greater even than Do-pelle. He was about to do what Dopelle had never quite been able to do—destroy the might and menace of Arcturus.

Nothing, he thought sardonically (and a bit plagiaris-tically), that he had done in this universe had become him as would the manner of his leaving it.

Come to think of it, he'd done all right here. From a hunted suspect to be shot on sight, he'd become the hero who had a chance of saving the human race. Only he'd not be here to know whether he'd saved it or not; whether or not the flash of the Burton effect destroyed the monster ship from Arcturus, it would either kill Keith Winton or blow him—somewhere. Back to his own universe, he hoped.

He wondered if statues would be erected to him, if all went well. If Keith Winton's Birthday would be a national holiday—an international—an interplanetary holiday. But how confusing that would be to the other Keith Winton, the one who belonged here and who undoubtedly had the same birthday. People would have to call one of them Keith Winton Two.

Out of an infinity of Keith Wintons in an infinity of uni- Verses plus an infinity of universes in which there wasn't any Keith Winton plus at least one universe—rather, plus an *infinity* of universes again—in which Keith Winton had been but was missing after a rocket flash. . . .

But *this* universe was a real one now. For a while, at least.

And he, alone in this tiny cigar-shaped rocket only thirty feet long by six in circumference, might be able to do what the whole Earth fleet couldn't do.

He wondered. But Mekky thought it would work and Mekky should know if anybody or anything should know. No use worrying about it. It would work or it wouldn't and, if it didn't, he wouldn't be alive to know that it hadn't.

He tested the controls, sending the rocket in a tight little circle only a mile across, coming back to a dead stop at exactly the point from which he'd started. A difficult maneuver, but easy for him now; he was an expert, thanks to Mekky.

*The Ole Rocketeer*, he thought, remembering the way he'd signed his Rocketalk Department in *Surprising Stories*. If only the fans who wrote to that department could see him now! He grinned.

Inside his head, Mekky's voice said, "It's coming, I can feel vibrations in the subether. Get ready, Keith Winton."

He looked hard at the visiplat. There was a black dot just off the center of it. He touched the controls, got the dot on dead center, and then slammed on all the rocket's full power.

The black dot grew, slowly at first; then it filled the screen. It filled the screen although the objective for which he was aiming was still a long way off. It must be tremendous!

He could see the gun ports of the monster ship; guns were trying to swivel around toward him. But there wouldn't be time for them to get in a single shot; he was only a split second away.

A fraction of a second now!

Quickly, desperately, he remembered to concentrate on Earth, *his* Earth, on the spot near Greenville, New York. On Betty Hadley. Above all, on Betty Hadley. On currency in sensible dollars and cents, and night life on Broadway without the mistout. On everything he'd known and loved back home.

A whole series of pictures was flashing through his mind, as is supposed to happen to a drowning man (but doesn't, really). He thought, "But good God, why didn't I think of it sooner? It doesn't have to be exactly like the world I left. It can be *better!* I'm missing from an infinity of universes; I can pick one that will give me at least a few improvements. I can pick a universe *almost* exactly like mine, except that—my job-Betty—"

Of course all those thoughts weren't going through his mind just in that form, word following word, in the fraction of a second in which he had to think them. They weren't that coherent; it was just a blinding flash of realization—of what he might have done had he had time to think things out.

And then, as the rocket hit the monster ship on dead center, there was another blinding flash. A different kind of blinding flash.

Again there was no sense of a time lapse. And again, Keith Winton was lying flat on the ground and it was early evening. There were stars in the sky and a moon. It was a quarter moon, he noticed, not the narrow crescent of last Sunday evening.

He looked down and around him. He was in the middle of a big charred and blackened area. Not far away were the foundations of what had been a house, and he recognized the size and shape of it. He recognized, too, the blackened stump of a tree beside him.

And things looked—as they should—as though the explosion and fire had taken place nearly a week ago.

"Good," he thought. "Back at the right time and place."

He stood up and stretched, feeling a bit stiff from his confinement in the little rocket ship. He walked out to the road—a familiar road, this time, the same road that had been outside the estate.

But he still felt uneasy. *Why* had he taken the chance of letting his mind wander a trifle just at that last second? He could all too easily have made a horrible mistake doing that. What if—?

A truck was coming along and he hailed it, getting a lift into Greenville. The driver was taciturn; they didn't talk at all on the way in.

Keith thanked him as he got off on the main square of town.

He ran quickly to the newsstand to look at the headline of the current newspaper displayed there. "Giants Beat Bums," it read. Keith sighed with relief. He realized that he'd been sweating until he'd seen that headline.

He wiped the perspiration off his forehead and went into the newsstand. "Got a copy of *Surprising Stories*?" he asked. That was the next hurdle.

"Right here, sir."

He glanced at the cover, at the familiar cover, and saw that the girl and the monster on it were as they should be and that the price said 20^ and not 2 cr.

He sighed with relief again, and then reached into his pocket for change and remembered there wasn't any. And there'd be only credit bills—to the tune of about five hundred and seventy credits, if he remembered rightly—in his wallet. No use pulling them out.

Embarrassed, he handed the magazine back. "Sorry," he said. "Just realized that I came away without any money."

"Oh, that's all right, Mr. Winton," the proprietor said. "Pay me any time. And—uh—if you came away without your money, could I lend you some? Would twenty dollars help?"

"It surely would," Keith said. That would be more than enough to get him to New York. But how did the proprietor of this little place in Greenville know him? He folded the magazine and put it in his pocket while the proprietor opened the cash register.

Keith said, "Thanks a lot. But—uh—just give me nineteen eighty, so I won't owe you for the magazine too."

"Sure, might as well keep it even. Gee, I'm glad to see you, Mr. Winton. We thought you were killed when the rocket hit. All the papers said so."

"I'm afraid they made a mistake," Keith said. Of course, he thought; that was how the man knew him. His picture had been in the newspaper as one of the visitors of Borden who was presumed to be killed by the rocket.

"Sure glad the newspapers were wrong," the proprietor said.

Keith pocketed the change from twenty dollars and went out again. It was getting darkish now, just as it had been on last Saturday night. Well, now to—now to what? He couldn't phone Borden.

Borden was dead—or maybe blown into some other universe. Keith hoped it was the latter. Had the Bordens and the

"Do I want to? *Darling— oh, my beloved!*"

A moment later, Keith Winton, with a dazed and somewhat silly look on his face, hurried out of the drugstore to find a taxi.

*This*, he thought, was a universe he'd really settle for.