

# The Diploids

A Novel by

***KATHERINE MacLEAN***

*Thrilling Wonder Stories*

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## ***The Penalty of Uniqueness***

WHAT would you do if you suddenly discovered you were not human at all, but an alien? Would it change your feelings towards your friends—your wife—your sweetheart—your parents? Would you still feel drawn toward humans, or would a new craving spring up in you to find and join your own kind?

Independent as many men may be in their thinking, there is yet the basic herd comfort of being not too much unlike their fellows. Nothing is lonelier than uniqueness—except being an outcast. This was the ferment which worked in Paul Breden, from the day he discovered he was different. And in him worked not only the loneliness, but an outraged sense of injustice dangerously like revenge.

—The Editor

*He had to backtrack his own heredity before he could find out whether he was a freak or a superman*

# I



LOOK out!” The shout was almost in his ear, and with the shout came another sound, a flat crack like two boards slapping together. He moved instinctively, grasping Nadine’s arm and making three rapid strides to the shelter of a store doorway. Then he turned as the flat echoes of sound rang back from the stone fronts of the buildings across the street. He expected to see something fallen from a window, or a car out of control veering up over the curb.

At first glance there was nothing. The traffic moved by silently and swiftly as usual, but the people on the sidewalk milled oddly, and then straightened to stare all in one direction down the street. The light had changed a few seconds ago, and the traffic sped by more rapidly, accelerating.

He picked out voices.

“Did you get his number?”

“Some nut waving a gun from a taxi.”

“But he shot at us!”

He glanced at Nadine; they exchanged a half shrug and walked on.

Then “Mart” Breden remembered that something had brushed his neck roughly as he heard the shout. He had assumed it was the sleeve of a waving arm but...

“So as I was saying—” he continued stubbornly, determined to finish a half-finished witty point. While he spoke he put his fingertips up to feel the spot on his neck, then brought them down again. There was a dampness on his neck and a red smear of color on his fingertips... blood.

Nadine halted. “As you were saying, brother—you’re just too dumb to know when you’ve been hurt.”

She moved quickly around to his other side where she could see the side of his neck. “It’s only a scratch. The bullet just touched

you,” she reassured, groping in her jade-green bag with gold-tinted fingernails. “Hold still! I’ll fix it.”

He stood still. Whatever he had been about to say had vanished from his mind, but it was a pleasure to stand and have Nadine fussing over him and ministering to him with obvious concern. She was indisputably lovely, and dressed in a way that was designed to bring out the fact. He was conscious of envious glances. Streams of brightly dressed, handsome people returning to work from lunch passed by, their feet soundless on the green resilient sidewalk. Some of them were talking quietly and laughing in conversation as they passed; some were listening to music spools with ear-buttons that touched his hearing with a faint faraway strain of music as they passed. He was pleased that they looked at her, and had no attention for him.

Standing still under Nadine’s ministrations, he said appreciatively, “You’re the perfect partner to take along to an accident.”

She smiled up at him. “Well, if you’re going to make a habit of being shot at, I’ll buy more band-aids.” Stepping back she cocked her head to inspect her work. The wail of a police patrol wing throttled down to a growl as it touched road and swung in to where the crowd clustered. She glanced back doubtfully. “Should we go back and tell them?”

He touched the small flesh-colored bandage on his scratch, looking at the reflection in a window. “Hardly worth going back. All we’d prove is that someone was shooting, and they know that already.”

THEY walked on together through the shade of the tall trees that lined the avenue. “When your Revision Committee for the Patent Code testifies before Congress,” he said, remembering what he had been saying, “you should be spokesman in that tight green and gold suit you’re wearing. They’d agree to anything.”

She picked up the thread. “ ‘Gentlemen,’ I’ll say—”

“Undulating slightly,” he added.

“Invention has become a form of restriction. The law has been diverted from—”

“*Seduced* from!”

“Seduced from its original intention, which was to guarantee sufficient profits to the inventor to encourage and stimulate invention. Instead, research now has as its main purpose the desire to invent something first and patent it first, not for use, but to prevent its use, to preserve the status quo for the industry, financing the research, by preventing its use by competitors.”

A small tube elevator whooshed them up to the sixtieth floor, “Lawyers’ Row.” They were at the door of his office.

PAUL BREDEN

PATENT LAW

Nadine’s office was further down the corridor. Paul pushed his door open, hoping to extend their lunch time together a little more, beguiling her with the imaginary speech. “At this point your claue in the gallery claps and cheers and stomps, and while they are being ejected you pull out your compact and put on more lipstick.”

They walked into the inner office past the secretary, ignoring the fact that lunch was over and they both had work to do. Nadine continued the speech, gesticulating with mock earnestness. He considered her from a standpoint of an imaginary audience of lascivious Congressmen. She was beautiful—yes, but too perfectly dressed, too crisp and finished and unapproachable. It was probably an effect carefully calculated to keep the minds of her business associates on the subject of business.

“You should muss your hair a little,” he interrupted, getting a frown for his efforts.

“The competition, not to be outdone, pours its money into research to find *other* ways of doing what it needs done rather than the way the patent excludes them from. This, gentlemen, is...”

He looked at her with a familiar question coming: up in his mind, quickening his pulse. She probably had a private life of friends and lovers, but he had never dared let himself approach that side of her, although they had known each other for six months. She could

choose among many men—men without his handicap—yet she seemed glad to be with him as a law collaborator, and welcomed any free time they could escape from business lunches to eat together. Yet...

“... does not make the inventor any richer, for he draws only his research salary from his company. Actually, the prime result is duplication of research, so that instead of each day bringing hundreds of brilliant new inventions, the patent office is flooded daily with hundreds of brilliant new ways of doing the same damned thing, each one tying up the patent office with its red tape—each one no better than the other!”

He sat down behind his desk and propped his elbows on it, smiling. “Add this. ‘There are nine and ninety ways —Of constructing tribal lays, And every —Single—One—Of them—Is *right!*’”

“As Kipling wrote—” she began, then stopped to frown at him. “Would Congressmen know that lays are a form of poetry?”

He laughed. “All the better if they don’t.” It was not often they had lunch together or extended their lunch hours like this. They were too busy. She probably would have been surprised to learn how much these occasional lunches meant to him.

The televiewer chimed.

PAUL muttered a “damn,” reaching for the right phone, and Nadine gave him a farewell salute and moved toward the door. “Wait a minute,” he asked her, “and we’ll see who this jerk is.” He pushed a button and a screen on the wall opposite him sprang to life in color, showing a lean old man in a snappy pearl gray suit, waiting with restless impatience. “Yardly Devon.” Breden identified him without pleasure, remembering the things Devon had said before switching off the last time they had seen each other.

“His last two inventions were not patentable, Nadine, and I told him so, but he insisted I try to get patents on them anyhow. When they were rejected he claimed I’d sabotaged them. He probably took them to another consultant, got the same opinion, and wants to

apologize now.” He indicated the chair beside the desk. “Sit there a minute. You’re out of range of the scanner.”

She smiled and sat down. The bell chimed again impatiently, and Breden switched on the scanner that put him on Devon’s screen. “Yes?”

A light came into the eyes of the dapper old man as he saw Breden. With a quick move he jumped to his feet, bringing a gun up from somewhere below screen range. “I’ve got you now, Breden. I suspected it a long time, and now I know what you are.”

For a half second of time Breden started to laugh, then he remembered the shot on the street a quarter hour before with a sudden cold jolt. Devon was not kidding.

“Careful there, old boy, you’ll break your scanner,” Nadine called.

His screen couldn’t see her, and the tailored neat old man was childishly startled. “Who said that!” He leaned forward, peering, then turned to inspect the partially visible room showing on the screen, the gun waving in his hand. “I’ve got to kill him,” he said clearly to no one in particular. “He’s a diploid.” He dwindled and came into full view further away, peered around and then wandered out of screen view.

“Crazy,” Breden muttered. He felt weak. That last meaningless word had been a shock. “Have the police trace the call. I’ll try to hold him.” He handed her one of the phones.

The old man had wandered back to his screen and he glimpsed the motion. He whirled, gun leveled. “Don’t try to escape!”

Breden pulled his hand back and arranged his features in an expression of respect and interest. He felt shaken. *Diploid*. Judging by Devon’s voice it meant something different from a human. It had been a long time since he had heard that inflection in anyone’s tone. The meaningless word rang in his ears as if he had been called something animal. He forced himself to think. What would hold an inventor’s interest long enough for the police to reach him? “I gather that that gun shoots through television screens. Could you give me an idea how it works, Mister Devon?”

Nadine was murmuring into the phone, “Yes, with a gun. It looks

like a private room he's calling from." She turned and whispered, "What's your number?"

"Lascar B-1063," Breden said, without turning his head. On the screen Devon was looking down at his automatic.

"It's an invention—" he said, looking up at the sound of Breden's voice—"a new Devon invention." The old man stroked it fondly with his left hand without turning it from its perfect pictured aim at Breden's face. It looked startlingly deadly in full stereo pointing at him from the screen.

Breden pulled his eyes from it, resisting an irrational impulse to switch off the screen. "How does it work?"

If only he could keep this conversation going for a while the police would come on to the screen in the room behind Devon and take him away.

The inventor's voice began to rise. "I won't tell you. It's secret. And you're not going to stop me from patenting it like you did the others. You sneaking diploids are trying to get in everywhere. But I won't let you have the Earth. You can't fool me! I know what you are. You're not going to hold up progress by keeping people from getting patents—" His voice had risen to a shriek; his face was distorted, "*I'll stop you! I'll kill you... I'll kill you right now!*" The shots came with a shocking crack of sound. The screen was too clear, too tri-dimensional, too much like an undefended open window through which a yammering madman poured shots at him. Instinctively Breden threw himself to one side and half rose before he could check the motion.

The vision of the shouting old man cracked across like a broken mirror and, still moving, began to waver in ripples like something seen in disturbed water, then abruptly shattered to darkness. They heard a shriek, "Got you!" just before a final tearing sputter and the dull *pfut* of a blown fuse as Devon's sound system went dead.

NADINE had been staring fascinated, but now there was nothing to stare at but the smooth grayness of the viewer screen. "He just shot his televiewer all to hell." she said into the phone, still staring

fascinated at the screen. “It blew out... that’s right. We’ll leave it on.” She put the phone back in its cradle with a sigh. “They said not to switch off.”

Her expression changed as she looked at him. “What is it, Mart? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” Another spasm of depression hit him. “Oh hell yes—everything. You heard him call me a diploid?”

She took out a cigarette case and opened it, selecting a cigarette with unnecessary care. She was concerned. “One of those little green men, you mean? Smoke?”

“No thanks.”

She untelescoped a long cigarette holder and fitted the cigarette into it, speaking thoughtfully, “I heard him. It was nothing personal, Mart. For a paranoid there always has to be the deros or the spies or the Martians, and the big conspiracy somehow against him. It had to be someone, and you were elected. You must see enough nuts coming in here with lunatic inventions and delusions of grandeur to be used to it.”

He leaned forward and lit her cigarette. “Too used to it. Beginning to wonder.” He put away his cigarette lighter and held up his hand, looking at it. Five fingers and a thumb. Too many fingers.

“Right up to high school they called me “Marty” for “Martian Breden”—and it wasn’t a friendly nickname. I was with a gang, but I was its goat. If we played cops and robbers—I was the robber, and got arrested or electrocuted, or shot resisting arrest. If we played cowboys and Indians—I tried to burn people at the stake and got my throat slit by a hero with a bowie knife, and bit the dust. In high school they started getting smarter, and I had friends who *were* friends, but for them I was “Marty” too. By that time it was my name. I like it now, but that’s where it came from.”

He put his six-fingered hand down on the desk. “When a new client comes in, now, I mention that the simplest inventions are the best, like the safety pin— or the small labor saving device I invented which makes it easier to play the piano and carry four



beer bottles in each hand. ‘What is it?’ they ask... I hold my hand up. ‘Extra finger’ I say. ‘It is patented.’ That always tickles them.”

He had given her the same line when they first met. He remembered that he had felt the same first hostile alertness and expectation of hurt for her as for any other stranger, and had concealed his tension behind the usual line of entertaining talk. She had been just another beautiful woman to him, a lawyer like himself, but more poised and bland than he was—and too beautifully dressed, too efficient, probably critical and unforgiving and egotistical, someone who could hurt you if you dropped your guard.

That was before he knew her. His guard was all the way down now. There was no pretending and no caution when he talked with Nadine. “I’m not just being sensitive, Nade, I need jokes like that. I have to use them, and use them carefully. So they’ll get a lift and a laugh every time they notice a detail that’s different. That Mart! Always a character. Everything with him has to be original—if I don’t point it out and make jokes about it, sooner or later people begin to fidget and grow uncomfortable with an instinct of something being wrong. There are too many subtle physical oddities that disturb instinct with a feeling of misproportion. The only thing I can do to stop nervousness and tension from building up in them is to bring out my differences and display them like a collection of card tricks, so whenever they get that wrong feeling again, it’s part of the joke, just Mart being a character again.”

## II

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FOR a time Nadine sat back, something close to pity on her lovely face. Then she grinned and mimicked him from memory, with a proudly bent arm and clenched fist, demonstrating the muscles. “My own invention...” she quoted words he had said, flexing her arm as she had seen him do, with a precise back and forth motion. “I’m the only *genuinely* self made man. Self made—self assembled—” a rusty hinge noise began in perfect time with the

motion of the flexing arm, and she glanced at the arm with dismay and tried to stop it.

It kept moving stiffly, the rusty squeak growing louder. Hastily she grabbed it and brought it to a halt with her other hand, and then apologetically took an imaginary small object from her pocket. “Of course, I was pretty young at the time... might have slipped and gotten some parts in from the wrong stack... not enough light...” Nadine’s voice faded to an apologetic mumble as she carefully oiled her elbow with an imaginary oil can.

He was laughing. This was the first time he had seen anyone else do his act. He had seen clients laugh, but this was the first time he had seen what they were laughing at from the outside, and, well, it *was* funny.

She looked up from oiling her elbow, her eyes round and solemn. “You were saying?” she asked innocently, putting the invisible and imaginary oil can carefully back into her pocket, and then smiled. “I wondered about that end-man effect, Mart. It’s amusing and starts a talk off in a good mood, but it isn’t exactly like you, not when a person gets to know you better. Are you sure you need it?”

For an instant a crowd of painful incidents pushed against the unlocked door of memory. The time, when he was twelve, visiting the city and he had wandered into a strange neighborhood where the kids did not know him; the fight he had lost. And other times. “I’ve lived long enough to find out what happens if I don’t.”

“Are you sure that still applies?” she asked, her cool green eyes showing interest and concern.

Breden went on talking as if he hadn’t heard her question. His eyes held a faraway look as he remembered people’s past reactions to his difference.

“Take my face—ears set higher than normal and tipped back more—a difference easy to sense, hard to focus on. It makes my face look foreign, but what race? I can see the reaction to it even in the faces of people who pass on the sidewalk—the usual quick unseeing glance, then a double-take and a puzzled expression. Then they’re past and they forget about it. It doesn’t lead anywhere with adults. No one spits at me anymore or stops me to ask who the hell

I am and why don't I go back to wherever I came from, but the reaction is always the same. None of them can classify me. It must be a genuinely strong feeling of something alien." He laughed suddenly and harshly, surprising himself with the sound. "By the law of democracy the majority is right. Maybe I *am* a Martian, if that's what they think!"

She blew a plume of smoke reflectively, not commenting, then picked up the phone. "Let's see if the police have our paranoid friend yet."

"A Martian." Saying that hateful word to Nadine made it sound like a joke and not like something that had been dreams and nightmares ever since he was a kid and they had dubbed him "Martian" Breden, and he'd known something secret about himself that the others did not know.

Nadine's voice, vibrant and soft. "Calling in for Paul Breden about a threat to him we reported... yes, did you? Oh... no... of course. Thank you." She hung up thoughtfully, "You can switch off now."

He switched off the scanner that had held connection with Devon's blown televiewer. "What'd they say?"

"They didn't get him. When they got there there was nothing but a smashed televiewer and the neighbor in the next room complaining about the racket— that must have been his gun."

"Anything else?"

"They want you to drop down to the local station house today or tomorrow and swear out a complaint. I said yes."

"Check."

She smiled. "Let's hope he sticks to trying to kill you by television."

Then when he thought she had let it pass, Nadine looked at her long, gold-tinted nails, and asked, "What did you mean about being a Martian?"

She had known it was more than a gag.

He glanced at his appointment pad. "Could you spare me fifteen

more minutes?”

She settled back and crossed her legs. “I’m listening.”

He hesitated a moment, his hands flat on the desk top, looking for easier ways of saying what he was going to say. Stray fugitive thoughts scurried around the fringes of consciousness like a dusty frightened nest of mice looking for knotholes of escape from a suddenly opened closet—mice that could have grown to full scale monsters if he had waited longer before telling someone of this. And the tightening feeling in his chest warned of coming fear, the ghost that always comes out of mental closets that have been locked too long and are opened reluctantly.

IT WOULD be better, he decided, to speak rapidly and bluntly, or he might not get it out at all. There was no real trouble, it was just that this was the first time he had explained to anyone. What are you afraid of? This just needs airing out.

“Let’s take it item by item,” he said slowly, still holding his hands palm down, flat against the desk top, feeling their slight tremor. “I’ve got six fingers, right?”

“Sure,” she said with a touch of defiance. “Six good fingers.”

“Ever notice something odd about my walk?”

“Yes.” She smiled reflectively. “Individual... a slightly crouched springy look. I’d recognize you by it.”

“My feet are different.”

“Oh?” She exhaled a translucent puff of smoke, looking at it, then met his eye. “In what way?”

He swung in his chair so that she could see his legs and shoes. “They’re long in the arch, and abnormally narrow. I can’t keep my heel on the ground, it doesn’t feel right there. Go on my toes instead.” He considered his deep rubber soles, checking their normal appearance. “My shoes are built up inside—up in the back—down in the front, so inside I’m standing on my toes the way I like it. The angle brings my shoe down to normal length.” He looked up at her, challenging her to answer. “Remind you of something?”

“Hocks,” she said reluctantly. “Do they hurt?” It was a key question.

“No.” He knew what she meant. An abnormality should be imperfect. Feet hurt vehemently at the slightest trace of imperfection. His feet felt fine.

“What else?” she asked grimly. He could see the conclusions forming in her mind.

“What race would you say I am, Nadine?”

The long grey-green eyes wandered over his face. “I don’t know. A nice, handsome blend—definitely worth staring at. If you’re sensitive about stares —try being ugly and peculiar both. People will look away in droves... Probably some Japanese for those good, broad cheekbones and the set of those ears. Mongoloid skull, Caucasian nose, extra wide chiseled mouth, Hindu almost. I’d guess American Indian, or high cast Brahmin. That orangy olive skin doesn’t tell me anything.” She smiled. “I give up.”

“My parents were straight Caucasian—white midwestern Americans from Omaha.”

“Anyone in the family look like you?”

“No.”

“What else?” She was forgetting to smoke.

He bent his right arm, clenching his fist near his shoulder. “My arms. The proportion of forearm to upper arm is wrong. They should be about equal. My fist should come level with my shoulder.” His fist was five inches above his shoulder. “My upper arm is shorter and thicker than my forearm.”

“Handicap?” The question was automatic now. She knew what the answer would be.

“Advantage, I think. My arms are unusually strong.” Abnormalities should be crippling defects, but these weren’t. People had told him that he was one of the strongest and most vital persons they had ever met. He wondered how much of this Nadine had noticed herself, and how much she had shrugged off. She wasn’t shrugging now.

“What else?”

He hesitated. There was something else—a fact that came into his mind reluctantly as if it were something that was half untrue, a private fairy tale that had no meaning except for him. He had hidden it too long. It was a repression now. His fingers whitened against the desk top. He could feel them trembling. “I’ve got a soft spot in the back of my head.” That’s what he had told the other kids when they had bumped it accidentally and he had cried. His hair covered it, and he hadn’t let them look at it. He had fought instead.

“On the left side,” he said. “The doctor said it looks like it was starting out to be an eye.” He watched her face and saw it go hard and expressionless in defense against whatever was coming, reflecting his own sudden tight control. He continued levelly without change of tone. “I’m lying to you, Nadine. It *is* an eye!”

AFTER he had told her, he sat frozen. This brought the fact to full reality in one blow. *An eye in the back of his head! What was it doing there?*

After a pause she said. “I believe you.” Her cigarette had burned down to the holder. She stubbed it out.

“Want to see it?” They had to bull through this now it was begun.

“No—yes.” She got up and moved behind him, “Show me.”

He reached back and parted his hair in the place where he let it grow long.

There was a moment of silence. “Does it open?” she asked behind him.

He opened it. The unaccustomed glare of the light in the room was painful, a blinding blend of tans and blues. A pinkish blur came into focus in the shape of a face. He shut his eye again, gratefully shutting out the light.

Nadine walked back in front of the desk looking younger and more flustered than he had ever seen her. “Not the right place for an eye,” she muttered confusedly. Fumblingly she took out a cigarette, juggled and dropped it. “It blinked at me.” she said,

picking up the cigarette and trying with trembling fingers to fit it into her holder.

Her confusion was amusing. He had never seen her even slightly flustered before, and the sight distracted him from his own reactions. The tremor left his hands as he began to smile. Self consciously, Nadine made an effort to say something controlled and practical. "Why don't you have it taken out?"

He looked at her without answering for a moment, then said, "Why don't you have one of your eyes taken out?"

She looked up at him, seeing him as a person, thinking how he would feel, and suddenly had back her balance and wisdom like picking up a purse she had dropped. "Sorry. You gave me the right answer to that one."

He grinned, snapping on his cigarette lighter and holding it out for her, his hand steady, and she remembered the cigarette in her hand with a start and looked from it to him, beginning to grin back, and leaned forward putting it between her lips. When the cigarette caught she straightened. "All right, so I'm a sissy."

They shared smiles. "Okay, I've shown you the inventory. How does it add up?"

She sobered abruptly and took the holder from her lips and looked at the cigarette's glowing tip, delaying speech. Then she took a deep breath and forced herself to look at him and reply. "All right. What gives you the idea that you're human?"

For a moment he didn't breathe or think, then his mind raced like a squirrel trapped in a cage. It was almost unbelievable how long he had managed to avoid the elementary question that had trapped him at last. Why should he think he was human? Why should any *man* have so many freakish differences, and yet feel no pain from any of them at all?

Automatically he gasped out the stock answer he had used to fool himself with all those years. "My parents are normal."

"How do you know that they are your parents?"

Here was another shattering question. They were obviously *too* normal, no physical peculiarities at all. They could not possibly be

his parents, and yet he had wanted them to be his parents when he was a kid, wanted it desperately enough to fool himself into believing it. The shock of the idea when he heard it now was appalling. It was the effect of the tremendous effort by which he had always avoided that awful question. It was incredible how long he had managed to suppress it, and how cleverly he had been able to fool himself, he thought dully.

All right, so he wasn't human.

*Then damn all humans!* The hatred flamed like a blow torch. He could hate them now, all these puny, two-eyed five-fingered people who were the same race as the kids who had jeered and tormented him through his bitter childhood. Somewhere there were people like him— people for whom three eyes and six fingers were *right*, who could be friends and accept him without thinking anything about him was wrong—or ugly— or *inhuman*..

“All right,” he said thickly. “So I'm a Martian. Now what?”

Nadine held up a perfectly manicured five-fingered hand. “Not so fast!” She was recovering from the shock and thinking now as he'd seen her concentrate when they were working on a tough case and the opposition had them in a tight corner. She was on his aide, battling against his conclusions. “You don't have to go all the way into a padded cell with our friend there.” She jerked her head at the televiewer screen. “We don't need extra-terrestrials to account for a non-human anthropoid type race. You're obviously Earth adapted, so you have to be a member of a race natural to Earth.”

FOR a moment Breden was held by the sight of her hand. It had five fingers, five lovely fingers, and he couldn't hate Nadine. He couldn't hate his “father” or his “mother” either, and they were human. Even some of his clients were good guys and honest dealers. He clenched his hands and unclenched them in frustration. Was there nothing in the world that was simple? Nothing that a person could be wholeheartedly either for or against? He smiled wryly. A tolerant sense of humor was supposed to be the mature reaction to such impulses. But it was a pale substitute for the pleasure of a knock-down, drag-out fight.



He forced his attention back to what Nadine was saying. Other races. on Earth... “There isn’t any other—”

She interrupted, restraining a knife-edge of impatient logic. “No other known species of mankind *surviving*. But paleontologists have already dug up almost a hundred extinct species. Apparently the conditions were so favorable back in the early days that every species of tarsier, monkey, lemur, baboon and gorilla existing started evolving an offshoot branch of man, and homo sap got there firstus with the mostus and wiped the others out. But perhaps he hasn’t wiped *all* the others out. There may be a few small tribes of a different kind still surviving in the hills and jungles.”

He had wanted to meet and know people like himself, but this presented only a depressing vision of a patent lawyer foolishly out of place on some distant mountainside, trying to communicate in six-fingered sign language to a bunch of frightened six-fingered savages.

“If there are any people like myself around,” he said emphatically, “they’ll be running things.”

“Like that, eh?” she looked him up and down, measuring him for a straight-jacket. “The diploid conspiracy?”

“Like that,” he snapped, uneasily defiant.

She stood up and touched her fingers to the top of his desk, looking at him with irritated affection. “Let’s bring it down to common sense, Mart, If there’s any group running things, it’s obviously a group of low grade imbeciles. The world has never been in such a mess. We’ve been walking the plank towards an atomic blow-up for fifty years, and the longer we take to get there, the bigger the blow. Or put it this way... granted your I.Q. is high, and maybe high I.Q. goes with six fingers—are *you* running things? There are a million people every bit as intelligent as ourselves. We meet them every day in this line of work. Are they controlling the world?” Her vehemence grew, adding force to her words and brightness to her eyes. “Now add them up. If all the political experts, intellectuals, economists, sociologists and general geniuses who ought to know how to run things better, plus all their brains, success, money and power can’t get control of what’s going

on—then a hypothetical handful of conspiring three-eyes has about as much chance of seizing power as a package of Jello has of stiffening up the English Channel for dessert!”

He grinned and cowered down behind his desk. “Cease fire! You’re right, *kamerad*.”

She smiled, holding out her hand. “All right, Mart. The war’s over. Now I have to get back to work.”

He took her hand, standing up. “Sorry you can’t stay.”

“I’m sorry too. We had a nice lunch.” She looked at him slantwise from under her long dark lashes, suddenly provocatively helpless and appealing. “Remember, any time you want someone to talk to while you’re being used for a target, or any time you feel confessional and want to tell someone about a few extra things like a third arm, or how you walk through walls...”

“I’ll call on you.” He finished the sentence as she let it trail off wistfully, and he hustled her toward the door, grinning. She had taken it the way he had hoped she would, as something casual. There was no discernible difference in the easy relationship they had established.

She poked her lovely head back in a moment after he had closed the door after her. “If you find out that there really is a Martian conspiracy, tell me so I can help. I like conspiracies.”

Suddenly fear and loneliness came again. “*I like conspiracies*,” she had said. His spirits sank. But what of Martians, of freaks. How could she like a freak? Perhaps it was all pretense. The old wave of doubts assailed him. A spasm clenched somewhere in his chest and he rose trying to think of something to say—some question that would somehow bring an answer he could trust.

Nadine stood in the doorway in her green suit, looking at him, seeing something in his expression. She came back into the office and put her hand on his arm, looking up into his face with an intent and puzzled gaze. Something changed in the air between them. He felt the warmth of her hand on his arm as if it were fusing into his body, as if in some subtle way their bloodstreams had grown into one. For a long joined moment they stood in silence, their gazes

locked together, and then she said in an oddly quiet voice, “Well, there’s work.”

With an effort they stepped away from each other. “I’ll see you, Nade,” he said as she walked away.

“Yes,” she said, for he had stated something that had to happen. They could not help but see each other. The thought of remaining apart had become an impossible, ridiculous thought.

He had been given his answer, and it was magnificently more than he had hoped for..

He postponed thinking on the subject, letting it remain in the back of his mind as a source of warmth and happiness, and got down to his delayed stack of work. An interview with a client was due in five minutes and he had to brief up on the legal twists he was planning to use to get the man’s patent through.

Concentration shut out from his universe everything but patents and technical details for the time that was necessary. But before the man came in, Mart lifted his head and let his mind range back over the discussion, just once. Maybe there was some explanation for his differences, some pleasant explanation that he could tell Nadine with pride. *Mart Breden wants to know where he came from, what his real name is, and why he has an extra finger on each hand and an extra eye in the back of his head.* Put that way, it hardly seemed too much to ask.

### III

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ON THE way over to the police station at four thirty he heard a shot. It came from God knows where, and it missed, but there was no telling how close it had come. He didn’t stop to investigate; he merely hurried his stride down into the nearest belt entrance and merged himself into the crowd. No one turned to see what the sound was. There was enough noise in the quiet city in the first home-going rush to partially muffle it and make it seem like a normal street sound, and there was no reason for anyone else to

think of a possibility of shots. Violence was too unusual to be expected.

Stepping on a belt the crowd dispersed over the local and express strips, and for a moment Mart was exposed again before the belt carried him out of shot range of the platform. There was no shot, but he was sweating as he found a chair and sat down. It would be easy to be killed that way. The unwary passers-by of the city could not defend him; they simply provided an innocent camouflage and ambush from which Devon could take easy aim without being noticed.

The rest of the way over he was wary and alert, but there were no more shots.

At the station the police informed him that they had not managed to locate Devon in his usual haunts, but they had alerted hotels and airlines to watch for him.

“If you set someone to follow me,” Mart said, “You’ll probably follow Devon too. He’s probably waiting for me somewhere along my usual route home. He tried to get me again today.” He began to have the futile feeling that the police were not particularly interested. The reply confirmed that feeling.

“We don’t do much body guarding anymore Mr. Dev—Mr. ah—Breden. We’re pretty busy, and there aren’t as many cops as there used to be. Automatic alarms take care of protection against burglary and housebreaking. Hypno-questioning has made it pretty difficult for professional crooks, because they find themselves on the suspects’ line-up every time there’s a crime in the city, and if they did it, they find themselves saying so. There’s no profit in the business, and there aren’t so many crooks as there used to be. We have things to do, but most cops are college trained specialists. We route the traffic of the city on all levels, on different loads and flow directions at different times of day; we calculate the maximum load limit of each route and how to reroute from it if it breaks down. We keep things moving and keep jams from piling up. We keep people from getting hurt around fires and power failures and broken water mains, things like that. The city is a big machine and we have to know where all the controls and keypoints are, and keep the wheels turning. You see—” he spread his hands—“we just don’t have any

dumb lug with nothing better to do than guard one single man.”

It sounded like a speech he had made often to plaintive citizens. “You see our position?”

Doggedly Mart asked, “But you have some department to investigate shootings, don’t you?”

“Of course. We have Homicide and Crimes of Violence sections—mostly plainclothes investigation.” The officer smiled. “No matter how unprofitable it is, people still get mad enough to try to kill each other.”

“How do I attract its attention?” Mart asked, “By getting myself killed?”

The officer was amused and patronizing. “Don’t worry. If he’s as far gone as he sounds from your story we’ll probably pick him up tomorrow for taking off his clothes and sitting in the middle of Times Square blowing bubbles. He won’t be around long enough to bother you.”

Breden remembered Devon’s trim appearance, and his pride when apparently he had been sane. He had probably been close to paranoia for a long time, and vanity and surface self-esteem held him back from any conspicuous oddity. Probably he’d be witty and poised to the end, and go to the mental hospital with his sandals shined, his stickpin fastening his tossed-back rain-cape dashingly at the shoulder, his Phi Beta Kappa key impeccably in place and his wristwatch wound, the picture of a sane man being led away by lunatics.

EXCEPT for a small obstacle like trying to kill long range by television, Devon was his choice for the murderer-most-likely-to-succeed. If the police wouldn’t protect him, he would have to protect himself.

“I guess I’ll buy a gun.” He said it with malicious pleasure, knowing it was legal, but almost unheard of, for a man to carry a weapon for self-defense. Let them have their attention attracted by a gun battle in the streets, if nothing else would do it.

The fattish man blinked, his smile fading slightly. “This is a

crowded town mister. You can't go shooting guns off in a city, because you'd be mowing down the bystanders six to a slug. I can't stop you, but if you're licensed, how about borrowing something from us to shoot at him, something not so dangerous?"

Mart was suddenly interested, remembering the spectacular police weapons in the hands of the screen heroes. He'd been watching them enviously for years. "How about a fizz pistol? I've always wondered if they really work like they do on teevee shows—"

"No! Those aren't for civilians. You'd gas crowds at every shot. You know the penalty for unauthorized use of hypno-drugs—sixty-years-to-life, or even death. If I loaned a hypno-loaded pistol out to a civilian we'd both be behind bars before you were out the door. We can't use them ourselves for questioning without being under bond and having three witnesses and a tape recording of every word." He seemed genuinely upset. Apparently someone in the department had been rated down for misuse of hypno recently, for he paused and wiped his forehead with a paper handkerchief, and then tried a feeble smile. "No, all I've got for unauthorized types like yourself is a curare automatic. It won't hurt anybody if you handle it carefully. Just aim low; try not to shoot anyone in the eye, huh?"

Mart walked out feeling better able to defend himself. In one pocket was a button push that would put a directional call for help on the radios of patrol wings, and in the other a small flat automatic that threw a hollow bullet filled with a harmless drug of the curare type that made its victim instantaneously limp and unable to move. Two shots would cause unconsciousness, and three, death. He had been warned to shoot for the legs where a puncture would cause little damage, and to stop when one bullet had penetrated.

Back on the subsurface belt conveyers he kept alert for the sight of a slim old man in an iridescent pearl grey suit. He would have to see Devon first or no weapon would help him...

In his apartment he called his parents, or the people whom he had always loved and thought of as his parents. They were retired on one of the Florida Keys. He asked, as tactfully as he could, about

his birth.

“I’m sorry you found out about that, Marty,” said his father over the televiewer. He stood on the screen, tanned and healthy with wrinkles weathered deep into his face. A flaming orange shirt with fluorescent green seagulls flying across his chest put a strain on the screen’s color system, and the seagulls wavered from bluer to yellower green as the scanner struggled to approximate its shade. Through a window behind him was visible a view of deep blue sky and white sand. “We thought it might hurt your feelings, if you found out. But I guess you’re old enough to know that it doesn’t matter.”

“Could you tell me who were my real parents?”

“I don’t know, Marty—it never seemed important to us. The only one who knew was my brother Ralph—he helped arrange the adoption—but he wouldn’t say, except to say that they were good people. He’d promised not to tell I guess. He was a doctor, and doctors have to keep their secrets.”

“No reflection on you, Dad, but I’m curious. I’d like to find out. Could you tell me how to get in touch with Uncle Ralph?”

“Why, he died about two years ago. We mentioned it to you in a letter, but I guess you forgot.”

They talked pleasantly about other things for a while, and then he switched off thoughtfully, his problem coming up in his mind. Doctor Ralph Breden had known who his parents were, but he had been dead for two years.

IF THERE was an unknown species of man, what was it doing in Omaha?

And if these men traveled among ordinary men, how did they manage to keep their existence a secret? The ability to keep the secret required money, intelligence and organization. And why did they want to stay secret? His imagination drifted toward the idea of a conspiracy again, and he smiled and rejected it. All these tenuous deductions were based on the idea that he was of an alien species, and that was merely an unproven hypothesis. There probably could

be some other explanation of his physical peculiarities.

His thoughts were broken by a sound like someone turning the knob of his apartment door. It was locked of course, and it would be no use to anyone to turn it. He finished his shower and dressed hurriedly, scanning the corridor through the door viewplate before stepping out. No intruder was lurking there, and he began to wonder if the sound had been imagination. When he got to the street a feeling of being watched suddenly came with complete conviction. Casually he put his back against the nearest wall and inspected the street, checking each person.

Many people walked by. Some noticed him and glanced at him with the usual disconcerted reaction deepening to suspicion as they noticed his searching eyes, and the tension of his hands in his pockets.

He noticed the change in their expression and wondered bitterly how little provocation it would take to have them decide he had done something and call the police. Sourly he gave up looking and walked on his way, taking his chances on a bullet. The feeling of being watched continued.

In the airbus waiting room he had a chance to look around without attracting attention to himself and being stared at. People always looked around in waiting rooms, searching for first sight of whoever they were waiting for. His careful inspection of the room went unnoticed. There was no one in evidence who looked like Devon. Apparently Devon was not following him after all.

Mart picked up a newspaper from a mechanical vender. The headlines were much the same as yesterday's. As he nipped toward the back pages an ad in a lower corner caught his eye. It was a picture of a hand, held out flat, the fingers separated, and it reminded him of his problem. The ad was nondescript, easy to pass without seeing. It could have been selling anything—astrology—palm reading—insurance. "Worried?" the caption read. "Dissatisfied? Seeing..."

People began to stream down from the upper level exits. The airbus had come in. *Worried?* Smiling wryly he folded the newspaper, dropped it into a trash dispenser and watched the draft



suck it away into darkness. *Dissatisfied?* Smiling more broadly he went slowly home. The feeling of being watched was with him again, but he hadn't seen anyone who looked like Devon, and he was beginning to get used to the feeling.

WHEN he stepped into his office the next day the viewer was chiming.

He switched it on while taking off his overshirt, and Nadine appeared on the screen. "Hey, the Martians are advertising for you."

"What do you mean?" He took the curare gun and the alarm button the police had given him from his pockets and carefully placed them in a desk drawer.

When he glanced back at the screen she was holding up a magazine with a full page ad showing a well drawn hand, almost two thirds life size. "Did you see this ad?" It looked like an enlarged replica of the one he had glanced at in the newspaper the day before.

"I noticed it," he admitted. "Didn't read it."

"Notice the hand?"

"Yeah, what's it about? Palm reading?"

"Count the fingers."

The hand was well drawn and looked normal, but this time he didn't have to count. He could see the difference. Six fingers.

This was it. The thing he had been looking for. He wondered how often the ad had run. How many years had he been passing it by? He tried to control the eagerness in his voice. "What does it say? Read it!"

She read clearly. "Restless? Dissatisfied? Seeing dots before your eyes—too many fingers on your hands? Call Wesley C-06320. *We might be what you're looking for.*" She glanced up eagerly. "And at the bottom here it says, "National Counseling Service 1862-A Halshire Avenue. That's right in the city!"

"We can check on it this lunch. Have the time free?"

“I can fit it in. I don’t want to miss any of this.”

They found that the address on Halshire Avenue was a huge, beautiful white building with a three-story-high webbed-bronze archway opening on exclusive Halshire Place. Recessed inconspicuously into the white stone wall a long way from the main door was a private entrance. It was padded in morocco leather, studded with bronze studs and labeled inconspicuously with a small bronze plate. *National Counseling Service*. Through a porthole window inset in the door they could see a waiting room which was luxurious with the expensive Spartan simplicity of modernistic furniture.

Nadine touched his arm. “Going in?” People passed them in the sunlight, going both ways in orderly separate streams on the wide green sidewalk. Some glanced at them with faint interest. Some glanced back at him after they had passed, with that expression of puzzlement that he always noticed.

He glanced at his watch. It had taken them fifteen minutes to reach the address, and they both had appointments at one. “No. We have to save a little time for lunch.”

A well dressed man came out, flagged a taxi, and drove away without giving them a glance.

“Martian going to lunch,” murmured Nadine.

THEY ate in a nearby drugstore, sitting at a counter looking at the impassive white stone face of the towering building across the street. The separate entrance was a luxury for which the building must have charged high rent. Apparently the National Counseling Service could afford such expensive whimsies. They ate hastily in silence, considering the implications of what they had seen. The National Counseling Service had money and power, and they were interested in him for some reason.

That advertisement was obviously directed at him and others like him. He wondered how many others there were to see the ad.

“Power...” he mused. “A big organization too...”

Nadine set a sliding pointer on the menu and pushed a button at

its base. “We don’t know how much space they’ve taken behind that swank front. Maybe it’s just intended to look expensive to frighten off people who are attracted by the ad and genuinely come for counseling.” She sipped a malted milk that came out of the automatic mixer and continued thoughtfully. “If I were using a front like that, I think I’d give a little genuine counseling to make it stand up.”

She had bought another magazine on the way over, and she began flipping through it as she talked. Pictures in fluorescent inks glowed vividly as she flipped past them. Suddenly a page turned up in cool black and grey, the familiar spread hand. “Here it is!” Nadine flattened the magazine and they looked at it together.

“Puzzled?” He read the black letters, “Discontented? We don’t read palms, but we can tell you about yourself—call the National Counseling Service. We find unusual situations for unusual people.”

“Now they’re threatening you with an unusual situation,” Nadine remarked skeptically. They had finished their lunches and it was time to go back to work. “What are you going to do, Mart?” They dropped their meal tabs in the slot and paid the amount the machine rang up. The turnstile yielded and passed them through. They stood on the sidewalk looking at the towering impassive building across the street.

“Go in and look around, I guess. I’ll have to wait till after work. Would you like to come in with me?”

“No.” She looked up at him soberly, the sunlight touching her face in sprinkles of light as it filtered through the elms overhead. “This looks secret, Mart. They probably wouldn’t tell you anything if you had anyone with you, or even said you’d confided in anyone about this. I want to hear about it, but I’d better just spend the time looking some stuff up in the science and technology room at the library. Call me there when you find out anything, will you Mart?”

“Right.” He made his face solemn and asked, “Date?”

“Date,” she smiled. Hurrying together they went down the belt entrance and back toward the afternoon’s work.

## IV

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FIVE hours later, with, his hand on the bronze knob of the leather-covered door, he hesitated briefly, looking: in through the small window set in the door. There was still no one inside the waiting room as far as he could see. Was the whole organization waiting for him as a trap waits for a mouse?

Then he thought of Devon, free somewhere, and looking for him with a gun. He glanced anxiously over his shoulder. There was only the stream of brightly clad people, looking wilted in the dusty late afternoon heat, going wherever people go after work. Women, girls, young men, old men—no one familiar, but there was no use standing there like a target. He turned the knob, pushed through the door and was inside. The door shut after him softly.

As it closed, the sounds of the city dwindled and vanished, and he was in a sound-proofed silence as still and remote as the room of a deserted house on some distant hillside.

It was the pine scent that had made him think of mountains, he realized after a moment. A cool drift of air brushed against his face as if somewhere near there were wide windows open to a breeze that had come through an evergreen forest.

The waiting room was comfortably darkened, with recessed lights in the small bookcase, and wide stylized chairs in polished wood and rough dark green cloth with small adjustable spotlights clamped to the left arm of each chair for easy reading.

He felt almost hidden standing in the half dark, and his tension faded. Under the glass coffee table an indirect light shone on a lower shelf, glowing on a scattering of varicolored pamphlets and bound booklets with the name *National Counseling Service* in script on the cover.

The waiting room remained soundless and peaceful. Apparently no one was going to interrupt or ask him why he was there. Through a small archway he could look down a softly lighted

corridor and see the blank wall where it turned. Breden sat down and picked up a pamphlet. The back section was filled by a reassuring collection of honest-looking graphs and statistics. He turned to the front and started at the first page.

A single slogan was blazoned across it: **SQUARE HOLES FOR SQUARE PEGS**. A small block of print at the bottom, placed like a footnote, stated. "The National Counseling Service is approved by The American Psychometric Association, and The Association for Corrective Psychotherapy, and works in co-operation with the Human Engineering Laboratories of Stevens Institute, Columbia University and the University of Chicago. We have available on request all personal data of public, State and Federal psychometric tests already individually taken."

All the organizations mentioned were of unassailable integrity. Feeling impressed, he turned the page to the next, a glowing montage of full color tri-dimensional photographs of faraway landscapes, and able-looking people working with unusual machines. Large glowing white letters superimposed across the middle of the page stated aggressively: **WE'LL TELL YOU WHERE TO GO—AND YOU'LL LIKE IT!**

He turned to the next page. It was an exaggerated drawing of a small nervous man sitting in an electroencephalograph that was built like an electric chair, with a huge metal headpiece over his head and wires streaming from it in all directions: **—EVEN IF IT'S TO A HOSPITAL TO HAVE YOUR HEAD EXAMINED.**

THE outside door opened and a timid woman came in, looked around hesitantly and then, taking courage from his example, took a pamphlet, sat down and began to read. There was nothing visibly unusual about her. Breden began to wonder if he had merely let himself in for a total psychological check, and a diagnosis of what his abilities best fitted him to do. The six fingered hand could be merely a coincidence, a copywriter's inspiration.

He turned to the next page. On it a man stood triumphantly with his arms flexed, bulging startlingly with muscle, grinning with enthusiasm and radiating health, vigor and vitality in big orange

rays: *Our technique WORKS.*

The nonsensical cheer of it was infectious. Someone came in and said, "Doctor Sheers will see you now." Breden looked up with a grin reflecting the grin in the cartoon. The receptionist had apparently spoken to him rather than to the mousy woman, so he rose. "Could I keep this pamphlet?"

"Yes indeed," she smiled professionally as a nurse smiles, warm but distant. "The office is right down the hall."

He followed, still grinning. The receptionist reminded him of Nadine in the incongruity of her pretty face and figure, and her efficient businesslike air. If nothing happened now he'd take his counseling like a man, and have a good laugh with Nadine when he came out.

They turned the blind bend in the corridor and it widened with doors on either hand for thirty feet before making another turn. The receptionist stopped before an open door to let him pass, and then closed it after him as he went in.

He found himself in a mellow, wood-paneled room with the relaxing half-dusk of indirect lighting focused on the shelves of books. Good books with thoughtful titles, and reference books he recognized as old friends, books he had for his own reference in microfilm.

The man who greeted him was spare, with a slight scholarly round-shoulderedness. He came forward and took Breden's hand with confident hospitality. "How do you do. I'm Doctor Sheers, and you're—"

"Paul Breden."

"I'm glad to meet you, Mister Breden," he said, seating himself behind his desk. "Have a chair."

Breden sat down, trying to judge Sheers's face. The diffuse desk light lay in a pool of orange-brown on the mahogany and lit up the counselor's face from below with a ruddy light that should have made him look satanical, but instead merely made his face look round and childish. He looked at Breden, waiting for him to speak.

"I saw your advertisement," Breden said, "and I was interested.

Could you tell me more about it?” He moved his hands, slightly shifting their position. The reading light that was clipped to the arm of the chair was focusing diffusely in his lap, spotlighting his hands.

The room’s atmosphere of safety and concealment was the result of having one’s face in shadow. It was probably very relaxing to the shy, self-conscious misfits, and the hostile types that came in, needing counseling. But the concealment was an illusion, for the counselor could read expressions and reactions in the small unconscious motions and tensions of the spotlighted hands.

He should also be able to notice a deliberate conscious motion made to call his attention, such as Breden had made. Breden waited, wondering if it would mean anything to him.

The counselor’s own hands under the desk light were white and large knuckled, with blue lines of veins showing through. They lay there quietly, white and inexpressive, schooled to perfect relaxation.

“What is your profession, Mister Breden?”

“I’m an attorney—my specialty’s patent law.”

“And what complaint against life attracted you here?” There was a slight smile in his voice, and he interrupted before Breden could reply. “You needn’t answer that one. I’m not completely unobservant.” He stood up, smiling, and said regretfully. “I would have liked to have given you a few tests and made at least a surface diagnosis. You’re an interesting case, and rather well integrated considering the stress. Interesting... but you didn’t come for that, and I can’t take up your time of course.”

He held out his hand.

With excitement building in him, Breden rose and shook hands. “What you want is right down the hall,” the counselor said regretfully. He escorted him to the door and opened it, then reached into a recess of a bookcase shelf and pulled out a box of fig bars. “Here, have a couple of fig bars. You need to fortify your blood sugar. You’re probably going to get something of a shock...”

Breden accepted them with an inward smile. Some diagnosis! He

was hungry all right. That sandwich for lunch hadn't been enough, and he was growing shaky, with so much excitement.

The counselor leaned out from his office and pointed. "Just turn right and keep straight ahead until it stops at a door."

"Right," Bredden started off, taking a quick bite from a fig bar.

"And remember, I'd like to diagnose you sometime," the counselor said after him wistfully. "You diploids are always fascinating."

BREDEN had rounded the turn and was walking along a remarkably long featureless corridor before the full explosive impact of that struck him. "You diploids!" Then diploids were real; it was not just a gibberish word from Devon's imagination! It meant something! *Diploids*. What in the name of Howling Entropy *was* a diploid?

He wolfed the second fig bar and licked his fingers, walking steadily down a doorless corridor where every step looked just like every other step, like a corridor in a dream. What was a diploid? There was an answer to that question, but it was a joke. *He* was a diploid.

So far, being a diploid was no different from being a Martian.

Ahead, terminating the corridor, was a small door. He felt the floor-level change subtly from one stride to the next and realized that he had just walked out of one building into another. The corridor had been going straight back through the building, and it was longer than the building itself, more than half a block long. The door was closer, just ahead now.

Doctor Sheers was a pleasant man, he thought irrelevantly. Too bad there wasn't time... he opened the door and stepped through.

He stepped through into a shock of light. The corridor had been dimmer than he thought. Blinking, he stood still, letting his eyes adjust. To his left a woman was writing at a desk. There was an odd sweetish smell in the air. A form dimly seen moved beside him and the sweetish smell increased and mounted to his brain and swirled there with the thin singing of a dream, and he could not turn or look in the direction of the person moving beside him.



From that direction a voice asked patiently. “*Ever hear of MSKZ?*”

“*I read something about it once,*” answered a voice that sounded like his own.

“*Are you a super, or directed by supers?*”

“*I don’t know.*”

“Never heard of supers, all right. Have you been given hypnotic instruction for any special behavior while here?”

“No.”

“*Do you intend any damage while here?*”

“No.”

“*Okay.*” The smell changed to something sharp and acrid, and the figure on the side of his vision moved blurrily, fading back. “*You’ll forget this. When you wake, you’ll feel and act as if you’d just come in.*” The smell was gone, and after some vague time the swirling feeling stopped abruptly.

He’d just stepped into the room. It was lighter than he had expected, and he stood blinking, waiting for his eyes to adjust. A woman was writing at a desk on his left. This was another office, but this one was bright and aseptic in white and grey, with the scientific look of a hospital—everything in clean precise squares and angles, with heavy medical books and scientific journals arranged neatly in grey metal shelves. *Medical and Biological*, he thought, classifying automatically. He glanced behind him. The door he had come through was flat and inconspicuous beside another door which stood between two banks of open shelves.

It looked like the door to a closet.

The desk was beautiful in grey ruled metal, with the weightless, floating effect of expensive design. A lucite light hose had been pulled out from its wall coil and arched back above the desk, sending down its beam of brilliance like a transparent cobra suspended in the act of striking.

The woman at the desk said, “Just a minute,” without looking up

and continued writing for a moment.

Then she looked up. She was middle-aged and small, with an air of restless energy and a thin pointed face with large eyes that her friends would probably call pixy-like. Her gaze was impersonal, her eyes flickering across his face and down to his hands then back to his face again thoughtfully as if he were making an effort to place an old acquaintance.

“E-2 control.” She nodded. “You look like the pure type, too. I didn’t think there would be any.”

After a second he decided that he had not been mistaken for someone else who would have understood her.

“My name is Breden,” he said. “I saw an advertisement.”

“Six fingers,” she nodded again. “We run that one once a year. It pulled in a few people last year too.” She looked at him speculatively again. “The extra eye is recessive. You do have it, don’t you?”

AGAIN he mastered the jolt that came with mentioning the thing which he had hidden so long. “Yes,” he said, forcing the word out. And then the full implication of what she had said came through. There were others like him. They had seen the advertisement and come to this place before him. And they were important, very important, judging by the expense and secrecy used in locating them. He was the pure type, she had said.

“How old are you?” she asked.

He answered mechanically through the surge of his excitement. “Twenty eight.” Leaning forward, he was unable to conceal his eagerness, and he no longer wanted to. “You mean that there are other people like me? I’m not the only one?”

She leaned back, beginning to smile. Her chair was metal, he saw with one corner of his mind, and cunningly designed metal joints in the chair gave with the motion.

*Money*, he thought again, automatically fitting facts together. *Inconspicuous swank. This place sells something medical.* Then he

thought, in the first touch of rising fear, *This is routine to her. She doesn't treat me as if I were important.*

“The only one?” she repeated. Abruptly the woman laughed. “To put it bluntly—no.” Smiling she reached into a desk drawer and took out a heavy catalogue. He glimpsed the cover, MSKZ LIVE BIOLOGICALS as she found a place in the thumb tab index and flattened it open, turning it so that he could see what was on the page. A double spread of twenty four diagrammatic chromosomes were spaced across it, like twenty-four vertical strings of black and white beads, each bead numbered and explained in a listing at the bottom. At the upper left of the left page was an insert circle with the photograph of a small, curled fetal figure.

Looking up at him with a smile she said, “You might be the only adult copy in existence. Except for that, Mister Breden, you are probably the least unique being in existence.” She dropped her hand emphatically on the diagram of numbered chromosomes. “That’s your chromosome set right there. At this moment there are probably several hundred thousand identical embryo copies of you from that chromosome set in use in all the genetics, cytology, endocrinology and geriatrics laboratories in the world. *Embryos*—not legally persons, not meant ever to be persons—being used as experimental animals, under the premise that they will never be men. In thirty years of use, hundreds of thousands of them have gone down the drain, advancing the knowledge of medicine and genetics immeasurably, and we are prepared to make and sell millions more. You are our diploid standard model E-2.”

Smiling with a touch of impishness she waited for him to speak.

So this was the great secret.

He was a laboratory fetus accidentally grown up to be a human being. A laboratory animal! A million fetal copies of him were being experimented on, damaged, injured and mutilated in the experiments — dissected and casually thrown away as junk at each experiment’s end! For a moment he could feel the scalpels and needles in his own flesh, the probes moving in his brain, the hypodermics plunging in deep with germs and poisons. *Flesh of my flesh, blood of my blood... a million mangling deaths, and it's what*

*we were designed for legally, not for life...*

The woman still leaned back pleasantly, showing mild friendliness and attention. She had told him cheerfully and without feeling, either not knowing or not caring what the information would do to him. The only emotion that he had seen in her since he entered was intellectual interest—an experimenter, one who experimented on E-2s.

HE STOOD with his hands resting at his sides and let the fury go off inside him like a silent explosion of firecrackers, rockets and pin wheels. When it died down he found himself still standing in the same position, lightly dewed with cold sweat, damp in the palms of his hands and shaking slightly, but he had not moved, and to the woman he could have just looked thoughtful. He had probably changed color but the artificial lights helped conceal that.

A habit of self control was a good thing, he thought. It can even carry you through an attack of madness.

“I didn’t get the name,” he said smoothly, hating the woman’s aging pixy face and graying curly hair. *Why are you doing this?*

“Mirella Sorell.”

“Doctor?”

“—of Philosophy—Biochemical.” She was smiling slightly.

“Why are you doing this?” His voice seemed to have no connection with himself. It was urbane and polite, as if the question meant nothing.

She was still smiling. The overhead light left her eyes in shadow. “I could have said ‘for money,’ Mister Breden. That’s always considered an honorable and adequate motive for any act. As long as one stays inside the law that answer is enough—no further questions are asked. Its only when one becomes tainted with beliefs or ideals or purposes that one becomes dangerous and an object of suspicion and ridicule and hostility...Is that not so, E-2?”

He took the name stoically, and after a moment realized that by it she had meant a compliment. It indicated that she expected some

extra quality of understanding or special insight from him by virtue of his being born to a letter and a number instead of a name. A compliment of a sort, but she had not answered what he wanted to know. He touched his lips with his tongue. “Why are you doing this?”

Sorell made a gesture of deprecation.

“I’ll tell you this much, Mister Breden—your genes were selected from some of the cream of humanity, the top men and women in atom power and radioactive tracer research, with I.Q.’s of one hundred seventy and over. We managed to get our hands on these by taking a government research contract, where the government wanted to know if the genes of their scientists who had been exposed to sublethal radiation over long periods had more recessive lethal mutations. The sperm and ova we took to answer the question we kept, and it gave us a good start in our classified gene bank,”

“My abilities, I know about,” he said. “Regardless of their history. What interests me is why these—these—”

“We wanted abnormalities. We needed a good control for crosses before we could go ahead in any other genetic research. Your characteristics had to be tagged with slight abnormalities and mixed racial differences which were plain enough to be visible in embryo. That way we could see what we were doing and judge the properties of each outcross into E-2 by watching the embryo develop and checking the number of E-2 alleles showing. Once we had the control gene set selected we not only used it ourselves, but we began to sell it. It has been priceless in a thousand laboratories. Almost thirty years of genetics research is based on E-2.” She smiled. “We suspected that some geneticists might be tempted to follow their test crossbreeds past the embryo stage, even though it’s strictly illegal. And they were tempted—obviously. Here *you* are, a sample of the pure strain, indicating someone needed you for a control check on another child.”

THEY had trademarked him with peculiarities simply for purposes of recognition. He began to wonder if his question had any

meaning. Could they be doing everything she described for mere scientific curiosity, without purpose, indifferent to the cost? Or was there some purpose hidden behind her evasions of his question? He asked, "You have me now—E-2, adult version. What do you want me for?"

"You could answer some questions first, and take a physical examination. You don't object?" There was a trace of mockery in her voice, and something quizzical in her expression, almost as if she were interested in his reactions, and observing them closely.

"Anything you say," he replied with bitterness. How much of this could he tell Nadine? And what good would it do him to tell her? If other things had not driven her away, why this new knowledge of what he was would certainly do it. *A laboratory guinea pig*. "How much secrecy is there in this business?"

"Very much secrecy," Sorell replied gravely. "We will explain later." She touched a button on her intercom box and switched off her desk light. "I'm leaving for the day, but I'll have someone show you around." She gathered up things from the desk and moved toward the door, adding absently. "There's a diploid meeting going on upstairs. I don't think many of them have left yet. If you can spare the time..."

"I think so," Breden said. He remembered Nadine, waiting at the library for the news, added. "I can't stay long."

"Long enough to be introduced around, anyway," Sorell said at the door, and as a young man came in she introduced him hastily. "Zal, this is E-2 control standard. Mr. Breden, this is Ea-crossZ, he can explain anything you want to know. If you don't mind, I have to leave now."

Zal Elberg shook hands firmly, saying over his shoulder to Sorell as she left, "G'night Mirella." He turned back to Breden. "Glad to meet you." he grinned. "She's a monomaniac. People aren't real to her, they're just carriers for genes. I also have a name, besides a gene file. Zal Elberg."

"Mart Breden," he said, puzzling over an odd familiarity in the young man's appearance. "What's going on upstairs?" he then asked curiously.

“Sort of a party.” Zal Elberg was shorter than Breden. but broad in the shoulders. He was handsome with rugged features, slightly slanting blue eyes and dark hair bristling up in a stiff crew cut. He was wearing a defiantly gaudy pink sport shirt. “Come on upstairs and join in. I’ll answer your questions like a tourist guide.”

## V

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ON THE way up in the escalator Mart saw that there was something odd about Zal Elberg’s hands, and realized suddenly that there had been something odd about the feel of his handshake. Their fingers had meshed. Six fingers.

And the familiarity of Elberg’s face —it was like his own, like a brother would look if he had a brother.

While Mart was absorbing the realization and trying to frame a question about it, they came to the right floor and walked towards the sound of mingled voices. They entered through a half open door into a big room with desks, file cabinets, computers and a standard laboratory work-table with a sink down the middle. It was filled with a mild babble of voices.

Mart’s first impression was like a blare of colors; there were so many completely different personalities there, and they were so dissimilar. Most of them were eating sandwiches, drinking beer, and talking with intensity and excitement.

He took a deep breath and looked around more carefully, but his first impression was confirmed. They were all individuals—characters. They all deviated, and they all deviated in different directions, setting off each other’s differences by the contrast of their own.

There was a long, drawn-out individual seated cross-legged on a table in a mediative pose listening to a very short individual who was telling a funny story. There was a short chubby girl of about 14 with buck teeth and the face of a happy baby loudly arguing some obscure mathematical point with a short, square, thick-armed young man who looked as if he had a dash of gorilla blood.

In the middle of the room was a lanky young man with a beaked nose that could have been used to slice bread. His hair was too long, and he sat on a stool quietly reading a magazine, eating a sandwich and swizzling from a bottle of beer. Two doll-like children on short stools drank milk and root beer and talked excitedly in shrill fluting voices about the Doppler effect.

Somehow this wasn't what he had expected.

"These are diploids?"

"Sure."

"But," he hesitated. He had expected that they would all look something like him or Zal, but the expectation suddenly seemed foolish. "Then what the blue blazes are diploids?"

Zal grinned and stepped forward to tap the lanky fellow on the shoulder. "Plink Plunk, what's a diploid? E-2 wants to know."

"Please," said the one addressed, putting down his beer bottle and turning his beaked face to them with slow dignity. "The name is Max P. Planck, or Planck-Planck, if you prefer, and the answer is, *I'm* a diploid. Who did you say wants to know?"

"E-2 control standard," Zal said, reaching up and putting a hand on Mart's shoulder. "He's just come in."

The thin one offered his hand gravely. "I'm glad you found us. Do you know that E-2 has been the anchor to windward of an entire generation of biological research? The world owes the E-2 set a great deal. What's your real name by the way?"

"Mart—er—Paul Breden."

"Mine is really Max Planck-Planck, but these discourteous characters have no concept of dignity," He indicated Zal, "They call me Plink Plunk, or Plunk Plink or Plunk-Plunk. What have you been called?"

"Martian."

The skinny young man made a slight bend of the shoulders that implied a bow. "Thank you, Mr. Breden. I take it, being a newcomer, that you are eager for an explanation." He glanced at Zal. "Mister Elberg, would you see that our guest is properly



provided for?”

“Sure. Swiss with white or rye?” Zal asked Breden. “Beer or ale?”

The sight of the food around him had set his stomach gnawing at itself for minutes.

“Ale,” he said gratefully.

“Right away,” said Zal and went off toward a big white refrigerator. Planck-Planck continued.

“Although I do not work with MSKZ I am almost uniquely provided among diploids to explain the process of diploiding. The others being kept in the dark as to their individual inheritance, to avoid any influence of expectation on their behavior, I am one of the few fully able to explain precisely my own origins.”

Nearby, the two children of the doll-like incredible beauty were now arguing dogmatically about the latest stellar evolution theory, and Max Planck-Planck raised his voice slightly to compensate. “I’m the only one who thus has his proper name, and these buffoons are jealous.”

Zal returned with a cold plastibottle of ale and two sandwiches. He set them down on the laboratory table beside them.

Breden remembered what he had read of the great mathematician and physicist. “Are you related to Max Planck?” he asked with respect, peeling the pliofilm shell from his sandwich.

“Closely,” said the skinny young man with precision, hitching himself around in his stool and closing his hand on the neck of his beer bottle. “He’s the one person that I am related to. To be exact, I represent *half* of his chromosome set, doubled up to a full set, so that some of his characteristics I have in double strength, and others, dominant genes which shaped him, I don’t have at all, just the other of the gene pair, doubled in me so that it comes out, while it was just an unused recessive for him. MSKZ was probably trying to double the genius genes and get a double genius, but my friends say that obviously they doubled the wrong half.”

He paused and took a thoughtful swallow from the bottle. “The number of different people with different combinations of traits you can get from one man’s genes, after nature has done its job of

haploiding—randomly selecting one set of twenty-four from two sets of twenty-four—is I think, factorial twenty-four, or twenty-four plus twenty-three plus twenty-two and so on. It comes to some large number. I can't say precisely because I'm no mathematician; I'm a musician. *She* could tell you." He indicated the plump, baby-faced girl who was still discussing something incomprehensibly mathematical with the gorilla-like young man. "I suspect that May, there, is another diploided Planck set. I think she represents the opposite half set, allowing for embryo mortality to weed out the doubled lethals. I think she is probably the Hyde to my Jekyll. Neither of us look at all like Max Planck." He waved a hand from her to himself. "Can you explain why one of us is fat and the other thin?"

BREDEN thought of suggesting that she might eat more, but decided that it was a remark inappropriate to an academic discussion of heredity. He found himself liking the courtly, ugly young man he was talking with, and possessed of a strong desire to call him Plunk Plunk.

The gorilla-like young man and the girl who was probably a sister of Max Planck-Planck were now engaged in detaching the two little children from their root beer bottles and their argument and herding them toward the door, still arguing. "Aw, that's not right." "It is too!" Seen in motion they were even more unreally pretty, a Hollywood idealization of children.

"Who are those kids?" Breden indicated them as they went out.

"Sales Package," Zal answered for Planck-Planck. "They're for people who want beautiful children. Will Your Child Be A TV Star? If the customers have no brains of their own that's all they'll want, but brains and health and all the mutant improvements we can collect from all the populations of the world will be in the same package. We'll need a wide selection of different kinds of beauty to have sets that will closely match the purchasers. The customers won't mind that they have quiz kids, as long as they are born naturally to Momma and look like Momma or Papa and are pretty enough to compete with movie kids. They'll think of them as their

own kids and be flattered by any extra abilities that are thrown into the bargain. Trouble is, beauty is something we can't check in embryo to see how the crosses come out. It will take fifty more years. We'll need plenty more test kids like Em and Ben before we can advertise."

"These scientist characters work themselves like Simon Legree worked Uncle Tom," commented Planck-Planck. "Fifty more years of work he mentions like planning a weekend. My work plans extend to the age of thirty when I shall retire to a hammock and fiddle or compose music in a recumbent position. All this work, and for what?"

"For supermen," Zal said in a very low voice, so that Breden barely heard him. The word was a shock, although he had been touching the edges of the idea for days. It sounded like something for the far future, not to be casually mentioned as a project.

"Supermen we have," Planck-Planck said mildly. "At least that is what the supers claim to be, and so far they..."

Zal interrupted, speaking to Breden hurriedly. "Would you like to meet another fourth of MSKZ?"

Breden felt a surge of the subconscious hostility he had felt for Mirella Sorell at the mention of the organization name. MSKZ had him in its catalogues.

MSKZ sold gene duplicates of him for experimental purposes. "That's rather a large order," he said casually, concealing his resentment. "I haven't time to meet the whole organization. It's..."

Zal laughed. "It's not an *it*, it's a *them*. MSKZ are the initials of the team that runs MSKZ. You've met Sorell. She's S." He indicated a man sitting on the other side of the room. "That's K over there—Keith. He's in town this week. I'll introduce you to him."

The pale blond man sitting across the room had been easy to ignore, but now that he had been pointed out Breden could see that he was not a diploid. He was too normal, and he lacked some extra charge of vitality that made the others relatively conspicuous. When they walked over he looked up inquiringly, and Breden saw

that he was greying and considerably older than anyone in the room. The diploids were all young.

“Mart,” said Zal, “I want you to meet Anson Keith, one of the guys responsible for this outfit being started. Responsible for you being here, too.” He put his hand on Breden’s arm. “And Keith,” Zal continued, “I want you to meet Mart Breden. He’s the first E-2 to show up.”

Keith rose to shake hands. He was big and thick-boned, the kind built to carry muscle and fat, but there wasn’t any fat on him, and not much muscle. His hand was bony in Breden’s hand—he was thin in the same way Sorell had been thin, wasted out in the fires of too much work without enough food or rest, with enthusiasm giving a life and energy to his face that denied its lines. “E-2, are you?” Interest shone in his eyes, and he pulled a note pad and pencil from his pocket with a practiced motion. “Do you have wisdom teeth?”

ANOTHER person to whom he was just E-2. Breden smiled faintly. “No.” Another diploid, a tall sturdy girl, entered the room through a swinging bookcase that was evidently a secret door, and sat down quietly with a magazine and a sandwich. Breden was not surprised by the door. It fitted with the signs of secrecy that he had observed, and with the way Zal had just interrupted Planck-Planck to prevent him from giving some information that had to do with the incredible word—supermen. There was something obviously undercover about the organization of MSKZ, and something illegal about its activities.

“Good. We hoped you might have that allele.” Smiling, Keith made a note. “It had been one chance in four. I’m glad you came in. You settled something we were in doubt about with the E-2 set. We can follow up that line now. Any dental work ever needed?”

“No.” Breden found himself hating the greying blond man, hating his normal Caucasian face, his narrow five-digit hands and his evident intelligence, just as he had hated Mirella Sorell. He hated them as a chess pawn would hate the players who moved the pawn. He was just an experiment with a number to them. As a long range

result of their experiment he had lost Nadine —lost any chance of any kind of marriage. They had done it by making a freak of him.

Keith made a note. “That seems to be hopeful. There’s a faint probability that one of the E line got a gene for self-repairing teeth in the shuffle We couldn’t check that in embryo, and even if your teeth continue in good shape we can’t be sure it isn’t coincidence unless one of them is knocked out and we see whether it grows back in.”

“I’ll have someone knock one out for you.” Breden said drily.

Looking at him more sharply, Keith folded his notebook and put it away. “Is there something I could do for you— something you might like to discuss?”

He had decided what he could do. Breden took a deep breath and said softly, “I’d like to know what is there in your program that justifies my being born with an extra astigmatic eye? It seems to me I owe you nothing for that. Life itself is a meaningless gift, for no one misses life when it is not given. It’s the quality of life that’s important, and for that *you* were responsible. But you don’t acknowledge your responsibility. You don’t ask what your distortions may have cost me, or what I may have lost by them.”

Breden had always angered slowly; he was angering now. “If your routine plans had their way, the geneticist who incubated me—supposedly for his experiments—would have sent me the usual way of the scalpel and the ashcan. I don’t owe you anything for that either. Oh yes, I accidentally escape the ashcan, and so you greet me cheerfully and ask about the condition of my teeth, inquiring in effect what more I can do for you.” Although he kept his voice at conversational pitch the words were intense, and as Keith listened, Breden got the impression that everyone in the room was listening, keeping up their previous activities and conversation without change, but bending an interested ear to the remarks the newcomer was making to Keith.

“Do any of these experiments—” he indicated those in the room—“who are taken in by this good-of-humanity mishmash actually owe you anything?”

Zal, leaning against a table reading a technical journal, said,

“Diploids of the world, arise.” He turned a page blandly. “Go on, Mart.”

“For the sake of the future of mankind—” Keith began mildly.

“Propaganda! Does the white rat owe any duty to mankind because he is the subject of experiments? No, he owes duty to his own kind—to humanity he owes only hatred, because he is being used and sacrificed by humanity. An enemy.”

He had maneuvered himself back against the bank of filing cabinets, and he could feel the reassuring weight of the curare gun in his pocket. The gun which was also a radio signal mechanism to call the police if it were fired. The police would probably be very interested in secret doors and whatever lay beyond them. “You know,” he said, suddenly mild, “I could cause you people a lot of trouble.”

There was a vague kind of motion in the room, a slight reshifting of positions so that there were more people between him and the door, though they still were not looking at him. Zal glanced around and suddenly laid down his magazine, his expression changing.

Keith sat down, seeming politely attentive, his expression a mask hiding his thoughts. “I find your viewpoint interesting. Mr. Breden. Other people have tried to convince me to see things in that light before, but not quite so rapidly as you seem to have arrived at your conclusions. Would you say you have chosen sides, then?” The urbanity was not natural to the man; it was camouflaging something else.

Very clearly, speaking to Breden alone, Zal said. “Mart, look; this isn’t good. You’re going off half cocked. You’re in some kind of bad mood.” His voice was low, but the repressed urgency of his tone made what he meant as emphatic as a shout. “Before you do anything, how about going out and walking it off? You’re not thinking clearly right now.”

As he became aware of it, Mart could hear the pulse pounding in his ears and the stiff tension of his hands, the way he had been leaning forward on the balls of his feet unconsciously in anticipation and hope that someone would attack him. What he wanted was a good stupid old-fashioned brawl. He wanted to work off his rage

and pain against something tangible. He had been talking through a fog of hatred for what seemed like hours, like a drunk precariously giving the impression he was sober.

“We can talk it over later,” Zal said softly, watching him with eyes that had doubtless seen similar expressions in the mirror on his own similar face. Keith watched the two of them without remark or motion. With an effort of decision Breden pulled his hand stiffly from his pocket and relaxed. “I have an appointment,” he apologized to Keith.

To Zal he muttered, “See you sometime.” People between him and the door hesitated briefly as he walked toward them, and for a moment he hoped they would try to stop him. His hands clenched, but there was no sound from Keith and his fellow diploids stepped aside.

## VI

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NOW he was outside, still walking in his private fog. Nade, he thought. Then in an ironical flash that seemed to come from some separate place in himself that didn't ache like the rest. You're in love, brother.

Judging by the way it felt, people in love should be locked up to beat their heads against white padded walls until the fit passed. There was a tiny element of doubt that made it worse, for that meant he would have to force her to say it herself. Being sure what her reaction would be wasn't enough; he would have to hear it.

Then he was in a televiewer booth with Nadine looking at him, close, very close, but nothing but only a picture with the hard touch of glass. She was far away in the library, out of reach. “Are you all right, Mart? It was bad news, wasn't it.”

He didn't speak for a moment, looking at her then said, “Secret.”

“Secret,” she repeated with a small motion of crossing her heart. It was a promise not to tell.

“I'm some sort of a lousy genetics experiment,” he said bluntly.

“Not even anything special, just a test run.” He looked at the screen image of Nadine—the beautiful hair and eyes, the slim five fingered hands, the notebook and library cards she was carrying, the cards scrawled on in larger more irregular letters than usual, her hair slightly mussed on top from a habit she had of running her fingers into it when nervous. Signs of waiting. “Don’t wait for me when you get through, Nadine, go on home,”

“Is it hereditary?” The picture looked at him. It was hard to tell with a picture, but it looked white, and it looked as if it might be crying.

“It’s hereditary.”

Then it seemed they were going to switch off, and suddenly he had to know, he had to be sure.

“Nade, would you marry a three-eyed freak, a lousy laboratory experiment?”

Her voice came controlled and dead-sounding. “No Mart, I wouldn’t.”

Then both screens were blank and he sat in the dark televiewer booth, trying to remember who had hung up first. “See you,” he said absently, but the connection was cut and she could not hear him now.

“I’d marry for children.” Had she said that? She had said it once in a discussion of something else several months ago, and he could hear her voice as if she had just said it. “I’m sorry for myself, Mart, losing you.” That was a good thing to have said, he hoped that she had really said it.

Numbly, Mart Breden left the televiewer booth and began to walk. He walked carefully, balancing his numbness and trying not to disturb it, as a man would carry a fragile vase. Whatever his feelings were, he would feel them later; for now, for the moment, he had no emotions. He could see the things around him very clearly—buildings, sidewalk, people, trees—and he could think with an odd effect of being distant from himself, seeing the point of view of Keith and Sorell.

Scientists are not trained to consider individuals. Their



philosophy and practice included a daily practice of inflicting small immediate losses to win long range large gains. The MSKZ team of biologists, when they had added a line of stereotyped human fetuses to their selection of standardized stereotyped laboratory animals, had probably done so with the full expectation that some of them would be carried illegally to term in the incubators by purchasers, and birthed as physical misfits into a world of people differently shaped from themselves. The results in psychological loss could easily have been predicted, and probably was something the biologists took into account and disregarded as not particularly important.

And in the long run, he supposed, it probably wasn't important...

TRAFFIC hummed in the sky over the skyscrapers, circling in changing interweaving patterns as radar control patterns changed with the gradually diminishing load, and the commuters' 'copters streamed away from the city. The sky had darkened to a transparent deep blue, and the street lights were beginning to glow. A little way behind him a man in a gray overcape was walking almost in step with him, but Mart ignored him and walked blindly, trying to keep himself walking away from the thing that had happened to him. Hating was no good as a solution, and letting it hurt was no good either. He had to think, to grasp and understand it as a pattern of events that was natural, something that was inevitable and had to be—before he could let himself feel.

He had to keep thinking, asking logical questions. What had Sorell said was the reason for them giving the E-2s the extra eye?

There were few pedestrians now, and only one convertible air-ground car parked on the block between himself and the door to MSKZ. It was a business section without restaurants, and so always almost totally deserted during the dinner hours.

As he came opposite the parked car he saw that there were some people sitting in it, and simultaneously a hand touched his arm. "Are you sure you want to go back to MSKZ?"

Breden turned. He had assumed indifferently that the follower was some arrangement of MSKZ, but now this stranger's presence

became something that rang along his nerves like the clangor of an alarm bell. The presence of the follower implied that MSKZ and the National Counseling Service had enemies to whom their secret purposes were known and familiar, enemies as secretive as their own hidden goals.

The man insisted. "You shouldn't go in there without knowing something about it." Out of the sides of his eyes Mart could see the black air-road convertible at the curb. Inside, shrouded in the half darkness, was the pale blur of two faces and the twin small glows of cigarettes.

*Waiting for me*, thought Mart. The follower had waited and had not spoken to him until they were both opposite the car. A quick silent shot from an illegal hypo-gun and a quick ordering of him into the car—and then what? Why should anything of the sort happen? His only known enemy was a lunatic inventor who had singled him out as the source of his demented persecution. A madman who thought he was either a Martian or a diploid.

But he was a diploid! Did that make a target of him in some way he couldn't conceive? Was the mere fact of his existence a provocation for murder? Why hadn't Keith explained this and warned him? Mart measured the distance to the door of MSKZ and considered the amount of time it would take the man beside him to free a hypno gun from under his cape. There was time enough if he ran. But running would be ridiculous; you don't run from a surmise. And pulling out his curare pistol, or pushing the buttonpush that would summon the police would seem equally ridiculous to rational outsiders.

"If you could give us a few minutes —" a tense voice interrupted his thoughts—"you could find out what we have to say," the man continued, watching his face as if looking for hesitation. "There are things about MSKZ you should know."

HE WAS a small man, with sharply cut features, and the skin was tight over the bones of his face as if he were in fear, holding in check a great fear of the door labeled MSKZ BIOLOGICAL SUPPLIES. Looking at Mart's hesitation he smiled, and his face

changed and seemed younger until he seemed less than twenty, perhaps a kid who had learned to pass as an adult. He held out his hand.

“My name is John Eskhart.” The smile seemed friendly and eager.

Beginning an answering smile Mart grasped the extended hand.

And felt the needle with its hypnotic contents sink into his palm.

He had about five seconds before the hypnotic would return in the circulating blood from his arm and reach his brain. He reached for his pocket to push the button in the radio signaler and summon the police. John Eskhart gripped his arm and stopped the motion. The man was small and light, but the full weight of even a small person clinging to his arm would make it impossible to get his hand into his pocket. With a sudden yank Mart pulled free and ran for the doorway of MSKZ. There were only a few seconds left.

There was no sound of anyone running after him, but when he was ten feet from the door John Eskhart’s voice reached him very clearly.

“There’s no hurry. You don’t have to go in just yet.”

*No hurry.* He found himself slowing as he reached for the door. *No hurry... don’t have to go in...* He hesitated trying to remember why he had been hurrying.

Behind him Eskhart’s voice said, “You do want to find out what we can tell you about MSKZ before you go in there. Don’t fight it, man, we’re friends.”

*Friends.* He could have laughed at that, but then as the hypnotic swirled darkly up into his mind, he believed, and turned to walk back. They held the car door open for him...

The only thing of which he was conscious was a voice, or was it several voices?

“No human could genuinely love you. People who said they loved you were pretending. Your parents—”

“No.” He tried to pull away from the awful words, knowing they were not true, but they came into his mind in a steady flow, each

sentence with its own burning belief and pain.

“Only your own kind, only those of the diploids who have not been misled to favor humanity can be your friends.”

“No,” he thought, but the ideas burnt their way in. He tried to wake up to escape from the voice, but it came remorselessly.

“Compared to average humanity you are a freak. You are only at home among your own kind. The friends you have had were not your friends.”

Nade... no. He struggled to pull himself up out of the dream, and suddenly there was the sight of a gray ceiling and a male arm. He had succeeded in opening his eyes. He lay looking at the ceiling, victorious, but oddly without any wish to look around.

“He learns resistance to drugs like learning to recite ‘Mary Had A Little Lamb’,” said a voice disgustedly. It sounded like the same voice, but this time it was a real voice, outside of him, and not a voice in his mind.

“Okay, switch to octo-hypno and take him down again. It’s a good thing we blacklisted the E strain—I never would have believed it without seeing this.” It was another person, but this voice sounded like the other, like the man or youth who had called himself John Eskhart.

“We can’t have these recalcitrants and immunes—they’re dangerous.”

“Diploids must control.” These voices were younger, but still alike.

“He’s a diploid too. You mean supers must control.”

“You two are talking like hypno indoctrination formulas.” This was an older voice. “*You* don’t have to take that literally. Words are just words. We follow what we feel.”

Obligingly Mart held still for an injection, feeling friendly and tolerant, because these were his friends. As his senses ebbed again, he wondered of what famous man all these John Eskharts were the diploid descendants. These anti-MSKZ diploids had called themselves “supers” in his hearing, but even as supers, what would they do with this “control” if they had it? Who could genuinely

control any part of such a jumble of events? An image of Nade, her face flushed and earnest leaning forward with her hands planted on his desk. *“If all the political experts, intellectuals, economists, sociologists, and general geniuses who ought to know how to run things better—plus all their brains, success, money, and positions of power can’t get control of what’s going on—”*

“Package of Jello—” he murmured to himself smiling. Then he felt an inexplicable wave of loss and desolation, and escaped from it into the drugged darkness.

MSKZ BIOLOGICAL SUPPLIES said the lettering on the door. It was much later in the evening, about nine thirty, and he was hungry again, but before eating there were important things he had to do for the supers and for himself. Some time during the evening he would use his curare pistol, and some time during the evening he would use the button push in his pocket to call the police. It would have to be done with a careful timing that was vague to him now.

But he knew he would remember when the time came.

The door was unlocked and there was a light in the hall. He wedged a match-book cover into the lock to make sure it would stay unlocked and left the door slightly ajar for *someone* who would be following. Then he switched on the escalator and went up to the second floor, where he could hear the distant sound of conversation.

There were fewer people than before, and the conversation had grown more subdued. Breden looked around and was suddenly let down from a tenseness he had not recognized in himself. He had been ready to do something in connection with Keith being there. What it was, he did not know.

The fluorescent pink shirt drew his eye to where Zal was holding forth to Planck-Planck and the tall heavy girl who had come in through the secret door when he was last there. Zal was explaining, gesturing occasionally with a technical magazine he had clutched in one hand. “Or, better yet, a small operation on the father will replace his sperm manufacturing tissue with our own improved gene-carrying substitute, and permit him to take care of

fertilization in his own way. A rather more complicated operation will do the same for a woman.” He added regretfully, “We need to make it all easier than that before we can sell on a large scale. These operations are too expensive, and people are generally afraid of operations anyhow.”

Zal grinned at him as he approached. “Hello Mart, how’d it go?”

“I cooled off,” Breden said, smiling briefly. He liked this husky slant-eyed kid who looked like him. But he had to appear ignorant and innocent as if he had not learned things and chosen sides against MSKZ while he was gone. “By the way Zal, what’s the secret door for?”

“For ourselves,” Zal waved at it casually. “We just like to have it handy. It leads to a secret room where we keep things we don’t want stolen and work on gadgets we don’t want made public. We need defenses, and we don’t want to broadcast the fact or get the police in on it.”

“Defenses against what?” Asking the question he realized that he did not know much of the answer. He knew which side he was on, but the reason for the fight... MSKZ was run by the team of MSKZ, biologists—human, non-diploid human, and for some reason they opposed direct action by diploids who were interested in some kind of political activity. It was all vague and sketchy, though he could have sworn the details had been explained to him and he had been persuaded by logic. “Some of our diploid geniuses go a little wild. They go all out for being supermen with a capital S and want to conquer the world—manufacture a million type copies of themselves for an army.” Zal grinned at Breden with some friendly mockery in his expression. “There must be a lot of pleasure in the idea of shaking hands with yourself and forming a mutual admiration society, huh?”

“A lot of pleasure,” Breden agreed gravely. Brothers closer than brothers, fellowship and understanding to end the loneliness of being different and separate and unable to join wholeheartedly with the people around you. Loneliness can become so basic that a whole personality is built on it. Who would know better than a diploid?

Of all mankind, only MSKZ had the power to make duplicates.

Soberly Zal said, “Diploiding as a process brings out all kinds of hidden hereditary weaknesses in the strain. We can weed out the physical defects by spotting them in embryo, but we can’t see the mental defects until the child is born. Some of our incross geniuses have turned out sort of nuts. They’ve organized together in a separate faction, and they’ve tried to steal their egg files from the gene bank a couple of times, and they tried to take MSKZ once when all four of them were here, to hold them hostage until the organization produced and birthed a half army of baby duplicates and found homes for them at random.”

Breden blinked, reconsidering the last casual statement. “What help could they get from babies?”

Zal nodded, “No help at first. But we can’t kill off babies, once they are developed, and babies grow up. The chances are good that every one would grow up just like his adult prototype—a genius. But from the strictly humanoid point of view, more than half crazy, with drives completely tangent to the main line of human ambition, born enemies to everything that’s human. For them it’s a straight-out issue of dominate or be dominated. They’d make an army all right.” The other two were listening soberly to this recital of a situation they all knew. They looked grave and thoughtful, as if they foresaw danger and possible defeat. Zal went on seriously:

“It’s been something of a private war between us. We fight each other quietly with hypnosis and gadgets that won’t attract police attention. Both factions have invented some good gadgets, too. It’s not a big war, but it’s serious enough. If the public ever got wind of any of this, all hell would break loose. And if the renegades were to get hold of Self Perfection, they could plant their own type copies on a million women, to be born normally instead of incubated, and the country would be swamped with them.”

Breden remembered a similarity of voices he had heard somewhere recently, and his curiosity about them. “Are many of the supers the same type copy, I mean, from the same person?”

## VII

THERE was no doubt in Breden's mind that he was for the supers and would help them as much as he could, but he needed to know something about them. It had to seem like a casual question.

Zal did not seem to have noticed anything different about his manner. He answered slowly, "Let's see... Keith and Mac don't spill much. We don't know our own eggs, generally, but Keith told me something about this line when it started making trouble. He needed a good healthy outcross to mix in, because most of the star genius lines have traditionally moved around the world so much and outcrossed so much that there hasn't been any inbreeding in their background which would weed out the accumulation of lethal recessives, so diploiding shows up too much physical weakness. For the cross, Keith scouted around and picked up a batch of gamete-producing tissue from a healthy inbred high I.Q. family from one of those inbred southern small towns that get into the sex and scandal novels. The crossing strengthened the other strains, but those kids mostly grew up with an odd personality, all misfits the same way, not liking anybody but each other. Their organization has pulled in other misfits, but the kids of the F line of crosses have been the nucleus and center of it. That southern family strain personality was as dominant as the Hapsburg lip."

"Probably," commented Planck-Planck, "the reason why the town had been inbreeding and staying to itself. All a bullheaded lot who don't like strangers and won't marry anyone but cousins."

Breden glanced at a catalogue lying open on the table. "*MSKZ original house for genetic identicals since 1968. If you need precise standardized animal reactions for comparison experiments, and are dissatisfied with the variability of ordinary inbred animals, we can adapt any special strain of experimental animal you find suitable, and from it provide you with two strains of genetically homogeneous males and genetically homogeneous females, one or more of each, all of whose progeny will be genetically identical male twins. You can breed them to any quantity you require.*" There was a repeating frieze of tiny identical rabbits bordering the page. Breden remembered the page with the curled embryonic figure that was



E2... *experimental animals*....

He shut the catalogue hastily.

“When is Keith coming back?”

Zal was still talking. “Naturally Keith discontinued the F strain and started looking for another for a base. That’s what started most of the fighting. They want MSKZ to make more of the F type crosses like themselves, and we won’t.”

Planck-Planck said, “Frankly, if this is the way super humanity is going to behave, I don’t see that the world of the future will be any calmer than the world of the present.”

“Who wants calm?” Zal observed.

“*Superman*,” Mart said, as though he had not heard. The word still sounded fantastic. “I thought only the supers used that word.”

“Oh, we use it too. It’s just that we’re not so looping superior about it.” Planck-Planck glanced down at his skinny length with a wry smile. “I’m a superman—you’re a superman, anyone over I.Q. 140 is enough of a superman to do in a pinch. They’re using the Wallace corn technique in breeding. Incrosses are always frail and idiosyncratic compared to what comes next. If you want what you would call supermen, just let MSKZ go along selecting the cream of the world’s health and ability and increasing—diploiding them—letting selection weed out weakness—and see what happens when they start combining what’s left into outcrosses.”

ZAL made a mystic sign of propitiation to luck. “That’s my job,” he breathed reverently. “Keep your fingers crossed; we’ve already started. In fact, we have some kids adopted out. Brother, the F strain outcrosses haven’t a chance! If they can’t figure a way to capture or stop MSKZ now,” they’ll be calling themselves subs.”

The tall heavy girl came in the front door and set a large plastic container with a spigot on the table beside them. “Hot coffee,” she announced to the room. “Anyone who wants it, come ladle it out.”

“Look,” Mart said, trying to get the attention of the two friendly halfwits as they reached for coffee. “Could you tell me when Keith

is coming back? Someone was supposed to give me an examination.”

Somewhere in the room behind him Keith said distinctly, “Ahem.” He was standing near the secret door, and looked as if he had been standing there for some time. “I am examining you, Mr. Breden.” He smiled slightly. “You move like a dancer—you seem to have more vitality than anyone here. Is it something you learned how to do? Self training?”

Mart hesitated, trying to understand the question of the tall man with pale hair who should have known him in advance as the E2 pattern. Keith read his hesitation, and stopped moving in the midst of reaching for a coffee cup.

“Man, do you mean to say that you are genuinely not crippled? That all those structural abnormalities *work*? I expected some kind of physical and mental wreck. The kind of topblowing you were doing in here earlier was about what I expected psychologically, but Doctor Sheers reported that you were more stable than I am, friendly and accessible even with all that included rejection stress.” He drew himself some coffee and walked over to his desk to sit down. “And Mirella reports that you were hellishly poised. What’s the trick, man? Nothing should have been strong about you but those teeth, and here you are back gabbing with my zoo, healthy as a gorilla and more sure of yourself than I am.”

“I’m only poised from five to nine and alternate weekends.” Mart allowed himself a slight grin. He couldn’t afford to like Keith—Keith was the enemy—but it was getting difficult not to. “I’m only friendly on hours whose names begin with T.” It was time. Abruptly he walked over to the wall and put his back against the filing cabinets. He raised his voice. “*Nobody can leave the room.*” He took the curare gun out of his pocket and leveled it at Keith.

“I’ve already chosen sides,” he explained boldly to the suddenly silent room. “I chose the supers.”

“Oye!” Zal clapped himself on the forehead exclaiming in an undertone. “I let him go out alone and the supers got him!” There was dismay behind the joke.

Mart smiled at that. Someone moved stealthily, and he swung the curare pistol a little towards him, saying clearly, “I would like

to point out that if I find it necessary to fire, a radio signal will bring the police. Don't forget that there are laws against human experimenting. The Anti-Vivisection League will interest itself in the use of E-2 embryos and doubtless find that most laboratories let them run past five months. A post five month embryo is considered legally human, so the Anti-Vivisection League would carry the case to court and stand guard over all the post-five-month embryos to see that they are birthed when they come to term. That would give me fifty duplicates or so." He smiled around the room at unsmiling faces.

"You'd destroy all of MSKZ for a lousy fifty replicas?" asked the gorilla-like young man who had not previously spoken to him. He was angry. "What would you do with them when you had them, play ring-around-the-rosey?"

IN BREDEN'S pocket the button push that would call the police was growing slippery from contact with the fingers of his left hand. He was trying to push it, but something seemed to be holding his tensed hand back from completing the motion.

Planck-Planck hiked himself gangling up on the edge of a table facing him. "We can talk it over. You want to give MSKZ unfavorable publicity in order to have your replicas birthed. You have decided that MSKZ owes you something, and you want to take it out in replicas, right?"

That wasn't what he wanted. Breden hesitated. What did he want? He remembered Nadine again. He had lost her. There was nothing like knowing the truth, even if knowing it never helped. "Mister Planck-Planck," he said coldly, "I don't need a reason, I'm just expressing my feelings. Somebody owes me something for making me a freak, and if I don't take it out in replicas, I'll take it out in hide." If only someone would attack him. he thought wistfully; if only he had an excuse for hitting someone, preferably Keith. He made another try at pushing the button and this time succeeded.

With an odd mingling of satisfaction and depression he realized that he had called the police. If he didn't let them shut the secret

door, if he made them remain to be questioned, MSKZ as an organization was dead. And then he knew that the whole thing was unreal. Something else was going to happen. The door to the hall, the door downstairs that opened to the darkened street both stood ajar, open and waiting. For... he found his finger too tense on the trigger and relaxed it, turning the gun carefully away from Keith's face.

The members of MSKZ and the diploids did not know that he had sent a call signal.

Zal was saying seriously, "Don't argue with him. Can't you see that he's been hypnoed?"

"He can't be, Zal. The supers wouldn't have him calling the police; not if they hypnoed him. The police hypno questioning would be too likely to show up what they had done to him, and you know there's a penalty in the anti-hypnotic law for making people catspaws. They have more to lose by it than we have."

"If he's catspaw for them, they don't have to give him the inside dope on what he's doing. Any story will do." Zal turned to him. "Mart, as a favor, could you tell me where you went between six and nine?"

"I was met by some supers," he answered, feeling that he was breaking some obscure instructions in answering, yet easily able to do it. "They persuaded me to enlist on their side."

"How much did they tell you? Can you remember what arguments they used to persuade you?" Zal was earnest, leaning forward with interest.

He hesitated, a vast confusion flooding into his mind and subsiding again. He had been sure he had discussed the subject with the supers for a long time and been informed and chosen his own side reasonably, but—"I can't remember any specific arguments." The supers were still his friends and these were his enemies, but it was better to know the facts.

"He was hypnoed," Planck-Planck said. "That makes him completely unpredictable. We don't know what he's standing here with his gun for, because he doesn't either. Not only do we have to look after ourselves now, but we have to look after him."

“You’re probably quite right,” said Breden, suddenly liking him without caring which side he was on. There was an odd stir in the room. Planck-Plank looked at him directly and keenly, without stirring. “Mister Breden, you know that people with post hypnotic commands on them are also commanded to forget what was done to them. You are not supposed to be able to admit that you can’t remember, and you are definitely not supposed to recognize any possibility that you have been influenced to do what you are doing. How do you account for your own behavior?”

BREDEN remembered something. It was a disturbing memory, but the sound of the words was quite clear. “They said I learned resistance to drugs like learning a nursery rhyme.” He found the gun muzzle was pointing at Keith’s face again and shifted it, remembering the police warning not to shoot anyone in the eye. His gun hand was growing tense, and there was a feeling of instructions he was about to remember...

Keith had been leaning back in his desk chair, watching Breden with a cool, studying expression. “It’s probably true. In all the hundreds or thousands of generations of division and selection of the E-2 cells within our incubators the only possible evolution that could have gone on was evolution in the direction of chemical adaptability, since only the chemical environment varied. If this happened, Breden, it means that biochemically you are something like twenty thousand years ahead of the rest of us. At that rate I think you should be able to pull yourself out of any effect from external drugs without any help from us.”

Breden found himself swallowing painfully. “This is good news...” It came out as half a whisper, and he pulled himself together with an effort, trying to forget what he had just heard, and to remember what he was supposed to do. He shifted the direction of the gun absently away from Keith’s face.

“If this is so,” Keith continued, his eyes straying from Mart’s face to the gun and back. “Then it answers the question of why you are so healthy. That kind of adaptability could probably fit any random kind of physical structure together and make it work.”

Mart suddenly felt the health of his body as a physical sensation, and the gun in his hand which he was pointing at this quiet room full of people seemed totally incongruous. He was following instructions, but he had no enthusiasm for it now. He was doing it only as a favor to the supers. They were his friends, they were with him in his fight against humanity. Fight against humanity...

A second of silence had passed and Zal exploded impetuously, "For heaven's sake, Mart! Put that damn gun down. Don't you see you're holding us for some kind of a trap?"

"The supers are my friends. I'm doing what they want."

"That's hypnosis talking. Fight it."

"I don't want to fight it," Breden said reasonably. "I want to help them." If the button push was to have brought the police, they would have been here minutes ago. Something prickled along the back of his neck. Just what kind of a trap had his friends prepared for MSKZ? Why hadn't they told him? He hoped it was no worse than hypno-conversion.

"I suggest," Planck-Planck said softly, "that the F line of supers know something about the E-2 abilities and are afraid of being displaced. They have worked out some plausible way of eliminating Breden, who is E-2's only living representative."

"This was to be a trap for him, and not for us."

"Mart," Zal's voice was strained, "For God's sake, take care of yourself. Don't just stand there."

He was fighting now, trying to open his hand and drop the gun. He could feel the tension straining the muscles of his arm right up to the shoulder, and the surging and growth of the feeling of obligation, the feeling of obedience to the supers that fought to keep the gun in his hand, wavering, pointing...

Pointing in the general direction of the lined face of the big blond man who was sitting so close, leaning back in his desk chair, occasionally glancing from Breden's eyes to the gun. They probably could have jumped then and taken the gun away from him, but everyone in the room knew that they could not risk the chance that his finger would contract on the trigger, for one shot would bring

the police, and a hypno question to any of them about the shot would bring out enough of the story to retrograde forty years of MSKZ'S work in genetics and make it once more into a simple supply house for laboratory animals.

It was up to him. "I don't believe they are against me," he said, "but I..." He tried. His eyes fogging with the effort, he glanced up at a sound, looking past Keith's face toward the half open door on the far side of the room.

YARDLY DEVON stood there, a slim old man dressed in pearl grey. A hat was rakishly on the side of his head; his face was smoothly shaven and pink, and in his hand was the blue-steel glimmer of an old fashioned automatic. "I heard you." he told Breden.

For a moment he clearly remembered his instructions. He was supposed to shout and start pulling the trigger of the curare pistol wildly in Devon's general direction. None of the bullets would strike Devon, but one of the bullets was to go, as if by accident, into the face of Keith, penetrating one of his eyes. If he did this, they had told him, he would be perfectly safe and have his revenge against MSKZ for what it had done to him. Murder. Keith's eyes were a cool grey-blue color. *Murder...*

Mart Breden shut his own eyes tightly with a knot of terror that leaped together in his chest twisting intolerably. Then it was gone and he could breathe and his heart could beat again. With immeasurable relief he felt the gun fall from his fingers and heard it thud lightly on the floor. He opened his eyes, looking back at Yardly Devon, who stood across the room regarding him triumphantly, ready to shoot.

It had been a double catspaw. They had primed him so that he would do a murder for them, apparently by accident, and then never be able to reveal that it was a catspaw murder, or that he had been hypnoed—because he would be dead, killed by Yardly Devon, a paranoiac who had probably been easily set off in his direction by a few carefully keyed casual remarks. Devon made a handy killer, for he would kill with perfect innocence, convinced that his choice of time and place was his own, convinced that he

had learned of Breden's whereabouts by accident and able to tell the police no more than that. He felt he ought to warn the others in the room.

"Mr. Devon's business is entirely with me," he said, leaning back against the filing cases and feeling the handles and knobs push against his back. Filing cases aren't comfortable to lean against, but there had been too many cross-currents of melodrama, and he was tired. "I think it is his contention that I am a diploid or a Martian or something. He has been trying to kill me." He added wearily, "If I have been irritable today you can blame it on that."

All the tiny normal motions of the people in the room had suddenly stopped, even the motion of breathing diminished. A madman with a smile and a shave and a gun full of bullets is not the person to bring confidence and relaxation. Devon said. "I had my detectives follow you. I told you that you couldn't get away."

Breden could feel the tight weight of the curare pistol against his toe. It was supposed to be there to protect him, but it might as well have been on the moon for all the chance he would have to get it. He leaned against the filing cases, watching Devon's gun, wondering if a person could see the bullet flash out.

SOMEONE was stirring slightly in a stealthy movement, "He's a good shot," Breden warned quietly, remembering the creased neck in a shot from a moving cab. He looked into the dark hole of the muzzle. It was like a small dark eye that would expand to cover the world with darkness. His own voice seemed to come from a distance. "If I'm going to hell I don't want an escort. Just take it easy and hold still, and in a minute E-2 will stop complaining and giving you trouble and go back to being just another label on an egg compartment."

"But I *like Mart*," said Zal plaintively after a moment. He stood up, a solid-shouldered nineteen-year-old in a defiantly gaudy pink sport shirt, carefully stuck his thumbs into his ears and wiggled his fingers at Devon. His *excessive* number of fingers. Breden saw it from the side of his vision as something fantastic but unimportant. At the center of focus he saw the most important thing in the



universe, the automatic and the hand that held it jerk slightly, and then begin to waver in an arc. He wondered why Devon neither spoke nor fired.

“You’re *all* Martians,” wailed Devon.

That was when the tension broke. Everyone began to move rapidly at once, apparently all acting on the same simple impulse that Breden was acting on, that there was no profit in waiting for Devon to shoot them all down. The shots wore too loud in that inclosed room. The sound had an impact like a succession of blows, distorting everything.

Zal was clinging to Devon’s gun arm, and then was on the floor on his hands and knees while the tall stout girl held the thrashing figure in a tight desperate clasp with his arms partially pinned, and the convulsively squeezing hand pumped shots into the floor.

Breden had instinctively circled out of the line of fire and come in from behind, his eyes ranging for the gun in the struggling tangle of heads and arms and hands. The convulsively squeezing hand began pulling the trigger randomly again, and the impact of the sound stung his ears and skin as he spotted it. He slapped at the deadly shiny thing with an open palm, and it suddenly thumped on the floor and skidded away...

The tall stout girl picked it up and suddenly the room was quiet. Only Devon continued to struggle against the restraining arms.

She waved the gun in a sweeping hurried gesture, holding it by the barrel. “Everybody get out through the passage and close the door. Pick up the bottles and sandwich wrappings and take them along so it won’t look like there was a crowd,” she called, “Keith will take care of this madman.”

The big blond man approached the group and locked on a wrestling grip as the others unpeeled from their struggling captive one by one and darted through the open door.

Zal had uncurled from his hands-and-knees position and rolled over on his side. There was a small pool of blood where he had crouched. They gave him hardly a glance as they passed him and crowded through the open catalogue rack, but Planck-Planck said,

as he passed, “Take it easy Zal. Look out for those doctors. They’ll get curious and claim they have to open you up and take out something—just for a look inside.” The tall girl lagged behind last and handed the gun to Breden.

“Take over, boy,” she called, her lips close to Breden’s ear. Devon had wriggled free except for one wrist, and he was pulling and jerking at the end of his held arm like a hooked fish flopping on a line. His whimpers were rising to a keening wail, like a banshee warming up. The girl raised her voice. “Shut the door behind us and leave us out of the story.” Sirens in the street and air outside were adding to the racket. She vanished through the door, and he closed the swinging rack hastily.

## VIII

« ^

DEVON was still pulling away from Keith’s placid grip on his wrist, jerking and shrieking thinly with every breath, apparently under the impression that the Martians were going to murder him. It was hard to think, like being in the same room with a fire siren, and the sound of feet pounding up the escalator and a whistle blowing on the sidewalk added to the din. Holding the gun turned in Devon’s direction, Mart moved toward the door, and through it abruptly caught a glimpse of two policemen. He noticed that they had been wearing flesh colored pads over their noses and recognized their intention just as the first sudden startling noise of a fizz bullet sizzled past his face, but it was too late to stop the breath he was drawing and some of the gas went into his lungs.

There were three other sharp sizzling sounds. He saw Keith and Devon slow to a stop, just as his own desire to move faded. When Devon stopped screaming it left the air empty.

The gas-ice bullets had shattered against the walls and filing cabinets, and the shattered small pieces lay on the floor sizzling and dwindling into gas.

He felt like a cataleptic, perfectly able to think, but with no desire to move or speak. The fizz pistols shot some standard

hypnotic suspended in a compressed gas-ice pellet.

The police waited a cautious minute and a half and then they stepped into the room. "You won't move or talk unless we ask you to," said the one in the uniform of a sergeant, speaking with slight difficulty because, of his nose pad. He walked up to Breden and efficiently removed the gun from his hand, wrapped it in a handkerchief and dropped it in his pocket. The other one was busy at a desk opening out and arranging a sound recorder. He switched it on and stepped back. "Okay," he told the sergeant.

The sergeant turned his head and said matter-of-factly into the recorder, "These are preliminary questionings taken under hypnosis at the scene of the incident and do not constitute voluntary confessions unless later sworn to in freewill state, and a condition of sanity."

He turned to Breden and gestured at Zal on the floor. "Who's that?"

"Zalemeyer Elberg."

"What's your name?"

"Paul Breden."

"Are you responsible for his injury?"

It was a debatable question. "Indirectly," he said, after hesitating.

The sergeant looked faintly annoyed. "Did you fire at him with intent to kill?"

"No."

"Did you fire at him accidentally?"

"No." There was some disadvantage in this method of questioning, for though he answered willingly, he felt no desire to save the man questions by explaining that he had not had the gun.

The sergeant belatedly put two and two together. "Who did the shooting?"

"Yardly Devon." Mart knew he could fight the drug and lie if he had to.

“With this gun?”

“Yes.” So far no lies had been necessary.

“Point him out.” The cop glanced at the other two. “Which is he?”

Breden pointed, and the cop followed his indication and addressed Devon, who stood passively, looking pathetic, his thin sandy hair ruffled, his overshirt ripped and his hat knocked off. “What’s your name?”

“Yardly Evert Devon,” answered Devon obediently, and the recorder took down the sound of his voice.

“Did you shoot this man?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“He was trying to get my automatic. I had to stop him.”

“Why did you have a gun?”

“Because they are—I think they are Martians.” They call themselves—”

“Cuffs,” said the sergeant. While the other was snapping cuffs on Devon’s wrists he checked the time on his watch, unclipped a small mike from his belt and spoke into it. “Everything under control. Gas cleared. Send up a stretcher and the med for one gut wound and a violent case.” He hung the mike on his belt again and walked over, switching off the recorder.

Breden found his powers of motion returning as the hypnotic wore off almost as suddenly as it had taken effect. A man came in with a five lens motion picture camera and began moving around with it in routine fashion.

“They’re Martians,” Devon stated suddenly as he recovered his ability to speak. “There were a lot more of them and they escaped before you got here.”

The sergeant swung on Breden with his expression hardening. “How about that? You know that the people involved in a shooting have to stay around to be questioned. Did somebody leave?”

Here was the perfect moment to do what he had once intended,

destroy MSKZ in a blast of publicity. The moment was spectacular. The cameraman taking pictures, the wounded man on the floor, the doctor coming in the door accompanied by two attendants carrying a stretcher, the madman making strange accusations...

All Breden had to do now to add the crowning touch of sinister fantasy was to walk over to the catalogue rack that concealed the hidden door and swing it open. After that he could make whatever accusations he chose, and they would be believed.

SUDDENLY Breden found that he no longer wanted to tell the police about the secret door. He had forgotten what his reasons had been for threatening it.

His lag in answering had been only an instant. "Nobody else was here," he lied.

The sergeant gave Devon a disgusted glance and nodded. "Okay. Do you two want to go down to the station with this Devon character now and make a statement of what happened? We'll give you a lift." He glanced at Zal's fingers as he was carried past on the stretcher, then spoke as if from some shadowy uncertainty. "I take it you two are related."

"Cousins."

"Yeah." The sergeant gave Devon another disgusted glance. "Let's go."

They went out and down the escalator, and behind them Devon pushed back against urging hands, his voice growing hysterical. "No you have to listen to me. Believe me, the Martians were here. They went out a secret door. It's behind that bookcase." His voice was pleading now. "You can't take me away without listening to me. At least look at the—" The policeman with him gave him an impatient shove to the head of the escalator. Devon clung to the side with manacled hands, his voice shrill.

"For the love of justice! Look at that bookcase! You can't... not without even..." A rough shove dislodged him from the railing, and the screaming began again while the irritated young policeman held him still and the police doctor passed Keith and Breden, running up

the moving escalator with a pacifying hypo in hand. It was the sound of terror.

*“You can’t—no, you’re with them! You’re with the Martians. They’ve hired you. I see it now. You’re against me too. No don’t. It’s poison. Help!”*

Behind them the shouting choked off to a mumble as the hypo took hold. The escalator delivered them, silent and pale, to street level. A crowd had assembled outside. Keith and Breden climbed into the waiting police patrol wing...

After they had given their testimony and signed the record of their statements they paused on the station house steps, reluctant to separate.

“Quite a day!” Mart said.

“It was interesting enough,” Keith agreed. He hesitated oddly. “If you don’t mind my saying—I’m sorry about—ah —your troubles. E-2s weren’t really meant to be birthed, but I can arrange that if you have children they shan’t be like you—that is—”

“That they won’t be *too much* like me anyhow?” Mart supplied the words, grinning.

“That’s it.” Keith shook hands with embarrassed vigor as they parted. “Take care of yourself. Remember that you are my star line now.”

“Thanks.” Mart said, meaning it.

They walked away from each other, and it was a warm friendly summer night that seemed to Mart to be just for him.

When he stepped out of the elevator on his own floor Nadine flew into his arms. “Mart. Are you all right? I called everyplace and you weren’t there. You weren’t home—”

She was crying. He wrapped his arms around her comfortingly, and she tilted her face back from his shoulder to look at him, and everything was fine. It was wonderful, and he couldn’t understand how he could ever have been unhappy. “Mart... I wanted to tell you. We don’t have to have children.”

“Oh yes we do,” he said firmly before kissing her. “And they’ll all

grow up to be President.” He’d explain later.

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[scanned anonymously in a galaxy far far away]

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