

End as a Hero

1

In the dream I was swimming in a river of white fire. The dream went on and on; and then I was awake-and the fire was still there, fiercely burning at me.

I moved to get away from the flames, and the real pain hit me. I tried to go back to sleep and the relative comfort of the river of fire, but it was no go. For better or worse, I was alive and conscious.

I opened my eyes and took a look around. I was on the floor next to an unpadded acceleration couch-the kind the Terrestrial Space Arm installs in seldom-used lifeboats. There were three more couches, but no one in them. I tried to sit up. It wasn't easy but, by applying a lot more will-power than should be required of a sick man, I made it. I took a look at my left arm. Baked. The hand was only medium rare, but the forearm was black, with deep red showing at the bottom of the cracks where the crisped upper layers had burst.

There was a first-aid cabinet across the compartment from me. I tried my right leg, felt broken bone-ends grate with a sensation that transcended pain. I heaved with the other leg, scrabbled with the charred arm. The crawl to the cabinet dwarfed Hillary's trek up Everest, but I reached it after a couple of years, and found the microswitch on the floor that activated the thing, and then I was fading out again . . .

* * *

I came out of it clear-headed but weak. My right leg was numb, but reasonably comfortable, clamped tight in a walking brace. I put up a hand and felt a shaved skull, with sutures. It must have been a fracture. The left arm-well, it was still there, wrapped to the shoulder and held out stiffly by a power truss that would keep the scar tissue from pulling up and crippling me. The steady pressure as the truss contracted wasn't anything to do a sense-tape on for replaying at leisure moments, but at least the cabinet hadn't amputated. I wasn't complaining.

As far as I knew, I was the first recorded survivor of contact with the Gool-if I survived.

I was still a long way from home, and I hadn't yet checked on the condition of the lifeboat. I glanced toward the entry port. It was dogged shut. I could see black marks where my burned hand had been at work.

I fumbled my way into a couch and tried to think. In my condition-with a broken leg and third-degree burns, plus a fractured skull-I shouldn't have been able to fall out of bed, much less make the trip from Belshazzar's CCC to the boat; and how had I managed to dog that port shut? In an emergency a man was capable of great exertions. But running on a broken femur, handling heavy levers with charred fingers and thinking with a cracked head were overdoing it. Still, I was there-and it was time to get a call through to TSA headquarters.

I flipped the switch and gave the emergency call-letters Col. Ausar Kayle of Aerospace Intelligence had assigned to me a few weeks before. It was almost five minutes before the "acknowledge" came through from the Ganymede relay station, another ten minutes before Kayle's face swam into view. Even through the blur of the screen I could see the haggard look.

"Granthan!" he burst out. "Where are the others? What happened out there?" I turned him down to a mutter.

"Hold on," I said. "I'll tell you. Recorders going?" I didn't wait for an answer-not with a fifteen-minute transmission lag. I plowed on:

"Belshazzar was sabotaged. So was Gilgamesh-I think. I got out. I lost a little skin, but the aid cabinet has the case in hand. Tell the Med people the drinks are on me."

I finished talking and flopped back, waiting for Kayle's reply. On the screen, his flickering image gazed back impatiently, looking as hostile as a swing-shift ward nurse. It would be half an hour before I would get his reaction to my report. I dozed off-and awoke with a start. Kayle was talking.

"-your report. I won't mince words. They're wondering at your role in the disaster. How does it happen that you alone survived?"

"How the hell do I know?" I yelled-or croaked. But Kayle's voice was droning on:

" . . . you Psychodynamics people have been telling me the Gool may have some kind of long-range telehypnotic ability that might make it possible for them to subvert a loyal man without his knowledge. You've told me yourself that you blacked out during the attack-and came to on the lifeboat, with no recollection of how you got there.

"This is war, Granthan. War against a vicious enemy who strike without warning and without mercy. You were sent out to investigate the possibility of-what's that term you use?-hypercortical invasion. You know better than most the risk I'd be running if you were allowed to pass the patrol line.

"I'm sorry, Granthan. I can't let you land on Earth. I can't accept the risk."

"What do I do now?" I stormed. "Go into orbit and eat pills and hope you think of something? I need a doctor!"

Presently Kayle replied. "Yes," he said. "You'll have to enter a parking orbit. Perhaps there will be developments soon which will make it possible to . . . ah . . . restudy the situation." He didn't meet my eye. I knew what he was thinking. He'd spare me the mental anguish of knowing what was coming. I couldn't really blame him; he was doing what he thought was the right thing. And I'd have to go along and pretend-right up until the warheads struck-that I didn't know I'd been condemned to death.

2

I tried to gather my wits and think my way through the situation. I was alone and injured, aboard a lifeboat that would be the focus of a converging

flight of missiles as soon as I approached within battery range of Earth. I had gotten clear of the Gool, but I wouldn't survive my next meeting with my own kind. They couldn't take the chance that I was acting under Gool orders.

I wasn't, of course. I was still the same Peter Granthan, psychodynamicist, who had started out with Dayan's fleet six weeks earlier. The thoughts I was having weren't brilliant, but they were mine, all mine.

But how could I be sure of that?

Maybe there was something in Kayle's suspicion. If the Gool were as skillful as we thought, they would have left no overt indications of their tampering-not at a conscious level.

But this was where psychodynamics training came in. I had been reacting like any scared casualty, aching to get home and lick his wounds. But I wasn't just any casualty. I had been trained in the subtleties of the mind-and I had been prepared for just such an attack.

Now was the time to make use of that training. It had given me one resource. I could unlock the memories of my subconscious-and see again what had happened.

I lay back, cleared my mind of extraneous thoughts, and concentrated on the trigger word that would key an autohypnotic sequence.

Sense impressions faded. I was alone in the nebulous emptiness of a first-level trance. I keyed a second word, slipped below the misty surface into a dreamworld of vague phantasmagoric figures milling in their limbo of sub-conceptualization. I penetrated deeper, broke through into the vividly hallucinatory third level, where images of mirror-bright immediacy clamored for attention. And deeper . . .

* * *

The immense orderly confusion of the basic memory level lay before me. Abstracted from it, aloof and observant, the monitoring personality-fraction scanned the pattern, searching the polydimensional continuum for evidence of an alien intrusion.

And found it.

As the eye instantaneously detects a flicker of motion amid an infinity of static detail, so my inner eye perceived the subtle traces of the probing Gool mind, like a whispered touch deftly rearranging my buried motivations.

I focused selectively, tuned to the recorded gestalt.

"It is a contact, Effulgent One!"

"Softly, now! Nurture the spark well. It but trembles at the threshold . . ."

"It is elusive, Master! It wriggles like a gorm-worm in the eating trough!"

A part of my mind watched as the memory unreeled. I listened to the

voices-yet not voices, merely the shape of concepts, indescribably intricate. I saw how the decoy pseudo-personality which I had concretized for the purpose in a hundred training sessions had fought against the intruding stimuli-then yielded under the relentless thrust of the alien probe. I watched as the Gool operator took over the motor centers, caused me to crawl through the choking smoke of the devastated control compartment toward the escape hatch. Fire leaped up, blocking the way. I went on, felt ghostly flames whipping at me-and then the hatch was open and I pulled myself through, forcing the broken leg. My blackened hand fumbled at the locking wheel. Then the blast as the lifeboat leaped clear of the disintegrating dreadnought-and the world-ending impact as I fell.

At a level far below the conscious, the embattled pseudo-personality lashed out again-fighting the invader.

"Almost it eluded me then, Effulgent Lord. Link with this lowly one!"

"Impossible! Do you forget all my teachings? Cling, though you expend the last filament of your life-force!"

Free from all distraction, at a level where comprehension and retention are instantaneous and total, my monitoring basic personality fraction followed the skillful Gool mind as it engraved its commands deep in my subconscious. Then the touch withdrew, erasing the scars of its passage, to leave me unaware of its tampering-at a conscious level.

Watching the Gool mind, I learned.

The insinuating probe-a concept regarding which psychodynamicists had theorized-was no more than a pattern in emptiness . . .

But a pattern which I could duplicate, now that I had seen what had been done to me.

Hesitantly, I felt for the immaterial fabric of the continuum, warping and manipulating it, copying the Gool probe. Like planes of paper-thin crystal, the polyfinite aspects of reality shifted into focus, aligning themselves.

Abruptly, a channel lay open. As easily as I would stretch out my hand to pluck a moth from a night-flower, I reached across the unimaginable void-and sensed a pit blacker than the bottom floor of hell, and a glistening dark shape.

There was a soundless shriek. "Effulgence! It reached out-touched me!"

* * *

Using the technique I had grasped from the Gool itself, I struck, stifling the outcry, invaded the fetid blackness and grappled the obscene gelatinous immensity of the Gool spy as it spasmed in a frenzy of xenophobia-a ton of liver writhing at the bottom of a dark well.

I clamped down control. The Gool mind folded in on itself, gibbering. Not pausing to rest, I followed up, probed along my channel of contact, tracing patterns, scanning the flaccid Gool mind . . .

I saw a world of yellow seas lapping at endless shores of mud. There was a fuming pit, where liquid sulphur bubbled up from some inner source, filling an immense natural basin. The Gool clustered at its rim, feeding, each monstrous shape heaving against its neighbors for a more favorable position.

I probed farther, saw the great cables of living nervous tissue that linked each eating organ with the brain-mass far underground. I traced the passages through which tendrils ran out to immense caverns where smaller creatures labored over strange devices. These, my host's memory told me, were the young of the Gool. Here they built the fleets that would transport the spawn to the new worlds the Prime Overlord had discovered, worlds where food was free for the taking. Not sulphur alone, but potassium, calcium, iron and all the metals-riches beyond belief in endless profusion. No longer would the Gool tribe cluster-those who remained of a once-great race-at a single feeding trough. They would spread out across a galaxy-and beyond.

But not if I could help it.

The Gool had evolved a plan-but they'd had a stroke of bad luck.

In the past, they had managed to control a man here and there, among the fleets, far from home, but only at a superficial level. Enough, perhaps, to wreck a ship, but not the complete control needed to send a man back to Earth under Gool compulsion, to carry out complex sabotage.

Then they had found me, alone, a sole survivor, free from the clutter of the other mindfields. It had been their misfortune to pick a psychodynamicist. Instead of gaining a patient slave, they had opened the fortress door to an unseen spy. Now that I was there, I would see what I could steal.

A timeless time passed. I wandered among patterns of white light and white sound, plumbed the deepest recesses of hidden Gool thoughts, fared along strange ways examining the shapes and colors of the concepts of an alien mind.

I paused at last, scanning a multi-ordinal structure of pattern within pattern; the diagrammed circuits of a strange machine.

I followed through its logic-sequence; and, like a bomb-burst, its meaning exploded in my mind.

From the vile nest deep under the dark surface of the Gool world in its lonely trans-Plutonian orbit, I had plucked the ultimate secret of their kind.

Matter across space.

* * *

"You've got to listen to me, Kayle," I shouted. "I know you think I'm a Gool robot. But what I have is too big to let you blow it up without a fight. Matter transmission! You know what that can mean to us. The concept is too complex to try to describe in words. You'll have to take my word for it. I can build it, though, using standard components, plus an infinite-area

antenna and a moebius-wound coil-and a few other things . . ."

I harangued Kayle for a while, and then sweated out his answer. I was getting close now. If he couldn't see the beauty of my proposal, my screens would start to register the radiation of warheads any time now.

Kayle came back-and his answer boiled down to "no."

I tried to reason with him. I reminded him how I had readied myself for the trip with sessions on the encephaloscope, setting up the cross-networks of conditioned defensive responses, the shunt circuits to the decoy pseudo-personality, leaving my volitional ego free. I talked about subliminal hypnotics and the resilience quotient of the ego-complex.

I might have saved my breath.

"I don't understand that psychodynamics jargon, Granthan," he snapped. "It smacks of mysticism. But I understand what the Gool have done to you well enough. I'm sorry."

I leaned back and chewed the inside of my lip and thought unkind thoughts about Colonel Ausar Kayle. Then I settled down to solve the problem at hand.

I keyed the chart file, flashed pages from the standard index on the reference screen, checking radar coverages, beacon ranges, monitor stations, controller fields. It looked as though a radar-negative boat the size of mine might possibly get through the defensive net with a daring pilot, and as a condemned spy, I could afford to be daring.

And I had a few ideas.

3

The shrilling of the proximity alarm blasted through the silence. For a wild moment I thought Kayle had beaten me to the punch; then I realized it was the routine DEW line patrol contact.

"Z four-oh-two, I am reading your IFF. Decelerate at 1.8 gee preparatory to picking up approach orbit . . ."

The screen went on droning out instructions. I fed them into the autopilot, at the same time running over my approach plan. The scout was moving in closer. I licked dry lips. It was time to try.

I closed my eyes, reached out-as the Gool mind had reached out to me-and felt the touch of a Signals Officer's mind, forty thousand miles distant, aboard the patrol vessel. There was a brief flurry of struggle; then I dictated my instructions. The Signals Officer punched keys, spoke into his microphone:

"As you were, Z four-oh-two. Continue on present course. At oh-nineteen seconds, pick up planetary for re-entry and let-down."

I blanked out the man's recollection of what had happened, caught his belated puzzlement as I broke contact. But I was clear of the DEW line

now, rapidly approaching atmosphere.

"Z four-oh-two," the speaker crackled. "This is planetary control. I am picking you up on channel forty-three, for re-entry and let-down."

There was a long pause. Then:

"Z four-oh-two, countermand DEW line clearance! Repeat, clearance countermanded! Emergency course change to standard hyperbolic code ninety-eight. Do not attempt re-entry. Repeat: do not attempt re-entry!"

It hadn't taken Kayle long to see that I'd gotten past the outer line of defense. A few more minutes' grace would have helped. I'd play it dumb, and hope for a little luck.

"Planetary, Z four-oh-two here. Say, I'm afraid I missed part of that, fellows. I'm a little banged up-I guess I switched frequencies on you. What was that after 'pick up channel forty-three' . . . ?"

"Four-oh-two, sheer off there! You're not cleared for re-entry!"

"Hey, you birds are mixed up," I protested. "I'm cleared all the way. I checked in with DEW-"

It was time to disappear. I blanked off all transmission, hit the controls, following my evasive pattern. And again I reached out-

A radar man at a site in the Pacific, fifteen thousand miles away, rose from his chair, crossed the darkened room and threw a switch. The radar screens blanked off . . .

For an hour I rode the long orbit down, fending off attack after attack. Then I was clear, skimming the surface of the ocean a few miles southeast of Key West. The boat hit hard. I felt the floor rise up, over, buffeting me against the restraining harness.

I hauled at the release lever, felt a long moment of giddy disorientation as the escape capsule separated from the sinking lifeboat deep under the surface. Then my escape capsule was bobbing on the water.

I would have to risk calling Kayle now-but by voluntarily giving my position away, I should convince him I was still on our side-and I was badly in need of a pick-up. I flipped the sending key.

"This is Z four-oh-two," I said. "I have an urgent report for Colonel Kayle of Aerospace Intelligence."

Kayle's face appeared. "Don't fight it, Granthan," he croaked. "You penetrated the planetary defenses-God knows how. I-"

"Later," I snapped. "How about calling off your dogs now? And send somebody out here to pick me up, before I add sea-sickness to my other complaints."

"We have you pinpointed," Kayle cut in. "It's no use fighting it, Granthan."

* * *

I felt cold sweat pop out on my forehead. "You've got to listen, Kayle," I shouted. "I suppose you've got missiles on the way already. Call them back! I have information that can win the war-"

"I'm sorry, Granthan," Kayle said. "It's too late-even if I could take the chance you were right."

A different face appeared on the screen.

"Mr. Granthan, I am General Titus. On behalf of your country, and in the name of the President-who has been apprised of this tragic situation-it is my privilege to inform you that you will be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor-posthumously-for your heroic effort. Although you failed, and have in fact been forced, against your will, to carry out the schemes of the inhuman enemy, this in no way detracts from your gallant attempt. Mr. Granthan, I salute you."

The general's arm went up in a rigid gesture.

"Stow that, you pompous idiot!" I barked. "I'm no spy!"

Kayle was back, blanking out the startled face of the general.

"Goodbye, Granthan. Try to understand . . ."

I flipped the switch, sat gripping the couch, my stomach rising with each heave of the floating escape capsule. I had perhaps five minutes. The missiles would be from Canaveral.

I closed my eyes, forced myself to relax, reached out . . .

I sensed the distant shore, the hot buzz of human minds at work in the cities. I followed the coastline, found the Missile Base, flicked through the cluster of minds.

"-missile on course; do right, baby. That's it, right in the slot."

I fingered my way through the man's mind and found the control centers. He turned stiffly from the plotting board, tottered to a panel to slam his hand against the destruct button.

Men fell on him, dragged him back. "-fool, why did you blow it?"

I dropped the contact, found another, who leaped to the panel, detonated the remainder of the flight of six missiles. Then I withdrew. I would have a few minutes' stay of execution now.

I was ten miles from shore. The capsule had its own power plant. I started it up, switched on the external viewer. I saw dark sea, the glint of star-light on the choppy surface, in the distance a glow on the horizon that would be Key West. I plugged the course into the pilot, then leaned back and felt outward with my mind for the next attacker.

It was dark in the trainyard. I moved along the tracks in a stumbling walk. Just a few more minutes, I was telling myself. A few more minutes and you can lie down . . . rest . . .

The shadowed bulk of a box car loomed up, its open door a blacker square. I leaned against the sill, breathing hard, then reached inside for a grip with my good hand.

Gravel scrunched nearby. The beam of a flashlight lanced out, flipped along the weathered car, caught me. There was a startled exclamation. I ducked back, closed my eyes, felt out for his mind. There was a confused murmur of thought, a random intrusion of impressions from the city all around. It was hard, too hard. I had to sleep-

I heard the snick of a revolver being cocked, and dropped flat as a gout of flame stabbed toward me, the imperative Bam! echoing between the cars. I caught the clear thought:

"God-awful looking, shaved head, arm stuck out; him all right-"

I reached out to his mind and struck at random. The light fell, went out, and I heard the unconscious body slam to the ground like a poled steer.

It was easy-if I could only stay awake.

I gritted my teeth, pulled myself into the car, crawled to a dark corner behind a crate and slumped down. I tried to evoke a personality fraction to set as a guard, a part of my mind to stay awake and warn me of danger. It was too much trouble. I relaxed and let it all slide down into darkness.

* * *

The car swayed, click-clack, click-clack. I opened my eyes, saw yellow sunlight in a bar across the litter on the floor. The power truss creaked, pulling at my arm. My broken leg was throbbing its indignation at the treatment it had received-walking brace and all-and the burned arm was yelling aloud for more of that nice dope that had been keeping it from realizing how bad it was. All things considered, I felt like a badly embalmed mummy-except that I was hungry. I had been a fool not to fill my pockets when I left the escape capsule in the shallows off Key Largo, but things had been happening too fast.

I had barely made it to the fishing boat, whose owner I had coerced into rendezvousing with me before shells started dropping around us. If the gunners on the cruiser ten miles away had had any luck, they would have finished me-and the hapless fisherman-right then. We rode out a couple of near misses, before I put the cruiser's gunnery crew off the air.

At a fishing camp on the beach, I found a car-with driver. He dropped me at the railyard, and drove off under the impression he was in town for groceries. He'd never believe he'd seen me.

Now I'd had my sleep. I had to start getting ready for the next act of the farce.

I pressed the release on the power truss, gingerly unclamped it, then

rigged a sling from a strip of shirt tail. I tied the arm to my side as inconspicuously as possible. I didn't disturb the bandages.

I needed new clothes-or at least different ones-and something to cover my shaved skull. I couldn't stay hidden forever. The yard cop had recognized me at a glance.

I lay back, waiting for the train to slow for a town. I wasn't unduly worried-at the moment. The watchman probably hadn't convinced anyone he'd actually seen me. Maybe he hadn't been too sure himself.

The click-clack slowed and the train shuddered to a stop. I crept to the door, peered through the crack. There were sunny fields, a few low buildings in the distance, the corner of a platform. I closed my eyes and let my awareness stretch out.

"-lousy job. What's the use? Little witch in the lunch room . . . up in the hills, squirrel hunting, bottle of whiskey . . ."

I settled into control gently, trying not to alarm the man. I saw through his eyes the dusty box car, the rust on the tracks, the listless weeds growing among cinders, and the weathered boards of the platform. I turned him, and saw the dingy glass of the telegraph window, a sagging screen door with a chipped enameled cola sign.

I walked the man to the door, and through it. Behind a linoleum-topped counter, a coarse-skinned teen-age girl with heavy breasts and wet patches under her arms looked up without interest as the door banged.

My host went on to the counter, gestured toward the waxed-paper-wrapped sandwiches under a glass cover. "I'll take 'em all. And candy bars, and cigarettes. And give me a big glass of water."

"Better git out there and look after yer train," the girl said carelessly. "When'd you git so all-fired hungry all of a sudden?"

"Put it in a bag. Quick."

"Look who's getting bossy-"

My host rounded the counter, picked up a used paper bag, began stuffing food in it. The girl stared at him, then pushed him back. "You git back around that counter!"

She filled the bag and rang up the tab. "Cash only."

My host took two dog-eared bills from his shirt pocket, dropped them on the counter and waited while the girl filled a glass. He picked it up and started out.

"Hey! Where you goin' with my glass?"

The trainman crossed the platform, headed for the box car. He slid the loose door back a few inches against the slack latch, pushed the bag inside, placed the glass of water beside it, then pulled off his grimy railroader's cap and pushed it through the opening. He turned. The girl

watched from the platform. A rattle passed down the line and the train started up with a lurch. The man walked back toward the girl. I heard him say: "Friend o' mine in there-just passin' through."

I was discovering that it wasn't necessary to hold tight control over every move of a subject. Once given the impulse to act, he would rationalize his behavior, fill in the details-and never know that the original idea hadn't been his own.

I drank the water first, ate a sandwich, then lit a cigarette and lay back. So far so good. The crates in the car were marked "U.S. Naval Aerospace Station, Bayou Le Cochon." With any luck I'd reach New Orleans in another twelve hours. The first step of my plan included a raid on the Delta National labs; but that was tomorrow. That could wait.

* * *

It was a little before dawn when I crawled out of the car at a siding in the swampy country a few miles out of New Orleans. I wasn't feeling good, but I had a stake in staying on my feet. I still had a few miles in me. I had my supplies-a few candy bars and some cigarettes-stuffed in the pockets of the tattered issue coverall. Otherwise, I was unencumbered. Unless you wanted to count the walking brace on my right leg and the sling binding my arm.

I picked my way across mushy ground to a pot-holed black-top road, started limping toward a few car lights visible half a mile away. It was already hot. The swamp air was like warmed-over subway fumes. Through the drugs, I could feel my pulse throbbing in my various wounds. I reached out and touched the driver's mind; he was thinking about shrimps, a fish-hook wound on his left thumb and a girl with black hair. "Want a lift?" he called.

I thanked him and got in. He gave me a glance and I pinched off his budding twinge of curiosity. It was almost an effort now not to follow his thoughts. It was as though my mind, having learned the trick of communications with others, instinctively reached out toward them.

An hour later he dropped me on a street corner in a shabby marketing district of the city and drove off. I hoped he made out all right with the dark-haired girl. I spotted a used-clothing store and headed for it.

Twenty minutes later I was back on the sidewalk, dressed in a pinkish-gray suit that had been cut a long time ago by a Latin tailor-maybe to settle a grudge. The shirt that went with it was an unsuccessful violet. The black string tie lent a dubious air of distinction. I'd swapped the railroader's cap for a tarnished beret. The man who had supplied the outfit was still asleep. I figured I'd done him a favor by taking it. I couldn't hope to pass for a fisherman-I wasn't the type. Maybe I'd get by as a coffee-house derelict.

I walked past fly-covered fish stalls, racks of faded garments, grimy vegetables in bins, enough paint-flaked wrought iron to cage a herd of brontosauri, and fetched up at a cab stand. I picked a fat driver with a wart.

"How much to the Delta National Laboratories?"

He rolled an eye toward me, shifted his toothpick.

"What ya wanna go out there for? Nothing out there."

"I'm a tourist," I said. "They told me before I left home not to miss it."

He grunted, reached back and opened the door. I got in. He flipped his flag down, started up with a clash of gears and pulled out without looking.

"How far is it?" I asked him.

"It ain't far. Mile, mine and a quarter."

"Pretty big place, I guess."

He didn't answer.

We went through a warehousing district, swung left along the waterfront, bumped over railroad tracks, and pulled up at a nine-foot cyclone fence with a locked gate.

I looked out at the fence, a barren field, a distant group of low buildings. "What's this?"

"This is the place you ast for."

I touched his mind, planted a couple of false impressions and withdrew. He blinked, then started up, drove around the field, pulled up at an open gate with a blue-uniformed guard. He looked back at me.

"You want I should drive in, sir?"

"I'll get out here."

He jumped out, opened my door, helped me out with a hand under my good elbow. "I'll get your change, sir," he said, reaching for his hip.

"Keep it."

"Thank YOU." He hesitated. "Maybe I oughta stick around. You know."

"I'll be all right."

"I hope so," he said. "A man like you-you and me-" he winked. "After all, we ain't both wearing berets fer nothing."

"True," I said. "Consider your tip doubled. Now drive away into the sunrise and forget you ever saw me."

He got into the car, beaming, and left. I turned and sized up the Delta Labs.

There was nothing fancy about the place; it consisted of low brick and steel buildings, mud, a fence and a guard who was looking at me.

I sauntered over. "I'm from Iowa City," I said. "Now, the rest of the group didn't come-said they'd rather rest one day. But I like to see it all. After all, I paid-"

"Just a minute," the guard said, holding up a palm. "You must be lost, fella. This here ain't no tourist attraction. You can't come in here."

"This is the cameo works?" I said anxiously.

He shook his head. "Too bad you let your cab go. It's an hour yet till the bus comes."

A dun-painted staff car came into view, slowed and swung wide to turn in. I fingered the driver's mind. The car swerved, braked to a halt. A portly man in the back seat leaned forward, frowning. I touched him. He relaxed. The driver leaned across and opened the door. I went around and got in. The guard was watching, open-mouthed.

I gave him a two-finger salute, and the car pulled through the gate.

"Stop in front of the electronics section," I said. The car pulled up. I got out, went up the steps and pushed through the double glass doors. The car sat for a moment, then moved slowly off. The passenger would be wondering why the driver had stopped-but the driver wouldn't remember.

I was inside the building now; that was a start. I didn't like robbery in broad daylight, but it was a lot easier this way. I wasn't equal to climbing any walls or breaking down any locked doors-not until I'd had a transfusion, a skin graft and about three months' vacation on a warm beach somewhere.

A man in a white smock emerged from a door. He started past me, spun-

"I'm here about the garbage," I said. "Damn fools will put the cans in with the edible. Are you the one called?"

"How's that?"

"I ain't got all the morning!" I shrilled. "You scientist fellers are all alike. Which way is the watchamacallit-equipment lab?"

"Right along there." He pointed. I didn't bother to thank him. It wouldn't have been in character.

A thin man with a brush mustache eyed me sharply as I pushed through the door. I looked at him, nodding absently. "Carry on with your work," I said. "The audit will be carried out in such a way as to disturb you as little as possible. Just show me your voucher file, if you please."

He sighed and waved toward a filing cabinet. I went to it and pulled a drawer open, glancing about the room. Full shelves were visible through an inner door.

Twenty minutes later I left the building, carrying a sheet metal carton containing the electronic components I needed to build a matter transmitter-except for the parts I'd have to fabricate myself from raw materials. The load was heavy-too heavy for me to carry very far. I parked it at the door and waited until a pick-up truck came along.

It pulled over. The driver climbed out and came up the walk to me. "Are you-uh . . . ?" He scratched his head.

"Right." I waved at my loot. "Put it in the back." He obliged. Together we rolled toward the gate. The guard held up his hand, came forward to check the truck. He looked surprised when he saw me.

"Just who are you, fella?" he said.

I didn't like tampering with people any more than I had to. It was a lot like stealing from a blind man: easy, but nothing to feel proud of. I gave him a light touch-just the suggestion that what I would say would be full of deep meaning.

"You know-the regular Wednesday shipment," I said darkly. "Keep it quiet. We're all relying on you."

"Sure thing," he said, stepping back. We gunned through the gate. I glanced back to see him looking after the truck, thinking about the Wednesday shipment on a Friday. He decided it was logical, nodded his head and forgot the whole thing.

5

I'd been riding high for a couple of hours, enjoying the success of the tricks I'd stolen from the Gool. Now I suddenly felt like something the student morticians had been practicing on. I guided my driver through a second-rate residential section, looking for an M.D. shingle on a front lawn.

The one I found didn't inspire much confidence-you could hardly see it for the weeds-but I didn't want to make a big splash. I had to have an assist from the driver to make it to the front door. He got me inside, parked my box beside me and went off to finish his rounds, under the impression that it had been a dull morning.

The doctor was a seedy, seventyish G.P. with a gross tremor of the hands that a good belt of Scotch would have helped. He looked at me as though I'd interrupted something that was either more fun or paid better than anything I was likely to come up with.

"I need my dressing changed, Doc," I said. "And maybe a shot to keep me going."

"I'm not a dope peddler," he snapped. "You've got the wrong place."

"Just a little medication-whatever's usual. It's a burn."

"Who told you to come here?"

I looked at him meaningfully. "The word gets around."

He glared at me, gnashed his plates, then gestured toward a black-varnished door. "Go right in there."

He gaped at my arm when the bandages were off. I took a quick glance and wished I hadn't.

"How did you do this?"

"Smoking in bed," I said. "Have you got . . . something that . . ."

He caught me before I hit the floor, got me into a chair. Then he had that Scotch he'd been wanting, gave me a shot as an afterthought, and looked at me narrowly.

"I suppose you fell out of that same bed and broke your leg," he said.

"Right. Hell of a dangerous bed."

"I'll be right back." He turned to the door. "Don't go away. I'll just . . . get some gauze."

"Better stay here, Doc. There's plenty of gauze right on that table."

"See here-"

"Skip it, Doc. I know all about you."

"What?"

"I said all about you."

He set to work then; a guilty conscience is a tough argument to answer.

He plastered my arm with something and rewrapped it, then looked the leg over and made a couple of adjustments to the brace. He clucked over the stitches in my scalp, dabbed something on them that hurt like hell, then shoved an old-fashioned stickpin needle into my good arm.

"That's all I can do for you," he said. He handed me a bottle of pills. "Here are some tablets to take in an emergency. Now get out."

"Call me a cab, Doc."

* * *

I listened while he called, then lit a cigarette and watched through the curtains. The doc stood by, worrying his upper plate and eyeing me. So far I hadn't had to tinker with his mind, but it would be a good idea to check. I felt my way delicately.

-oh God, why did I . . . long time ago . . . Mary ever knew . . . go to Arizona, start again, too old . . . I saw the nest of fears that gnawed at him, the frustration and the faint flicker of hope but not quite dead. I touched his mind, wiped away scars . . .

"Here's your car," he said. He opened the door, looking at me. I started past him.

"Are you sure you're all right?" he said.

"Sure, Pop. And don't worry. Everything's going to be okay."

The driver put my boxes on the back seat. I got in beside him and told him to take me to a men's clothing store. He waited while I changed my hand-me-downs for an off-the-hook suit, new shirt and underwear and a

replacement beret. It was the only kind of hat that didn't hurt. My issue shoes were still good, but I traded them in on a new pair, added a light raincoat, and threw in a sturdy suitcase for good measure. The clerk said something about money and I dropped an idea into his mind, paused long enough to add a memory of a fabulous night with a redhead. He hardly noticed me leaving.

I tried not to feel like a shoplifter. After all, it's not every day a man gets a chance to swap drygoods for dreams.

In the cab, I transferred my belongings to the new suitcase, then told the driver to pull up at an anonymous-looking hotel. A four-star admiral with frayed cuffs helped me inside with my luggage. The hackie headed for the bay to get rid of the box under the impression I was a heavy tipper.

I had a meal in my room, a hot bath, and treated myself to a three hour nap. I woke up feeling as though those student embalmers might graduate after all.

I thumbed through the phone book and dialed a number.

"I want a Cadillac or Lincoln," I said. "A new one-not the one you rent for funerals-and a driver who won't mind missing a couple nights' sleep. And put a bed pillow and a blanket in the car."

I went down to the coffee room then for a light meal. I had just finished a cigarette when the car arrived-a dark blue heavy-weight with a high polish and a low silhouette.

"We're going to Denver," I told the driver. "We'll make one stop tomorrow-I have a little shopping to do. I figure about twenty hours. Take a break every hundred miles, and hold it under seventy."

He nodded. I got in the back and sank down in the smell of expensive upholstery.

"I'll cross town and pick up U.S. 84 at-"

"I leave the details to you," I said. He pulled out into the traffic and I got the pillow settled under me and closed my eyes. I'd need all the rest I could get on this trip. I'd heard that compared with the Denver Records Center, Fort Knox was a cinch. I'd find out for sure when I got there.

* * *

The plan I had in mind wasn't the best I could have concocted under more leisurely circumstances. But with every cop in the country under orders to shoot me on sight, I had to move fast. My scheme had the virtue of unlikeliness. Once I was safe in the Central Vault-supposed to be the only H-bomb-proof structure ever built-I'd put through a phone call to the outside, telling them to watch a certain spot; say the big desk in the President's office. Then I'd assemble my matter transmitter and drop some little item right in front of the assembled big shots. They'd have to admit I had something. And this time they'd have to start considering the possibility that I wasn't working for the enemy.

It had been a smooth trip, and I'd caught up on my sleep. Now it was five a.m. and we were into the foothills, half an hour out of Denver. I ran over my lines, planning the trickiest part of the job ahead-the initial approach. I'd listened to a couple of news broadcasts. The FBI was still promising an arrest within hours. I learned that I was lying up, or maybe dead, in the vicinity of Key West, and that the situation was under control. That was fine with me. Nobody would expect me to pop up in Denver, still operating under my own power-and wearing a new suit at that.

The Records Center was north of the city, dug into mountain-side. I steered my chauffeur around the downtown section, out a street lined with dark hamburger joints and unlit gas stations to where a side road branched off. We pulled up. From here on, things might get dangerous-if I was wrong about how easy it was all going to be. I brushed across the driver's mind. He set the brake and got out.

"Don't know how I came to run out of gas, Mr. Brown," he said apologetically. "We just passed a station but it was closed. I guess I'll just have to hike back into town. I sure am sorry; I never did that before."

I told him it was okay, watched as he strode off into the predawn gloom, then got into the front seat and started up. The gate of the Reservation surrounding the Record Center was only a mile away now. I drove slowly, feeling ahead for opposition. There didn't seem to be any. Things were quiet as a poker player with a pat hand. My timing was good.

* * *

I stopped in front of the gate, under a floodlight and the watchful eye of an M.P. with a shiny black tommygun held at the ready. He didn't seem surprised to see me. I rolled down the window as he came over to the car.

"I have an appointment inside, Corporal," I said. I touched his mind. "The password is 'hotpoint.' "

He nodded, stepped back, and motioned me in. I hesitated. This was almost too easy. I reached out again . . .

" . . . middle of the night . . . password . . . nice car . . . I wish . . ."

I pulled through the gate and headed for the big parking lot, picking a spot in front of a ramp that led down to a tall steel door. There was no one in sight. I got out, dragging my suitcase. It was heavier now, with the wire and magnets I'd added. I crossed the drive, went up to the doors. The silence was eerie.

I swept the area, searching for minds, found nothing. The shielding, I decided, blanked out everything.

There was a personnel door set in the big panel, with a massive combination lock. I leaned my head against the door and felt for the mechanism, turning the dial right, left, right . . .

The lock opened. I stepped inside, alert.

Silence, darkness. I reached out, sensed walls, slabs of steel, concrete,

intricate mechanisms, tunnels deep in the ground . . .

But no personnel. That was surprising-but I wouldn't waste time questioning my good luck. I followed a corridor, opened another door, massive as a vault, passed more halls, more doors. My footsteps made muffled echoes. I passed a final door and came into the heart of the Records Center.

There were lights in the chamber around the grim, featureless periphery of the Central Vault. I set the valise on the floor, sat on it and lit a cigarette. So far, so good. The Records Center, I saw, had been overrated. Even without my special knowledge, a clever locksmith could have come this far-or almost. But the Big Vault was another matter. The great integrating lock that secured it would yield only to a complex command from the computer set in the wall opposite the vault door. I smoked my cigarette and, with eyes closed, studied the vault.

I finished the cigarette, stepped on it, went to the console, began pressing keys, tapping out the necessary formulations. Half an hour later I finished. I turned and saw the valve cycle open, showing a bright-lit tunnel within.

* * *

I dragged my bag inside, threw the lever that closed the entry behind me. A green light went on. I walked along the narrow passage, lined with gray metal shelves stacked with gray steel tape drums, descended steps, came into a larger chamber fitted out with bunks, a tiny galley, toilet facilities, shelves stocked with food. There was a radio, a telephone and a second telephone, bright red. That would be the hot-line to Washington. This was the sanctum sanctorum, where the last survivors could wait out the final holocaust-indefinitely.

I opened the door of a steel cabinet. Radiation suits, tools, instruments. Another held bedding. I found a tape-player, tapes-even a shelf of books. I found a first aid kit and gratefully gave myself a hypo-spray jolt of neurite. My pains receded.

I went on to the next room; there were wash tubs, a garbage disposal unit, a drier. There was everything here I needed to keep me alive and even comfortable until I could convince someone up above that I shouldn't be shot on sight.

A heavy door barred the way to the room beyond. I turned a wheel, swung the door back, saw more walls lined with filing cabinets, a blank facade of gray steel; and in the center of the room, alone on a squat table-a yellow plastic case that any Sunday Supplement reader would have recognized.

It was the Master Tape, the Utter Top Secret Programming document that would direct the terrestrial defense in case of a Gool invasion.

It was almost shocking to see it lying there-unprotected except for the flimsy case. The information it contained in micro-micro dot form could put my world in the palm of the enemy's hand.

The room with the tool kit would be the best place to work, I decided. I

brought the suitcase containing the electronic gear back from the outer door where I'd left it, opened it and arranged its contents on the table. According to the Gool these simple components were all I needed. The trick was in knowing how to put them together.

There was work ahead of me now. There were the coils to wind, the intricate antenna arrays to lay out; but before I started, I'd take time to call Kayle-or whoever I could get at the other end of the hot-line. They'd be a little startled when I turned up at the heart of the defenses they were trying to shield.

I picked up the receiver and a voice spoke:

"Well, Granthan. So you finally made it."

6

"Here are your instructions," Kayle was saying. "Open the vault door. Come out-stripped-and go to the center of the parking lot. Stand there with your hands over your head. A single helicopter manned by a volunteer will approach and drop a gas canister. It won't be lethal, I promise you that. Once you're unconscious, I'll personally see to it that you're transported to the Institute in safety. Every effort will then be made to overcome the Gool conditioning. If we're successful, you'll be awakened. If not . . ."

He let the sentence hang. It didn't need to be finished. I understood what he meant.

I was listening. I was still not too worried. Here I was safe against anything until the food ran out-and that wouldn't be for months.

"You're bluffing, Kayle," I said. "You're trying to put the best face on something that you can't control. If you'd-"

"You were careless at Delta Labs, Granthan. There were too many people with odd blanks in their memories and too many unusual occurrences, all on the same day. You tipped your hand. Once we knew what we were up against, it was simply a matter of following you at an adequate distance. We have certain shielding materials, as you know. We tried them all. There's a new one that's quite effective.

"But as I was saying, we've kept you under constant surveillance. When we saw which way you were heading, we just stayed out of sight and let you trap yourself."

"You're lying. Why would you want me here?"

"That's very simple," Kayle said harshly. "It's the finest trap ever built by man-and you're safely in it."

"Safely is right. I have everything I need here. And that brings me to my reason for being here-in case you're curious. I'm going to build a matter transmitter. And to prove my good faith, I'll transmit the Master Tape to you. I'll show you that I could have stolen the damned thing if I'd wanted to."

"Indeed? Tell me, Granthan, do you really think we'd be fools enough to leave the Master Tape behind when we evacuated the area?"

"I don't know about that-but it's here."

"Sorry," Kayle said. "You're deluding yourself." His voice was suddenly softer, some of the triumph gone from it. "Don't bother struggling, Granthan. The finest brains in the country have combined to place you where you are. You haven't a chance, except to do as I say. Make it easy on yourself. I have no wish to extend your ordeal."

"You can't touch me, Kayle. This vault is proof against a hell-bomb, and it's stocked for a siege . . ."

"That's right," Kayle said. "It's proof against a hell-bomb. But what if the hell-bomb's in the vault with you?"

I felt like a demolition man, working to defuse a blockbuster, who's suddenly heard a loud click! from the detonator. I dropped the phone, stared around the room. I saw nothing that could be a bomb. I ran to the next room, the one beyond. Nothing. I went back to the phone, grabbed it up.

"You ought to know better than to bluff now, Kayle!" I yelled. "I wouldn't leave this post now for half a dozen hypothetical hell-bombs!"

"In the center room," Kayle said. "Lift the cover over the floor drain. You'll find it there. You know what they look like. Don't tamper with its mechanism; it's internally trapped. You'll have to take my word for it we didn't bother installing a dummy."

I dropped the phone, hurried to the spot Kayle had described. The bomb casing was there-a dully gray ovoid, with a lifting eye set in the top. It didn't look dangerous. It just lay there quietly, waiting . . .

Back at the telephone, I had trouble finding my voice. "How long?" I croaked.

"It was triggered when you entered the vault," Kayle said. "There's a time mechanism. It's irreversible; you can't force anyone to cancel it. And it's no use your hiding in the outer passages.

"The whole center will be destroyed in the blast. Even it can't stand against a bomb buried in its heart. But we'll gladly sacrifice the center to eliminate you."

"How long!"

"I suggest you come out quickly, so that a crew can enter the vault to disarm the bomb."

"How long!"

"When you're ready to emerge, call me." The line went dead.

I put the phone back in its cradle carefully, like a rare and valuable egg.

I tried to think. I'd been charging full speed ahead ever since I had decided on my scheme of action while I was still riding the surf off the Florida coast, and I'd stuck to it. Now it had hatched in my face-and the thing that had crawled out wasn't the downy little chick of success. It had teeth and claws and was eyeing me like a basilisk.

But I still had unplayed aces-if there was time.

I had meant to use the matter transmitter to stage a dramatic proof that I wasn't the tool of the enemy. The demonstration would be more dramatic than I'd planned. The bomb would fit the machine as easily as the tape. The wheels would be surprised when their firecracker went off-right on schedule-in the middle of the Mojave Desert.

I set to work, my heart pounding. If I could bring this off-if I had time-if the transmitter worked as advertised . . .

The stolen knowledge flowed smoothly, effortlessly. It was as though I had been assembling matter transmitters for years, knew every step by heart. First the moebius windings; yard after yard of heavy copper around a core of carbon; then the power supply, the first and second stage amplifiers . . .

How long? In the sump in the next room, the bomb lay quietly ticking. How long . . . ?

* * *

The main assembly was ready now. I laid out cables, tying my apparatus in to the atomic power-source buried under the vault. The demand, for one short instant, would tax even those mighty engines. I fixed hooks at the proper points in the room, wove soft aluminum wire in the correct pattern. I was almost finished now. How long? I made the last connections, cleared away the litter. The matter transmitter stood on the table, complete. At any instant, the bomb would reduce it-and the secret of its construction-to incandescent gas-unless I transmitted the bomb out of range first. I turned toward the laundry room-and the telephone rang. I hesitated, then crossed the room and snatched it up.

"Listen to me," Kayle said grimly. "Give me straight, fast answers. You said the Master Tape was there, in the vault with you. Now tell me: What does it look like?"

"What?"

"The . . . ah . . . dummy tape. What is its appearance?"

"It's a roughly square plastic container, bright yellow, about a foot thick. What about it?"

Kayle's voice sounded strained. "I've made inquiries. No one here seems to know the exact present location of the Master Tape. Each department says that they were under the impression that another handled the matter. I'm unable to learn who, precisely, removed the Tape from the vault. Now you say there is a yellow plastic container-"

"I know what the Master Tape looks like," I said. "This is either it or a hell of a good copy."

"Granthan," Kayle said. There was a note of desperation in his voice now. "There have been some blunders made. I knew you were under the influence of the Gool. It didn't occur to me that I might be too. Why did I make it possible for you to successfully penetrate to the Central Vault? There were a hundred simpler ways in which I could have dealt with the problem. We're in trouble, Granthan, serious trouble. The tape you have there is genuine. We've all played into the enemy's hands."

"You're wasting valuable time, Kayle," I snapped. "When does the bomb go up?"

"Granthan, there's little time left. Bring the Master Tape and leave the vault-"

"No dice, Kayle. I'm staying until I finish the transmitter, then-"

"Granthan! If there's anything to your mad idea of such a machine, destroy it! Quickly! Don't you see the Gool would only have given you the secret in order to enable you to steal the tape!"

I cut him off. In the sudden silence, I heard a distant sound-or had I sensed a thought? I strained outward . . .

" . . . volunteered . . . damn fool . . . thing on my head is heavy . . . better work . . .

" . . . now . . . okay . . . valve, gas . . . kills in a split second . . . then get out . . ."

I stabbed out, pushed through the obscuring veil of masonry, sensed a man in the computer room, dressed in gray coveralls, a grotesque shield over his head and shoulders. He reached for a red-painted valve-

I struck at his mind, felt him stagger back, fall. I fumbled in his brain, stimulated the sleep center. He sank deep into unconsciousness. I leaned against the table, weak with the reaction. Kayle had almost tricked me that time.

I reached out again, swept the area with desperate urgency. Far away, I sensed the hazy clutter of many minds, out of range. There was nothing more. The poisonous gas had been the only threat-except the bomb itself. But I had to move fast, before my time ran out, to transmit the bomb to a desert area . . .

I paused, stood frozen in mid-move. A desert. What desert?

The transmitter operated in accordance with as rigid a set of laws as did the planets swinging in their orbits; strange laws, but laws of nature none the less. No receiver was required. The destination of the mass under transmission was determined by the operator, holding in his mind the five-dimensional conceptualization of the target, guiding the action of the machine.

And I had no target.

I could no more direct the bomb to a desert without a five-fold grasp of its multi-ordinal spatial, temporal, and entropic coordinates than I could fire a rifle at a target in the dark.

I was like a man with a grenade in his hand, pin pulled-and locked in a cell.

I swept the exocosm again, desperately. And caught a thin, live line. I traced it; it cut through the mountain, dived deep underground, crossed the boundless plain . . .

Never branching, it bored on, turning upward now-and ending.

I rested, gathering strength, then probed, straining . . .

There was a room, men. I recognized Kayle, gray-faced, haggard. A tall man in braided blue stood near him. Others stood silently by, tension on every face. Maps covered the wall behind them.

I was looking into the War Room at the Pentagon in Washington. The line I had traced was the telephonic hotline, the top-security link between the Record Center and the command level. It was a heavy cable, well protected and always open. It would free me from the trap. With Gool-tutored skill I scanned the room, memorized its co-ordinates. Then I withdrew.

Like a swimmer coming up from a long dive, I fought my way back to the level of immediate awareness. I sagged into a chair, blinking at the drab walls, the complexity of the transmitter. I must move fast now, place the bomb in the transmitter's field, direct it at the target. With an effort I got to my feet, went to the sump, lifted the cover. I grasped the lifting eye, strained-and the bomb came up, out onto the floor. I dragged it to the transmitter . . .

And only then realized what I'd been about to do.

My target.

The War Room-the nerve-center of Earth's defenses. And I had been ready to dump the hell-bomb there. In my frenzy to be rid of it I would have played into the hands of the Gool.

7

I went to the phone.

"Kayle! I guess you've got a recorder on the line. I'll give you the details of the transmitter circuits. It's complicated, but fifteen minutes ought to-"

"No time," Kayle cut in. "I'm sorry about everything, Granthan. If you've finished the machine, it's a tragedy for humanity-if it works. I can only ask you to try-when the Gool command comes-not to give them what they want. I'll tell you, now, Granthan. The bomb blows in-" there was a pause-"two minutes and twenty-one seconds. Try to hold them off. If you can stand against them for that long at least-"

I slammed the phone down, cold sweat popping out across my face. Two minutes . . . too late for anything. The men in the War Room would never know how close I had come to beating the Gool-and them.

But I could still save the Master Tape. I wrestled the yellow plastic case that housed the tape onto the table, into the machine.

And the world vanished in a blaze of darkness, a clamor of silence.

NOW, MASTERS! NOW! LINK UP! LINE UP!

Like a bad dream coming back in daylight, I felt the obscene presence of massed Gool minds, attenuated by distance but terrible in their power, probing, thrusting. I fought back, struggling against paralysis, trying to gather my strength, use what I had learned . . .

SEE, MASTERS, HOW IT WOULD ELUDE US. BLANK IT OFF, TOGETHER NOW
. . .

The paths closed before me. My mind writhed, twisted, darted here and there-and met only the impenetrable shield of the Gool defenses.

IT TIRES, MASTERS. WORK SWIFTLY NOW. LET US IMPRESS ON THE SUBJECT THE CO-ORDINATES OF THE BRAIN PIT. The conceptualization drifted into my mind. HERE, MAN. TRANSMIT THE TAPE HERE!

As from a distance, the monitor personality fraction watched the struggle. Kayle had been right. The Gool had waited-and now their moment had come. Even my last impulse of defiance-to place the tape in the machine-had been at the Gool command. They had looked into my mind. They understand psychology as no human analyst ever could; and they had led me in the most effective way possible, by letting me believe I was the master. They had made use of my human ingenuity to carry out their wishes-and Kayle had made it easy for them by evacuating a twenty-mile radius around me, leaving the field clear for the Gool.

HERE- The Gool voice rang like a bell in my mind: TRANSMIT THE TAPE HERE!

Even as I fought against the impulse to comply, I felt my arm twitch toward the machine.

THROW THE SWITCH! the voice thundered.

I struggled, willed my arm to stay at my side. Only a minute longer, I thought. Only a minute more, and the bomb would save me . . .

LINK UP, MASTERS!

I WILL NOT LINK. YOU PLOT TO FEED AT MY EXPENSE.

NO! BY THE MOTHER WORM, I PLEDGE MY GROOVE AT THE EATING TROUGH. FOR US THE MAN WILL GUT THE GREAT VAULT OF HIS NEST WORLD!

ALREADY YOU BLOAT AT OUR EXPENSE!

FOOL!! WOULD YOU BICKER NOW? LINK UP!

* * *

The Gool raged-and I grasped for an elusive thought and held it. The bomb, only a few feet away. The waiting machine. And the Gool had given me the co-ordinates of their cavern . . .

With infinite sluggishness, I moved.

LINK UP, MASTERS: THEN ALL WILL FEED . . .

IT IS A TRICK, I WILL NOT LINK.

I found the bomb, fumbled for a grip.

DISASTER, MASTERS! NOW IS THE PRIZE LOST TO US, UNLESS YOU JOIN WITH ME!

My breath choked off in my throat; a hideous pain coiled outward from my chest. But it was unimportant. Only the bomb mattered. I tottered, groping. There was the table; the transmitter . . .

I lifted the bomb, felt the half-healed skin of my burned arm crackle as I strained . . .

I thrust the case containing the Master Tape out of the field of the transmitter, then pushed, half-rolled the bomb into position. I groped for the switch, found it. I tried to draw breath, felt only a surge of agony. Blackness was closing in . . .

The co-ordinates . . .

From the whirling fog of pain and darkness, I brought the target concept of the Gool cavern into view, clarified it, held it . . .

MASTERS! HOLD THE MAN! DISASTER!

Then I felt the Gool, their suspicions yielding to the panic in the mind of the Prime Overlord, link their power against me. I stood paralyzed, felt my identity dissolving like water pouring from a smashed pot. I tried to remember-but it was too faint, too far away.

Then from somewhere a voice seemed to cut in, the calm voice of an emergency reserve personality fraction. "You are under attack. Activate the reserve plan. Level Five. Use Level Five. Act now. Use Level Five . . ."

Through the miasma of Gool pressure, I felt the hairs stiffen on the back of my neck. All around me the Gool voices raged, a swelling symphony of discord. But they were nothing. Level Five . . .

There was no turning back. The compulsions were there, acting even as I drew in a breath to howl my terror-

Level Five. Down past the shapes of dreams, the intense faces of hallucination; Level Three; Level Four and the silent ranked memories . . . And deeper still-

Into a region of looming gibbering horror, of shadowy moving shapes of evil, of dreaded presences that lurked at the edge of vision . . .

Down amid the clamor of voiceless fears, the mounting hungers, the reaching claws of all that man had feared since the first tailless primate screamed out his terror in a tree-top: the fear of falling, the fear of heights.

Down to Level Five. Nightmare level.

* * *

I groped outward, found the plane of contact-and hurled the weight of man's ancient fears at the waiting Gool-and in their black confining caves deep in the rock of a far world, they felt the roaring tide of fear-fear of the dark, and of living burial. The horrors in man's secret mind confronted the horrors of the Gool Brain Pit. And I felt them break, retreat in blind panic from me-

All but one. The Prime Overlord reeled back with the rest, but his was a mind of terrible power. I sensed for a moment his bloated immense form, the seething gnawing hungers, insatiable, never to be appeased. Then he rallied-but he was alone now.

LINK UP, MASTERS! THE PRIZE IS LOST. KILL THE MAN! KILL THE MAN!

I felt a knife at my heart. It fluttered-and stopped. And in that instant, I broke past his control, threw the switch. There was the sharp crack of imploding air. Then I was floating down, ever down, and all sensation was far away.

MASTERS! KILL TH

The pain cut off in an instant of profound silence and utter dark.

Then sound roared in my ears, and I felt the harsh grate of the floor against my face as I fell, and then I knew nothing more.

8

"I hope," General Titus was saying, "that you'll accept the decoration now, Mr. Granthan. It will be the first time in history that a civilian has been accorded this honor-and you deserve it."

I was lying in a clean white bed, propped up by big soft pillows, with a couple of good-looking nurses hovering a few feet away. I was in a mood to tolerate even Titus.

"Thanks, General," I said. "I suggest you give the medal to the volunteer who came in to gas me. He knew what he was going up against; I didn't."

"It's over, now, Granthan," Kayle said. He attempted to beam, settled for a frosty smile. "You surely understand-"

"Understanding," I said. "That's all we need to turn this planet-and a lot of other ones-into the kind of worlds the human mind needs to expand into."

"You're tired, Granthan," Kayle said. "You get some rest. In a few weeks you'll be back on the job, as good as new."

"That's where the key is," I said. "In our minds; there's so much there, and we haven't even scratched the surface. To the mind nothing is impossible. Matter is an illusion, space and time are just convenient fictions-"

"I'll leave the medal here, Mr. Granthan. When you feel equal to it, we'll make the official presentation. Television . . ."

He faded off as I closed my eyes and thought about things that had been clamoring for attention ever since I'd met the Gool, but hadn't had time to explore. My arm . . .

I felt my way along it-from inside-tracing the area of damage, watching as the bodily defenses worked away, toiling to renew, replace. It was a slow, mindless process. But if I helped a little . . .

It was easy. The pattern was there. I felt the tissues renew themselves, the skin regenerate.

The bone was more difficult. I searched out the necessary minerals, diverted blood; the broken ends knit . . .

The nurse was bending over me, a bowl of soup in her hand.

* * *

"You've been asleep for a long time, sir," she said, smiling. "How about some nice chicken broth now?"

I ate the soup and asked for more. A doctor came and peeled back my bandages, did a double-take, and rushed away. I looked. The skin was new and pink, like a baby's-but it was all there. I flexed my right leg; there was no twinge of pain.

I listened for a while as the doctors gabbled, clucked, probed and made pronouncements. Then I closed my eyes again. I thought about the matter transmitter. The government was sitting on it, of course. A military secret of the greatest importance, Titus called it. Maybe someday the public would hear about it; in the meantime-

"How about letting me out of here?" I said suddenly. A pop-eyed doctor with a fringe of gray hair blinked at me, went back to fingering my arm. Kayle hove into view.

"I want out," I said. "I'm recovered, right? So now just give me my clothes."

"Now, now, just relax, Granthan. You know it's not as simple as that. There are a lot of matters we must go over."

"The war's over," I said. "You admitted that. I want out."

"Sorry." Kayle shook his head. "That's out of the question."

"Doc," I said. "Am I well?"

"Yes," he said. "Amazing case. You're as fit as you'll ever be; I've never-

"I'm afraid you'll have to resign yourself to being here for a while longer, Granthan," Kayle said. "After all, we can't-

"Can't let the secret of matter transmission run around loose, hey? So until you figure out the angles, I'm a prisoner, right?"

"I'd hardly call it that, Granthan. Still . . ."

I closed my eyes. The matter transmitter-a strange device. A field, not distorting space, but accentuating certain characteristics of a matter field in space-time, subtly shifting relationships . . .

Just as the mind could compare unrelated data, draw from them new concepts, new parallels . . .

The circuits of the matter transmitter . . . and the patterns of the mind . . .

The exocosm and the endocosm, like the skin and the orange, everywhere in contact . . .

Somewhere there was a beach of white sand, and dunes with graceful sea-oats that leaned in a gentle wind. There was blue water to the far horizon, and a blue sky, and nowhere were there any generals with medals and television cameras, or flint-eyed bureaucrats with long schemes . . .

And with this gentle folding . . . thus . . .

And a pressure here . . . so . . .

I opened my eyes, raised myself on one elbow-and saw the sea. The sun was hot on my body, but not too hot, and the sand was white as sugar. Far away, a seagull tilted, circling.

A wave rolled in, washed my foot in cool water.

I lay on my back, and looked up at white clouds in a blue sky, and smiled-and then laughed aloud.

Distantly the seagull's cry echoed my laughter.