

A LANCER SCIENCE FICTION ORIGINAL

THE CATS

DEAN R. KOONTZ

Time-lines clash as Earth becomes a battleground for alien creatures and men of the far future!



Hell's Gate

Dean Koontz

Contents

[TITLE PAGE](#)
[CHAPTER 1](#)
[CHAPTER 2](#)
[CHAPTER 3](#)
[CHAPTER 4](#)
[CHAPTER 5](#)
[CHAPTER 6](#)
[CHAPTER 7](#)
[CHAPTER 8](#)
[CHAPTER 9](#)
[CHAPTER 10](#)
[CHAPTER 11](#)
[CHAPTER 12](#)
[CHAPTER 13](#)
[CHAPTER 14](#)
[CHAPTER 15](#)
[CHAPTER 16](#)
[CHAPTER 17](#)
[CHAPTER 18](#)
[CHAPTER 19](#)

He came out of the dark night with only another man's name... a man who would soon be found floating in a distant river. He was a man without a past, without a future; he had only a bloody mission. His first act was violent murder! He was a man... or was he? Just who was Victor Salsbury? And if he was not a man, then... what was he? And who were the unseen masters, who issue orders only on whim? What were their plans for the world... plans so horrifying that they could change an unfeeling, nonhuman creature into a frightened human!

THE GATE

At one-thirty in the morning the vibrations sounded up from the cellar again. Salsbury slipped out of bed and pulled on jeans, then went down the stairs through the darkened house. The dog followed, staying close to his heels.

With the cellar lights out, the circle was easily visible, but a lighter shade now. And for the first time, dim and indistinct, there were shadowy figures-wrong figures. The legs were too thin, the skull narrow, and half again as large as a human skull. It was obvious that the shadowy figures were not men.

Abruptly the blue glow grew lighter and there was a click, a sharp snapping sound. The ringing ceased and the blue light disappeared leaving behind it the circle which now was clear as a window

A window that did not look out onto this planet!

Strictly a fun book for Gerda
to remind her of plasticine porters,
glass onions-and that nothing is real.
Nothing forthwith is real.

CHAPTER 1

The Puppet came awake beneath budding apple trees, lying prone in a patch of twisted weeds and dry brown grass. He was a big man, well over six feet and considerably more than two hundred pounds, though none of the weight seemed to be fat. When he was still, his body was a chiseled hulk of rugged muscles, as if a crude but heroic-minded sculpture had hacked out his uneven version of Ulysses. When he moved just the slightest, the sharp edges melted away, and the chiseled look gave way to the sleek, oiled smoothness of a cat. The muscles no longer jutted, but rippled. He had the look of a trained fighter, a mercenary.

He was dressed in a black suit of tough nylon that looked vaguely like leather and fitted as well as a scuba suit bought a size too small. There was a black hood that fitted over his head, holding his white-blond hair back from his forehead. He carried a pack on his back, but hardly seemed aware of the added weight. He gave the impression that, had the pack been a two ton Buick, he would still only slightly feel its weight.

He rolled onto his back and looked up through the nearly bare branches to the dully gleaming stars that managed to cut through the soft haze of the early spring fog. His head ached, and one place behind his right ear throbbed as if a small man were inside methodically kicking his way out. There was a curious feeling of *déjà vu*, of having been to this place before, but he could not place it. And *how* had he gotten here? Where was "here"? Why?

Moving carefully so he would not excite the little man in his head, he sat up and looked around him. In front and to both sides, the skeletal branches of unadorned trees scratched at the sky and rattled bony fingers at him, as if they were threatening him. There was nothing there to tell him anything. He came to his feet, somewhat wobbly. The little man in his head protested the change of position by kicking with both feet. He felt hairline cracks beginning to spread outwards across his skull from his right temple. In a moment, his head would split like a mush mellow, and it would be all over. He turned to look behind, expecting more trees, and he saw the house.

It was an old place, perhaps constructed in the late 1880's or early 1890's. There were many gables, a bay window, porches around all sides. Despite its age, it had been maintained in excellent condition. Even in the dim, fog-filtered moonlight, he could see the new paint, heavy storm doors, the manicured look of the shrubbery. The moment he set eyes on the house, the strange throbbing ceased in his head. The uneasy dizziness dissipated; he felt whole. This was the sight that keyed him. For a moment, he had been only a confused man, wondering about his circumstance. Now he was a full-fledged

Puppet moving according to program.

At the sight of the house, he dropped once again to the grass, as if seeking concealment, though the night and fog and the dark clothes he wore should have been insurance enough against discovery. After taking time to study the structure and the surrounding landscape, he came to his feet again, crouching like an animal on the prowl. There were no lights on in the house; its occupants were asleep. Exactly as had been planned.

He didn't stop to wonder who had planned it this way, or what else there was to this operation. Presently, there was no part of his mind able to experience curiosity or doubt. He only knew that this much was good.

Still hunched like an ape, he loped from the shelter of the apple trees and up the long, sloping lawn toward the back of the house which was open to him from this side. Once, he almost fell on the dewy grass but regained his balance as swiftly as a tightrope walker would recover from a slide on a banana peel. Through all of this, he moved with uncanny silence, without even the quick rush of his breath to disturb the peaceful night,

Seconds after leaving the trees, he slid against the railing of the back porch and knelt in the shadows, breathing heavily. When there was no outcry, he moved along the railing, found the steps, moved quietly up them and across the porch to the door.

The storm door was a solid aluminum piece that fitted its molding snugly. The glass had not yet been replaced with screens, which made entering the place much more difficult. Though not anywhere near impossible. Nothing was impossible for him. He had been programmed to meet any contingency. Kneeling, he removed his rucksack from his back, took out what he needed, replaced it. He took the small, brass-like coin he had gotten from the pack, held it flat against the glass of the storm door. There was a faint buzzing sound like a swarm of angry bees hovering out above the orchard. He moved the coin upwards, along the edge of the glass, leaving emptiness behind as the glass powdered and drifted silently down onto his feet. When he had created a hole large enough to reach through, he unlocked the door from inside, swung it open.

The heavy wooden door beyond had only one window, a small oval three quarters of the way up. He used the coin to dissolve this, reached through, searching for the lock. His fingers just barely touched it, but he managed to throw it open. With his hand on the outer knob, he swung the portal inward, gaining access to the darkened kitchen.

The interior of the house had been ripped apart at one time, for though the shell was Victorian, the guts were supermodern. The kitchen was large, ringed with dark wood cupboards and shelves. In the center of the red stone floor was a heavy slab of wood that served as a table and cookery work area. In it were built a sink, disposal, and an oven with all its fixtures gleaming in the

thin light that came through the two airy windows.

The Puppet took all this in without really examining anything. His perceptions were sharp, quick, like those of a wild animal. He moved from the kitchen into a tastefully decorated dining area; from there into a living room where the furniture alone would have bought half a dozen Asian families out of poverty. When he found the steps and started up them, his breathing quickened, though he did not know or care why.

At the top of the carpeted stairs, he clung to the shadows along the left wall, staying away from the windows on the other side—an act of instinct more than planning. He breathed through his mouth to cut down on the noise his lungs made. Ten feet from the head of the stairs, he stopped, scanned ahead. When he found the door he wanted, he moved farther along the corridor. When he reached the proper door, he leaned against it, putting his ear to the wood. For a moment, there was no sound. Then he detected the heavy exhalations of a sleeper. Stealthily, he reached out, took the cool brass doorknob in his hand, turned it,

He opened the door, walked into the room and crossed swiftly to the bed where the man laid with his back to the wall, facing the open room just as any man who must be careful learns to sleep. The Puppet judged the position of the body, then brought his hand up, palm flattened for the blow. Before he could swing, however, there was an exclamation from the sleeping man. He started to sit up, turned and dived for a cubbyhole in the headboard.

The Puppet corrected his aim, swung his stiffened hand, felt the blow connect solidly with the stranger's neck. The man grunted, crashed into the headboard he had been trying to reach, bounced back onto the mattress and was still.

Without wasting any time in self-congratulations, the Puppet found the switch on the reading lamp built into the back of the bed. The fixture dropped a puddle of light onto the center of the rumpled bedclothes. He hefted the unconscious man around until his face was in the middle of the puddle. A broad forehead framed with sparse, black hair. Eyes set deep and close together. A heavy, broken nose, broken more than once; thick lips, a brutish chin, a scar along the left jawline. It was the right man, though the Puppet did not even know his name.

Turning from the unconscious stranger, he slipped the pack off his back and set it down on an easy chair on the other side of the room. His fingers moved nimbly as he unstrapped its flap and peered inside, removed a pistol and a clip of ammunition. He took out a pair of gray gloves, slipped them on, then loaded the weapon. It was a very authentic weapon, one that fitted the decade of the 1970's; one that could even be traced to its original place of purchase, though the records of its owner were lost. When he was done, he would wipe all surfaces clean of prints, even though his own prints were not

on file anywhere in the world and never would be. If the surfaces were smeared, the police would assume a known criminal had been responsible, a man hiding his traces carefully. Another false trail, of course, just like the gun. He flicked off the safety and turned. He was only halfway around when the slam of the other man's pistol boomed through the room and the hot sting of the bullet bit into his thigh.

The slug did not hit bone, though it tore a chunk of flesh out of his leg big enough to fill the palm of his hand. He was spun back against the easy chair, fell over the arm and struck the floor hard with the side of his head. He felt the pain of the wound pounding up through his entire body. It shook his frame as if he had been grasped in two gigantic hands which were intent upon rending him into little bits and pieces. With one hand, he reached down and felt the wound. His hand came away slick with heavy, rich blood. For a moment, he felt as if he would pass out. There were dancing, whirling lights in his head. As each one burst, a pitch spot replaced it. In a moment, there would be total darkness-and then, surely, death.

He heard feet on the floor, moving quickly toward the chair. He already had the picture. At the moment, the chair hid him from the stranger, but it would be a useless barrier in seconds. The man would come around it, level his gun at the Puppet's head, and calmly fill his skull with lead. That might actually be nice, part of the Puppet's mind decided. Nice sharp bullets in the brain would snuff out all the agony of the leg wound. Two slugs lodged in the frontal lobe, fragments radiating in all directions, would put an end to the pounding ache, bring him soft relaxing darkness.

With an effort, he roused himself, expelled the longing for rest. He had not been sent here to fail. Too much depended upon his fulfilling the obligations set upon him. He was lying flat on his back, the wind knocked out of him, a fist-sized chunk torn from his leg. His situation was not pretty. The only thing he had going for him was his gloved right hand which still clutched the loaded pistol. He tried bringing it around, realizing for the first time how heavy it was. Perhaps, with a heavy-duty winch, he could lift it. Or if he had seven or eight strong arms to lend a hand. But he only had two hands, his own. He brought his left hand over, clamped the pistol in both palms. Yes, that made it easier. Now it was only about as bad as ripping an oak tree loose of its root system and turning it around for replanting.

He had the gun almost in position when the stranger appeared over the arm of the chair. It wasn't exactly where he wanted it, but he pulled the trigger anyway. It took a little over two thousand years to accomplish that, and he watched the stars dying inside his head while he waited. Then there was a flash of light, a booming, and a long scream that ended in a gurgle.

Abruptly, the gun's weight doubled, tripled, and he could no longer hold it. It fell out of his hands and landed on the carpet next to his head. He gritted

his teeth and waited for the stranger to take his turn in the shooting match. While he was waiting, he passed out.

He was in a dark forest, running toward a patch of gray light. Behind, a pack of wild dogs, slavering and keening, were gaining on him. One of the dogs had already attached itself to his leg and was slowly devouring him. Then, a dozen yards from the gray light, he tripped and fell. The moaning pack drew closer, howling with sudden excitement.

The Puppet woke and batted at the dog, but only slapped his hand on a bloody, pulsing wound in his own leg. For a time, he could not think where he was. Then the programming took over, and he did not even care where he was, did not care about anything but the next step of the plan. He had not been killed. The room was quiet He could remember an ugly scream just as he passed out, one which was not his own. He did not scream. Was the stranger dead, as intended?

The thing to do was get up and find out. The only trouble was that his left leg had grown roots into the floorboards. He grabbed an arm of the easy chair, braced his other hand on the floor, simultaneously pulled and pushed himself toward a standing position. But the leg held tight to the carpet. For a brief instant, he considered the expediency of taking the disintegrator coin out of his pock and slicing the limb off. It would save a lot of trouble. As if in response, the leg gave a little and started to rise. He got his good foot under himself and, shakily, pushed erect, holding onto the chair until the knuckles of that hand were a bloodless white.

It took only a moment to discover he had completed the next stage of the plan, perhaps a bit more messily than anticipated. The stranger lay in the center of the floor, one half of his face set at all the wrong angles from the other half. There was a bullet hole under his jaw.

The Puppet let go of the chair. The room tilted, threatened to turn upside-down. He got hold of it and throttled it into passivity, then staggered to the corpse. It was surely a corpse, considering the wound, but he had to make certain. He placed a hand against its chest, could feel no heartbeat. The back of his hands against the nostrils could not detect even the slightest trace of respiration. He turned away and wobbled back to the easy chair, laid the pistol half under it, where it could easily be seen, closed the rucksack and strapped that on his back. Haltingly, he wiped all the shiny surfaces in that half of the room, setting the false trail. Then, hands still gloved, he closed the door to the bedroom and tottered down the hall to the steps. He sat down heavily on the first riser and looked at his leg wound.

The sight of it did nothing for his confidence. The hole was dark with clotted blood. The ragged flesh around the edges had a curled and blackened look that made him think of charred paper. He probed the hole with his fingers, found the blunt end of the bullet. When he touched it, pain shot up his

leg, making him double over and bite his lips. He let go of the wound, took a medkit out of his rucksack, laid that out on the steps. He opened it, withdrew the small mechanical surgeon-hound, pressed the sucking mouth of it against the wound, and activated it.

The tiny robot whirred, launched forward into the bloody flesh, found the bullet, began working at it with microminiature blades, then sucked on it, grasped it, and slid backwards out of the wound, the job finished.

There was a rush of blood.

Pain fountained up, drowning him.

This time when he woke, he felt much better. The bleeding had stopped, and the healing had already begun. He knew, somehow, that the wound was not as dangerous to him as it would have been to the stranger he had killed. In three days, his leg would be knit. There would be no trace of the wound, no limp. For the moment there was still pain, though it was bearable and growing smaller all the time.

The Puppet packed up the medkit and slipped it into his pack. Cautiously, he grabbed the railing and pulled himself up. Hopping on his good leg, he went downstairs. By the time he reached the back porch, he was able to drag the wounded leg, using it for minimum support while his good leg did most of the work. He lurched down the slope, into the orchard, came out of the far end of the trees to a high bank that looked down on a small, winding creek. Walking along the bank, he found the place where rainwater had cut a path into the steep shelf. He worked his way halfway down the thirty-foot drop, then started across the face of the embankment, grasping at roots and stones until he came to the mouth of the cave. Using his arms to gain leverage, he lifted his right leg in, dragged the left over the lip. For a time, he laid in the mouth of the cave, pulling huge lungfuls of air deep into his chest, spitting it out in shuddering exhalations.

When he felt he could move again, he crawled further into the cave until he came to the luggage that was supposed to be waiting for him. He did not know how this had been arranged or for what purpose, but he accepted it without question. There were three trunks of equal size, equal coloring, all plain and unadorned. He leaned against one of these and stared out of the cave at the small patch of foggy sky that was visible. Now, soon, he would fall asleep. He could not have remained awake had he wanted to. For two weeks, he would rest in a comatose state. His metabolism would drop to such a point that almost no air, water, or caloric intake would be necessary. He would waken five pounds lighter, thirsty, but ready for the next stage of the operation.

At the moment, though, he could not remember what that stage was. Or who *he* was. All he could remember was a corpse lying on a bedroom floor, its face all confused, a little tunnel drilled through its jaw.

Suddenly, he knew he was going to be sick. He crawled back to the mouth of the cave and hung his head over the lip. When he was done, he dragged himself back to the luggage and tried to find the answers to some questions which had just begun to plague him.

Instead, he fell asleep.

CHAPTER 2

Two weeks later, he rose out of deepest blackness through blending shades of purple and blue. As he ascended like a diver from the ocean bottom, he kept searching for something that had been lost, though the loss was indefinable, illusive. As the blue became nearly white, he remembered that there should be a Fourth of July rocket sparking in his leg, sending pinwheel bursts of color shooting upwards into his head. Someone had stolen the rocket, or perhaps it had burned out. He was trying to think what should be done about it when the soft whiteness in his skull turned into little, busy fingers that pried open his eyelids.

He looked up at a jumble of rocks and earth and was seized with panic that he had been prematurely interred. He came quickly to his feet, bashed his head solidly against the low ceiling, and sat down again. A cave. Then it all came back: the Victorian house, breaking in, killing It was two weeks later, and he was ready for the next step of the plan. Very good.

He examined his leg. There was a faint blue-brown discoloration where a gaping, pulsing hole should have been. Nothing more. He flexed his thigh muscles, expecting an eruption of agony. There was none. Everything checked out perfectly. Except

Except that he had killed a man he did not even know. Except that he did not know who he was. Or where he was from. Or what he might do next. For a moment, he felt depressed, confused. But that same measured, computer-like efficiency that had guided him that night two weeks earlier seemed to rise and beat back anything resembling human emotions. He began to lose the depression, confusion, fear.

Then he remembered the three trunks. He turned, looked behind where they rested against the real wall of the cave. They were made of burnished blue-gray metal, not unlike aluminum in appearance. The lids were fitted with hinges of the same metal. There were no locks, no places for keyholes.

He crawled back to them and looked them over. There were no initials on them, no shipping tags. He tried the lids without success. For a moment he sat there, feeling the incomprehension creeping back, the doors of doubt opening in his mind. But that strange, iron part of him clamped down on those sensations and returned him to cool reason. He went to the rucksack, opened it, and looked for clues there. He found the coin that had disintegrated the glass, the medkit, and three separately wrapped packages: brown paper held shut with rubber bands. He laid the coin and medkit aside and opened the first of these parcels. Inside was a bundle of crackling, green fifty dollar bills.

Suddenly, the iron part of him unwrapped all three packages and began

counting. Two of the packages contained fifties, the other contained hundreds. Thirty thousand dollars in all. For a time, he sat, contemplating the money, smiling. But because there was nothing for the programmed part of him to do, the doubts and emotions began surfacing again. Had he been paid thirty thousand to kill the stranger? Was he a hired gun, an assassin? No, he could not very well be a professional killer, for he did not have the stomach for it. He could remember having been ill two weeks ago after killing the stranger. He had vomited just before going to sleep.

Sleep

Had he really slept two weeks? He remembered something, scrambled back to the mouth of the cave. The willow trees had bright, green tender leaves. When he had gone to sleep, they were merely studded with buds.

But in two weeks he should have starved, or died of thirst! And what about the leg? Did the average man heal that swiftly, without complications? Of course not. The more he allowed his mind to ramble through this disorder, the more frightening the mysteries became. And the more plentiful. He realized now that he was being used, that the programmed part of him was operating on some sort of quasi-hypnotic orders. But *who* was using him? And *why*? *And who was he*?

Victor Salsbury, a crisp, even voice said from somewhere close by in the cave. It is time for your first briefing.

Then, in an instant, there was no question of overcoming the iron program. It slapped down on him, squeezed the aware part of his mind back into the far reaches of his brain. He turned, positioned himself before the middle of the three trunks where, he somehow knew, an 810-40.04 computer was housed.

Victor Salsbury, the computer said. Remember.

And he did. He was Victor Salsbury. Twenty-eight years old. Both parents dead, killed in car crash when he was in sixth grade. Hometown: Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. He was an artist-commercial trying to make it as creative. He was moving to Oak Grove to find a place to rent and make a studio. Thousands of major and minor memories poured into his consciousness. Memories of childhood, of life in the orphanage, of his art schooling, his association with a Harrisburg agency. Now, he had an identity. Somehow, the aware part of him felt, it was not genuine. As if he had been told his past, rather than having experienced it himself.

Do not fight the programming, the computer said to the tiny part of his mind that held emotions.

But I have killed a man!

He would have died a month later anyway, the computer explained in its authoritative tones. And his death would have been much more horrible than anything you could possibly have done to him two weeks ago.

How do you know that?

But the 810-40.04 ignored the second question. On the top of the trunk, two squares of the burnished metal began to glow softly, a sweet yellow. Without understanding how he knew to do this, Victor Salsbury reached out and placed one palm flat on each of the glowing spots. Instantly, the next step of the operation was flashed into his brain and printed there for eternity. When the squares ceased to shine, he rose, went to the farthest trunk just as it popped open at a command from the computer. He took out a suit of conventional clothes, dressed, and left the cave. He had orders to follow.

CHAPTER 3

He spent most of that morning up the street from the Oak Grove Greyhound Station—a ponderous aluminum and glass and concrete structure whose architecture suggested modern gothic—waiting for the bus from Harris-burg so that, when he walked into Wilmar Realty to proceed with the plan, he could say it was by this means he had arrived. He was kept company by a drunk, a small boy with fire red hair, and three persistent pigeons who were absolutely positive he must be concealing some delightful morsel in his suit pockets. He ignored them all, answered the boy or the drunk with clipped, terse replies when silence could no longer be excused. They soon grew wary of him, his isolation, his even, hard eyes. Even the pigeons seemed to start avoiding him.

When the bus arrived, dispersed its passengers, and circled the block, heading back for Harrisburg, he got up, moving like a cat, and walked down the street toward the Wilmar Realty Agency.

He stepped through the plate glass door which shut behind, and relished the cool breath of air-conditioning. Outside, the heat had been nearly intolerable. The place was one huge room almost large enough to hold go-cart races in. It had been partitioned along the rear into five office cubicles, each without a ceiling or door so that one got the ludicrous impression of looking into the toilet stalls in a low class men's gymnasium. The greatest part of the room was an unpartitioned lounge with ashtrays and display boards of Wilmar properties. A receptionist was set before the five cubicles, servicing each. The moment he stepped in, she smiled a plastic smile. Can I help you?

I'd like to inquire about a house, he said.

Renting or buying?

It depends on what I like. But that was a lie, of course. He knew exactly which house. He had, after all, killed to obtain it.

Why don't you look around? she said. Someone will be with you in a moment. Glittering plastic teeth shone so brightly that they almost made him squint.

He scanned several display boards, found the Jacobi house on the third. He had never seen it from the front (all actions on that night two weeks ago had been initiated from the rear), but he knew it immediately. His mind kept wanting to return to Harold Jacobi, the man he had killed. He had learned the name from the hypnotic briefing with the computer. But the iron programmed part of him forced down any such foolishness.

Is that something like what you had in mind? a gentle voice next to his right shoulder asked.

He turned, smiled automatically, and said, Yes.

The trapped portion of his mind, the humane part that kept trying to assert itself, reacted much more violently. That part had been expecting a jolly, hard-sell jackass in loud clothes and squeaking shoes and was presented instead with this stunning, lithe, five-foot-five-inch blonde with a dark tan and a long fall of coarse, bright hair. She made the lovely receptionist look like the boy on the corner. Her face was the sort of creamy perfection that made Hollywood starlets scream and break mirrors in frustration. She had stolen her eyes from a large cat. The figure under the face came from somewhere in mythology, though it was not quite obvious whether it was Diana, Venus, or Helen.

She smiled, though it was a slightly unsure smile. Plainly, she expected a greater reaction from men than the iron Victor Salsbury was giving her. Were you renting or buying? she asked, flashing even, white teeth.

That depends on the property, Miss-

Oh, sorry. Lynda Harvey. Just Lynda, please. But even as she said it, she wondered whether he would unbend enough to call her by her first name. He gave her the chills, so formal, cold, like a hollow man. She had watched the pulse in his throat when he had turned to look at her-a standard way of judging a man's reaction to her-and had seen no change. That was highly unusual!

Victor Salsbury, he replied.

Very well, if he was going to be so businesslike The Jacobi estate calls for a sale, no renting provision. Even the factual statements sounded mellow, full, sensuous coming from her honeyed lips. He did not seem to notice. Strange, he did not look queer.

What's the asking price?

Forty-two thousand.

He did not wince at the price tag as she had expected. Instead, he nodded sharply and said: Fine. Let's take a look at it. He had considered taking it without being given a tour. But considering the odd circumstances around Harold Jacobi's death, he thought that might be unwise. The iron Victor was irritated with the facade he had to erect, but knew it was necessary to arouse as few suspicions as possible.

She arranged for one of the other salesmen to take a call she was expecting, left a memo with the receptionist, grabbed a big straw purse from the desk in her cubbyhole office, and came briskly across the floor to where he waited by the front door. Your car or mine? she asked.

I came by bus.

Mine's right behind the place. Come on. She said it in the tone of a woman used to leading men around a bit. Not domineering, but efficient and brisk.

Her machine was a copper colored Porsche with a white canvas top. Together, they put the top down. Two blocks from the Wilmar Realty Agency, he relaxed, uncramping his long legs as best he could. She was a good driver; she accelerated smoothly, cornered sharply on the edge between too slow and too fast. Her maneuvers were swift and clean, and she did not let other drivers bother her. Soon, they were off on a pleasant country lane fringed on both sides by trees so that, for a great deal of the drive, they were swathed in cooling shadows. He did not notice the scenery. He stared ahead, only anxious to get the play-acting done.

It's a lovely old place, she said.

Yes. So the picture would indicate.

She looked over at him, then back to the road. He was the first man in a long time who had unsettled her. There was something creepy about him, yet something attractive she could not define.

You haven't asked the standard question, she said.

What's that?

What a woman is doing as a real estate agent.

I suppose a woman could do as well as a man, iron Victor said, still staring ahead.

She had been expecting a lead-in to conversation. With this cool, almost unconscious rebuttal, she bit her lip, cursed him silently, and drove on.

Several minutes later, she pulled the Porsche off the lane, brought it rapidly up a long, curved drive toward the front of the Jacobi house. She stopped before the front steps that led to a glassed-in front porch.

Do you know the history of the house? she asked. To some people, it might make a difference about buying or not buying. Despite the fact that he angered her, she could not be less than honest with him.

The sunlight broke through the windscreen and caught her yellow hair, sparkled in it, made her green eyes grow larger. For a moment, he was unsettled. The hidden, confused part of him swam upward, shoved out the iron Victor. He said, I heard someone was killed here. Could you tell me about it?

They left the car, walked into the porch, to the front door. It wasn't a big surprise to the town, she said as she unlocked the door and pushed it inward.

A murder wasn't surprising?

They moved into the entrance foyer, a charming nook. The soft Victor, struggling for control of the body he shared with his iron counterpart, suddenly felt a deep self-loathing as he tried to imagine the kind of man with this sort of taste, the kind of man he had murdered. The carpet was green, dark and rich like oak leaves. The walls were buff, with a dark wood closet on one side and an original Spanish oil on the other.

This murder wasn't surprising. Harold Jacobi lived here in Oak Grove, but

made his living off some crooked little sidelines in Harrisburg.

Oh? Iron Victor was getting the upper hand again.

Yes, Harrisburg is big enough for small time crooks. Three hundred thousand with suburbs is big enough to breed high priced call girls, numbers, some discreet big money card games. Nothing to get the Federal Government on dear Harold's tail, but sufficient to make enemies among the competition.

They walked into the living room, which was every bit as tasteful as the foyer. Again, guilt unbalanced his mind enough to allow soft Victor a moment in control. He must have been a sensitive man, though.

Harold Jacobi was about as sensitive as a cow flop!

With his programmed self momentarily repressed, he was able to laugh. I take it he made a pass at you.

No. Not overtly. He was my uncle, you see. It's embarrassing to have such an uncle. He was always trying to do things for me. All the passes were covert. Just Dear Uncle Harold wanting to help his niece. Except that his hand was always straying to my knee. Things like that.

Anyway, he left this house to me, so I should show some respect. If he just hadn't been such a bore of a man!

But the decorations are so well done.

She grinned as if at a private joke. He had the Fabulous Bureau do it.

Fabulous Bureau?

You should have heard of them. They're from Harrisburg. A new interior decorating firm. Two nice young boys. Very dear boys, if you know what I mean. They came out here in a mauve Cadillac and spent a month of eight-hour days, flitting about like birds. They ate most of their lunches in the restaurant where I eat. That's how I came to know them, though it wasn't my feminine charm that won them. Just a mutual interest in art. Despite what you might think of their sort, you'll have to admit the Fabulous Bureau fellows did a fabulous job, eh?

The unprogrammed Victor could not resist telling her, as the computer had informed him, that he was an artist. She was impressed, as he had hoped. He was afraid she would ask him to draw something on the spot, the cliché request made of all artists. Somehow, he felt that if he tried to draw a person, it would look like a tree. A tree would look vaguely like a person; a house like a barn, a barn like an automobile, and automobile like God-knew-what.

Then, as his guilt lessened over the murder of Harold Jacobi, he felt the steely, cool alter-ego surging upward. Everything shimmered. He moved, again, like a robot.

They toured the house with little conversation, though she tried to initiate some several times and seemed puzzled that, when he was so close to coming out of his shell, he had suddenly drawn back into it. The drive back to town, to arrange financing terms, was stilted and uncomfortable as far as Lynda was

concerned. Iron Victor Salsbury only stared straight ahead.

The vice-president of the major local bank was hesitant about giving a mortgage to an artist without a full-time job. He softened considerably when Salsbury produced thirty thousand in cash, proceeded to pay twenty thousand on the house, and deposited five thousand in savings and four thousand in checking. His gold-plated, silver-dollar heart thumped almost audibly at the sight of so much money, and he concluded their conference with a lecture on the dangers of carrying so much money around on one's person.

At his request, Lynda helped him buy a car, a slightly used MGB-GT, bright yellow with a black top. The programmed Victor Salsbury did not care what sort of vehicle he had; the other part of him liked the honeybee bug. He wrote out a check for the full amount, waited while the suspicious salesman checked it with the bank, came back all smiles and closed out the deal.

After that, Lynda returned to her agency, and he went to buy groceries. A complete, standard list of purchases was programmed into his mind, and he chose the articles like an automaton, moving mechanically up and down the aisles. It was a quarter until six in the evening when he reached the Jacobi house, now the Salsbury residence. He put the groceries away, made a supper of eggs, ham and toast. He opened a cold beer automatically, as if this was the thing to do, part of the front he had to put up. The average man would sit down on his porch with a beer of a spring evening. To preserve the illusion of naturalness, so did he. The view from the stoop was a breath-taking panorama of green Pennsylvanian hills. Deep inside his mind, the soft Victor appreciated that scene and said, softly to himself, Well, let's see what happens next.

CHAPTER 4

What happened next was that he acquired the quickest drunk in the history of beer drinking. As he watched the sun disappear and leave bloody streaks behind it in the sky, his eyes began to feel funny, as if they were coated with fuzz. His head was doing an apache dance with the rest of his body for a partner. Warily, he rose, staggered inside, up the steps, which were ridiculously difficult to negotiate. He started for the master bedroom, but the soft Victor had visions of a head whose two halves were out of kilter, and he meandered back towards the hall to a guest room. The bed had a cover, but no sheets. He found sheets in a linen closet, brought them back, but could not manage to get them on the mattress. The damn thing kept changing size and jumping around. Finally he gave it up and crawled under the spread. He remembered that he had his clothes on, then decided that would make up for having no sheets. In the back of his mind, he made a note to try to discover the reason for his high susceptibility to alcohol. Then he passed out.

He had a nice dream that got bad. Very bad.

He was standing in a field of clover. The sun was streaming through trees at the side of the field and throwing shadows and strips of brilliance across him. It was late afternoon, and already the cooler air of evening had drifted in. A darkly tanned blonde with thick, long hair was walking across the field toward him. Her eyes were clover green and transparent so that he seemed to be looking through them, miles and miles and miles into some other worldly landscape. She held out her arms to him. As he took her into his embrace, she grew suddenly stiff and began talking in an even voice, cool, dispassionate, the voice of iron Victor.

He woke, smacking his lips and wondering what had died inside his mouth. He tried to spit the little animal out, found it was his tongue, decided to save it. His ears were ringing. He yawned, trying to pop them. But the ringing continued. The phone would not be hooked up until tomorrow, and he had set no alarm. Yet the longer he listened the more certain he was that the whining sound was real, not imagined. He pushed to the side of the bed and looked down at his feet, a little surprised that he had not even taken off his shoes, but not too concerned about it.

He stood up and immediately wished he hadn't. He was apparently some creature God had designed for horizontal existence. As soon as he was vertical, his eyes bugged out a foot, his head swelled to four times its normal size, and his stomach turned inside out and died. He decided that the worst that could happen had already happened. With that in mind he went through the door into the hallway, leaned against the wall and listened to the noise.

It was coming from the lower part of the house. He went down the steps, wondering why, if they were going to put an escalator in, they didn't make it a good one. The steps went back and forth as well as up and down, and it took one a long time to reach the living room floor. When he got there, he found the noise was coming from a lower point yet. He found the cellar door, opened it. The ringing sound washed over him, twice as loud now, the sound of heavy machinery masked by the electronic hum. He burped, squinted into the gloom, flicked on the lights, and carefully descended the cellar stairs.

Standing in the center of the cellar, the noise around him akin to that in a lathe shop, he tried to locate the exact source of the sound. At last, he zeroed in on a section of wall to his right. When he placed his hands on it, he could feel a far-away vibration. He thought he detected a change in the coloration of the wall here, but could not be certain. On impulse, he flicked off the light.

Immediately, a glowing blue circle, six feet in diameter, appeared on the wall.

He realized, then, that soft Victor had been in control of this body ever since he had awakened. Now, the iron part of him surged up, radiating fear, and struggled for the reins. Soft Victor shrank into the recesses of his mind.

He looked at the circle, evenly calculating now, still fearful. The edges of the mark were as perfectly defined as if it had been the terminus of a high intensity flashlight beam. But nothing of that sort was being played on the wall from anywhere in the room. If anything, the light was coming from the other side.

Then, while he watched it, the circle dimmed, faded, and was gone. So was the ringing. He waited another fifteen minutes, wondering what he was to do. The program seemed to be failing him. Though, whatever was happening, he was sure to be involved in it soon. After all, he had not acquired this particular house merely to live in. He had only to wait, and he would discover what was going to happen.

As he climbed the stairs again, the iron Victor slipped out of dominance and released control to its alter-ego. Wearier than ever, he returned to bed, fell quickly into sleep after undressing this time. Unfortunately, he had the same dream. The one that began nicely and ended badly. At least it was about Lynda.

The next morning was no fun. The thing that had died in his mouth the previous night had begun to rot. And even though it was his tongue, he was sore put to retain it rather than throw it away. While he was sleeping, someone had laid his head open with a mallet, and he needed most of the morning to push his brains back inside.

By noon, as the iron portion of him slightly asserted itself-though not with its previous intensity-he was feeling well enough to go back to the cave to retrieve the trunks. They were all there, three neat strong, closed pieces

without locks or keyholes. Well, Salsbury said to the computer, everything went fairly well.

There was no answer.

He detailed his transactions with the house, car, and groceries. The 810-40.04 just stood there, looking like nothing more than a common inanimate clothes trunk.

What about the noise in the cellar? Salsbury asked. And the light circle on the wall?

But there was no reply. He kicked it solidly, then wished he hadn't. The blow sent shock waves up his leg, deep throbbings of pain, while the trunk did not even sport a small dent. He searched through the quiet, iron part of his mind for clues, but that programmed section seemed to be growing more hazy, less well defined with every passing moment, and he learned nothing useful. He shrugged, decided he might as well move things into the house and wait for the pint-sized mechanical brain to get over its sulking.

He grabbed the first trunk, tested it for weight. Suddenly, it was floating several inches off the floor, doing some absurd Indian fakir's trick. A handle slid out of the end, appearing magically from the smooth metal. He grabbed that, tugged hard. A little too hard. The trunk moved as if it weighed all of three ounces. It knocked him down, sailed over him, and came to rest at the mouth of the cave, tilted as if it would slide down the embankment and into the creek, but still floating.

He got up, pushed it aside gently this time, and moved out the opening onto the narrow ledge, grasping roots and rocks with one hand, towing the trunk with the other. Five minutes later, it was in the house, upstairs in the room he had slept in. He pressed it to the floor, where it remained when he let go. Smart piece of luggage. A suitcase with a built-in porter beats the hell out of tipping.

He brought the second in without problems, went back for the 810-40.04. I'll leave you here, I guess, he said.

Nothing.

I mean, if you won't talk-

Nothing.

He wished he could tap the programmed part, wished he would start moving again with the swiftness and purpose of yesterday. At least, then, he would find out what was going to happen. Vacillating like this, confused, he felt he could easily go out of his mind. But the computer knew that he had a high curiosity index and would not leave it in the cave for fear of missing something. The computer knew everything there was to know about him. Everything

Damn you! Salsbury snapped at the computer, tugging on its proffered handle. It floated up to meet him. He walked toward the opening, dragging it

behind. When he was nearly to the entrance, he heard the scrabbling noise outside, the sound of stones falling down the embankment. Iron Victor, though dying, flushed terror through Salsbury's body.

He pushed the trunk behind, to the floor, to get it out of his way, then went on all fours against the cave wall. Quite chillingly, he wondered if his usefulness to the plan were up; perhaps another mystery figure in black scuba suit would kill him. Was that why the midget computer was no longer talking? Was he to become another Harold Jacobi?

Nice thought.

And he didn't have a weapon with him.

The only thing good about the situation was that he had had the last traces of hangover frightened out of him. He was clear-headed enough to know not to move. He tried to release control of his body and let iron Victor command. But iron Victor was having none of that. He lay still and waited.

For a while, all was silent. Then stones rattled down the embankment again, louder than before. Then a third time.

Some of his tension began to ebb. Surely, if it was a black-garbed killer out there, he would not be so clumsy. It seemed more likely, on reflection, that it was nothing more than a child playing, a child who did not even know he was in the cave. In that case, it would be better to come into the open immediately rather than wait to be discovered and give the impression he had been hiding here. Cautiously, he moved to the opening, trying to think what to say.

But even that problem evaporated when he looked outside. The intruder was not a playful child nor a black-hearted murderous villain. He was just an overgrown, black and tan mutt. The silly beast looked forlornly at Salsbury, his tongue lolling. He had every right to that expression, for he had worked his way along the narrow ledge to the cave mouth, evidently following Salsbury's trail. Now he had lost his nerve. He could not come farther, for the ledge disappeared for a space of three feet before continuing. Salsbury could step across it, but the dog would have to jump. This beast was a little too smart or cowardly to risk that. Yet he couldn't go back, for there was no room for him to turn around.

When Salsbury made a friendly advance, he found the dog in no mood for disagreement. He picked him up, slung him under his arm, and used his free hand to reach the top of the embankment where he deposited the mutt to the accompaniment of a great deal of whuffing, puffing, whining, and grateful licking. He had gained a friend. He patted the slobbering animal on the head and returned for the computer.

When he came topside again, the dog was waiting for him, followed him to the house. After Salsbury put the computer upstairs with the other trunks, he went outside and found the dog waiting in front of the storm door, his head

cocked curiously to one side. It dawned on him then that he might have use for the animal. It could warn him if another black figure came out of the orchard one night.

He spent the rest of the day learning about Intrepid (as he fittingly named the mutt), and satiating his appetite. The mutt had a huge hunger. He was more than a little affectionate and had a habit of whinnying like a horse when he was excited, which sound he would augment with rolling, brown eyes. Salsbury also discovered the dog was housebroken, which was a decided blessing.

Now and then, Intrepid would stop his games and look strangely at his new master, as if unable to find a scent for him. He would not growl or become anxious, merely look confused. Salsbury wondered if the dog sensed the hollowness of his master as his master sensed it in his own psyche. He was not really a man, only a prop created by the 810-40.04.

That night, when he went to bed, Intrepid slept on a furry blue rug at the foot of the bed, his tail curled dangerously close to his nose. Despite the new comradeship, despite the submergence of the iron Victor Salsbury, he dreamed of Lynda again.

They were walking along a river, holding hands, making silent love talk with gestures and smiles and covert looks that were not half so covert as they pretended. She turned to him, lips parted and tongue flicking her teeth. He leaned to kiss her. Before their lips could meet, some idiot dressed all in black ran up and shot her in the head.

He had the dream over and over as if it were on a film loop. He was grateful when Intrepid woke him.

It was the first time he had heard the mutt bark. Intrepid spat the short, harsh sounds out of his throat as if he were anxious to get rid of something distasteful. When Salsbury called his name-which he was already learning-he stopped barking and looked shamefaced. He did not bark again, but surely did manage a lot of whuffing and whinnying. By that time, Salsbury realized what was upsetting the dog.

There was a throbbing of heavy, singing machinery ringing upwards from the cellar.

CHAPTER 5

Wednesday morning, iron Victor was merely a whisper deep in his mind, a haunting presence that almost seemed not to exist. Yet he was not normal. Despite the fact that he was not moving according to a program, he felt hollow, half-completed. He tried horsing around with Intrepid for a while, but was becoming bored with that, bored with waiting for something to happen, something to put meaning to the killing of Harold Jacobi, the computer in the trunk, and the mysterious distant hum of machinery in his cellar every night. The day could have been a total bust had not Lynda Harvey pulled into the drive in her copper Porsche.

He went down to greet her, called to her. She looked surprised at his conviviality, but smiled. I told you Harold Jacobi was my uncle, she said. And I just about left everything in the house: silverware, dishes, sheets and towels. But there are some things in the attic, personal things, I suppose I should get out of here now. She cocked her head, her green eyes flat with reflected sun. Okay?

Sure, he said, ushering her into the house, realizing that his actions were perhaps exaggerated compared with his formal iron Victor responses of two days earlier.

He offered to leave as she opened the first of the two cardboard cartons in the attic to sort out what she would leave to be discarded and what she would retain, but she told him that was not necessary. She would enjoy his company. That sounded stranger to her than it did to him, because she had been so irritated with him on Monday. Irritated, yes-but also intrigued. There was no sense hiding that from herself. Mr. Victor Salsbury was certainly an interesting man, big and handsome, supposedly a creative artist, with a personality that suggested a past of much variety and perhaps illicitness. In a way, she felt like a foolish schoolgirl for nurturing fantasies; but then she had to admit he helped them grow with his strange manner.

As they talked now, sitting on the bare attic floor, she realized he had changed since she had seen him. Those short bursts of warmth that had broken his icy facade on Monday were now the dominant trait of his personality. Yet he was still not like other, men. She could touch him with her mind, delve into him, but only a short way. It seemed as if he was a man made of water, and that his outward appearance was merely the shimmering reflection of someone else.

When she could no longer pretend to be interested in the junk in the cartons, she was reluctant to bring up the other matter that had brought her here. This morning, when the banker, Hallowell, had told her what he had

discovered, she had jumped at the chance to break the news to Salsbury. She had wanted to see the blood drain out of his face, had wanted to see him on the spot and stammering. Now, talking with him, her feminine interest had been stirred; now that he had opened himself to her on this new friendly basis, to break this news was almost too cruel. But she had no choice. She had spent a great deal of time talking Hallowell into letting her ask Salsbury about the news clipping. She had to go through with it now or look like an idiot in the banker's eyes. Mr. Hallowell asked me to give you this and ask you what it's all about, she said, presenting him with the clipping as they descended from the attic into the living room.

Victor looked at the headline and felt alarms banging in his head.

BODY IDENTIFIED AS THAT OF LOCAL ARTIST

He licked his lips, knowing what was coming next.

The Harrisburg City Police today conclusively identified a body discovered by River Rescue Monday evening along the Front Street fishing shelf. Analysis of garments and dental records show the deceased to be Victor L. Salsbury, a local commercial artist employed by...

There's some mistake, he said, though he did not believe there had been the slightest mistake at all. I'm Victor L. Salsbury.

They say it was suicide, Lynda said. He was feeling dejected for weeks because of his inability to sell his creative work.

But I broke that barrier, Salsbury said lamely. I sold my creative work.

Mr. Hallowell is very upset. It appears, to him, that he just made a twenty-two thousand dollar loan to a man who is not who he claims to be.

Nonsense, he said. There's been a mistake here. I'll go into the city tomorrow and straighten it out. You can tell him that.

She looked at him for a long moment. You seemed to take that with less shock than I thought you would. I mean, when you read about yourself being dead, it should shake you up considerably. Victor are you really who you say you are?

Of course, he said, and laughed to prove it. Though he saw the laugh did not sound right to her. I'm Victor Salsbury. Of course I am.

He didn't sleep well that night. He spent the night thinking about a body dredged out of a river and tagged with his name. Was he really Victor Salsbury, or was Victor Salsbury a decaying corpse? Did the real Victor Salsbury (if that was, in fact, who the dead man was) really kill himself, or did another black-suited man come in the night and do the job for him?

None of these were sleep-inducing thoughts.

At one-thirty in the morning, the vibrations echoed up from the cellar again. He slipped out of bed, pulled on a pair of jeans he had purchased in town (since the computer had only furnished him with a single change of clothes). He stepped into his loafers, went into the hall, and down the stairs to the darkened living room. Intrepid followed, making god awful noises, half falling down the steps, then prancing excitedly to the cellar door.

In the cellar, with the lights out, they stood side-by-side, man and dog, equally scared. The circle was a lighter shade of blue, but that was not what frightened them. Beyond the circle, dim and indistinct, were gray, moving shadows. There were no features to be seen, nothing he could readily identify. There seemed to be a conglomeration of wires, struts, and tubes upon which one of the moving forms was perched. The other shadow stood beside this, legs quite skinny, feet abnormally broad, perhaps a foot wide. That and the shape of its head (narrow, half again as large as a human skull, with a high forehead) told Salsbury that the things beyond the blue glow were not men.

Intrepid sensed it too. He bounced around, snarling, the first ugly mood Salsbury had seen him in. He threw himself against the blue spot, bounced off the wall a few times. When he was sure there was no way to reach the gray forms, he contented himself with crouching against Victor's leg, teeth bared and eyes gleaming, spitting insults at the intruders.

Abruptly, the blue glow grew lighter, the shadows more distinct. There was a click, a sharp snapping sound like a dry twig breaking underfoot. The ringing ceased and was replaced by ghostly silence. The blue light disappeared altogether, leaving the circle which gave as clear a view as any window.

But the window was not looking out on Earth. Not on any Earth Victor had ever known.

The machine on the other side-apparently the one that had been establishing contact with this world, the one projecting the blue light-was an intricate jumble of condensers, sensors, wires, transistors. There was a chair atop it where the alien sat. The second demon stood beside the machine, looking through the window.

They were both looking directly at Salsbury.

Their heads were hairless, and, indeed, hinted at a rough gray cross-hatching of scales. The bony ridge of their foreheads shelved off as if on sudden impulse, leaving their eyes sunk two inches back in their heads. Their eyes fire leaping, crimson flushing, rouge, cinnabar, scarlet

Victor pulled his gaze from those burning eyes, quickly examined the rest of the face. For a nose, there were five vertical slits arranged evenly above a sunken, pulsing hole that seemed to serve as a mouth. All of this was on a withered, leathery body whose muscles were drawn long and tight and lacquered over with a hundred coatings of varnish to make them look brittle.

Unconsciously, Victor backed against an old workbench. He wished iron Victor would surge up and take command. But iron Victor was gone. There was no trace at all of his alter ego. The programming had-perhaps temporarily-come to an end. He was on his own.

Intrepid cringed against his legs, trying to find some way of crawling up his pantlegs where he could not see the demons and would not be tempted to look.

Salsbury looked to the steps, realized belatedly that he would have to go right by the window where the demons waited. Just as he felt his spirits scrape the bottom of his splintered soul barrel, the shadow monster standing beside the machine, the one in clear view, raised a long, bony arm with six three-jointed fingers on the end and made as if to reach out and grasp him.

His horror did not motivate him to flight, but paralyzed him completely. His vital organs had turned to cast iron. Someone had even pinned open his eyelids so that he could not blink out the alien vision.

Then the lighted portal fluttered brighter, dimmer, and was suddenly gone as if some delicate electronic link between alien world and basement wall had been severed. He stared stupidly at the blank tile which had been a window into hell only moments ago. His feet grew lighter. His organs turned back into flesh. Someone removed the pins from his eyelids. Still, he was emotionally incapable of acting. He was gasping frantically for breath.

Intrepid recovered faster, leaped and slammed against the wall. He took a second running lunge, hit with his feet in a flying leap, fell away and looked at Victor with glistening eyes that demanded his master do something about the things in the walls.

Victor recovered his wits under that gaze. He shrugged his shoulders at the dog, then crossed to the steps, went up them two at a time. There was a tremendous thumping and scraping as Intrepid tried desperately to keep up with his master. Salsbury went to the second floor bedroom where he had stowed the three trunks. He opened the door a bit hard, sent it banging back against the wall where it shivered and quaked as if it were alive. He went to the computer trunk, gave it a solid kick. The stinging pain leaped up his leg, but he did not much care. He kicked it again. Intrepid had joined him by this time and he set to snuffling and whuffing, dancing around the computer trunk with a look of expectancy.

Let's have a briefing, Victor said to the 810-40.04.

It wasn't in the mood for conversation.

Come on, damnit!

Nothing.

He remembered the tool bench in the cellar and went back down. Intrepid followed to the head of the stairs and watched him descend, but did not follow. In the cellar, Victor found the tools racked on a pegboard wall. He

chose a medium weight crowbar and took it back to the bedroom, moving like a caveman with his favorite stone axe.

He squared off before the computer trunk and brandished the weapon. A briefing now, or I pry you up good! There was a great deal of adrenalin pumping through his system, and all his nerves seemed to grate against each other, alive, aware and excited. There was something going on that he did not understand, something involving shrunken, leathery lizardmen with sucking eel mouths. It was definitely going to get dangerous, for those were dangerous looking customers, those scaly freaks. If he was expected to play a role in it, then he damn well better be informed.

But the 810-40.04 was unresponsive.

He stepped forward, swung the bar, smashed it against the top of the trunk. It bounced off, ringing his arm like a bell. His bones screamed at him to stop acting like an idiot, to have more respect for the fragile parts of him. He dropped the bar and massaged his arm until it started to feel like flesh again. Carefully examining the top of the trunk, he could not find the smallest dent or scratch where the bar might have struck. Thus ended round one.

I'm getting mad, he told the computer. And he truly was. He realized, not without a start, that this was the most heated emotional moment he had experienced since he had wakened in the orchard with iron Victor in command of his body. He felt more human than ever.

But the computer was inscrutable.

He picked up the crowbar again.

Intrepid snuffled and chortled like a mare in heat.

Victor knelt beside the trunk and examined the thin line where the lid met the body. Gently, he inserted the thin edge of the crowbar tip into the crack, worked it in a bit, then brought his weight down on it. For a moment, the increasing pressure seemed to have no effect whatsoever on the box. Then the bar slipped, popped out of the seam, and snapped a sharp blow alongside his head. He wobbled there on his knees, managed to keep from passing out. He nibbed his head where the bar had struck, felt an egg already beginning to rise. As soon as everything ceased spinning, he gritted his teeth and slipped the pry bar into the seam again, wedging it even farther back before rising and applying his weight. He bore down, grunting and sweating, putting every ounce of his strength into what he was doing. Just when he thought the metal must surely buckle, the frame most certainly give, just when he should have achieved success, there was a blinding flash of blue-green light, and a fist full of needles thumped him solidly across the head while a second fist grabbed a black curtain and pulled it down all around him.

CHAPTER 6

As he came up out of velvet blackness, trying to push the curtain aside, he discovered one of the lizard-things was eating his head. He could feel its raspy tongue delicately licking his face, savouring his flavor preparatory to taking the first bite.

Victor shuddered, opened his eyes expecting a demon. Instead, Intrepid whuffed happily in his face as if he had no idea how bad his doggy halitosis was and flicked his tongue over his master's face. Salsbury shook his head to clear it, felt around with his hands to see if his body was still connected to that head by a neck. Everything seemed in place, though he had a headache that was chewing up his brain. He sat up, looked around, and realized that the shock transmitted up the crowbar had knocked him six feet away from the trunk. He got to his feet, swaying slightly, and walked to the door,

You've won, he told the computer.

The computer said nothing.

Remembering something Lynda had discarded in the attic while routing through her uncle's possessions, he went up the narrow stairs, turned on the bare bulb and looked for it. He found it in the second box: a .22 pistol and ammunition. It seemed to be in good repair, well kept, perhaps a small game hunting pistol. He took it and the ammunition into the living room, dragged a big easy chair into a corner so his back was not to any windows, and loaded the weapon. Intrepid sat at his side, both curious, playful and tense.

From where Victor sat he could see the entrance to the cellar. If a skinny, sucker-mouth man-lizard so much as stuck a head out of the cellar door, he could blow it to bits with one shot well placed. The creatures did not look particularly sturdy.

But time crawled by with no major events, and his muscles began to uncramp, his nerves to loosen. In half an hour, he realized he was hungry and made himself two sandwiches. He was about to open a beer when he remembered his body's exaggerated reaction to the last one he had drunk. Beer was out. He needed to stay clear and alert tonight. Eating his sandwiches, he began to think. He had been reacting on a gut level up to this point, charging about like a wild boar with a peptic ulcer. He thought some unpleasant things, like: what if the lizard-things on the other side of the portal were the ones who had programmed him to kill Harold Jacobi? Perhaps he was their tool.

Such a thought was almost unbearable. If only the 810-40.04 would come out of its funk, he might have an answer that would make all this seem rosy, though he doubted it.

Then he had a second bad thought. Suppose, in trying to open the computer, he had cracked a casing, a power shell? Suppose he had ruined the computer? Would a briefing ever come now? Or had he stupidly, in a moment of fear and excitement, destroyed his only link with understanding?

He thought about those things until eight in the morning, showing not the faintest interest in sleep. At eight, he took his gun up to the bathroom and took a shower. He first posted Intrepid outside the door, then locked the door behind him. He tilted the white clothes hamper against the inside knob, the lid wedged to keep the knob from turning or the door from opening in the event someone or something found a way to by-pass the lock. He did not draw the shower curtain, and he kept his eyes on the door for a sign of movement, his ears attuned to pick up the first snufflings and whinnings from the dog.

At 9:15, he put his canine into the luggage shelf behind the front seat of his MGB-GT. Intrepid had just enough room to turn around in and three windows to look out of. He seemed content. Salsbury judged he would be in Harrisburg a little after ten. The first thing on the agenda was to see if the police would let him look at the body of Victor Salsbury or whoever was dead.

* * *

The desk sergeant was a dour-faced, yellow-toothed creature who sat behind a scarred and littered desk, chewing a stub of a cigar that was not lit and shuffling papers back and forth to make himself look busy. He ran a heavy, thick-fingered hand through his thinning hair and reluctantly took the delicious cigar morsel from his mouth before he spoke. Yeah?

My name's Victor Salsbury, Salsbury said.

So? He blinked several times, put the cigar back in his mouth.

I'm the one you people think is dead.

What's that supposed to mean? He was immediately defensive. Salsbury realized he had made two mistakes, the first of which was not beginning the conversation logically. A mind like that of Sergeant Brower (that was the name on the plaque on his desk) required tangible, simple statements to work with; phrases that could be turned over in his mind again and again for examination. Secondly, he had not been servile enough with the good sergeant-especially when using the phrase you people.

He changed his tact. I read in yesterday's *Evening News*, that the body taken from the river was identified as Victor Salsbury. But, you see, *I* am Victor Salsbury.

Wait a minute, Brower said, paging an officer named Clinton from his desk intercom. Salsbury stood there, fiddling with his hands and trying not to look guilty. Iron Victor would have handled this well, without a nervous

shiver of the smallest magnitude. But the unprogrammed Victor that was now in charge of his body could only think about having killed Harold Jacobi little more than two weeks ago and how those uniformed men would love to learn the facts on that one.

Detective Clinton approached the desk from the right, then stopped ten feet away from Salsbury as if he had been hit on the head with an eight-pound sledge. Recovering several long seconds later, he finished the walk to the desk. He was a tall, thin man with the features of a predatory bird. His eyes shifted from Brower to Salsbury; he paled again.

This fellow's here about that unidentified stiff case you were on, Brower said. Little things like mistaken identities for corpses or men coming back from the dead did not interest him. They were not logical thoughts; there was no use pursuing them. He turned back to his papers and began snuffling them assiduously.

I'm Detective Clinton, the hawk man said.

Victor Salsbury, Victor said, accepting the bony hand.

The detective's color drained completely, and he ceased trying to maintain his cool. This way, please. He led Salsbury back to his office, waited for him to enter, followed, and closed the door behind them. He directed Salsbury to a chair, sat in his own comfortable swivel model behind his desk. What can I do for you? he asked.

Victor could think of a dozen snappy rejoinders, but realized it was not the time or place for humor. I read the paper last night saw that piece about the body identified as me.

He was quiet a moment, then smiled. I'm sure there is a mistake, Mr. Salsbury. The names may be the same, but the body was identified correctly.

There are not likely to be two Victor L. Salsburys in a city this size-both artists. Besides, you recognized me out there.

There is a resemblance, he said. We found some pictures at the Salsbury residence. You match pretty well.

Did the corpse?

Somewhat. It was, you have to realize decomposed.

Why did you link the corpse to the name Salsbury?

Your landlady- He flushed. *His* landlady, a Mrs.-

Pritchard, Victor said, startling himself that he knew it.

Clinton was startled too. Yes. She reported that you had gone out for an evening and had been gone ten days. You were four days overdue on your rent. She was afraid something had happened. She reported you missing.

Identification on the body? Victor asked.

None. Except a note pinned to its shirt. It was inside a plastic window from a wallet and didn't get too wet.

The note said-?

'I'm creative, but they won't let me be. V.'

Not even signed with a full name?

No. But it fits. Victor Salsbury was a commercial artist trying to work creatively but unable to build a reputation.

But I am Salsbury, and I left home for ten days with a batch of work which I sold in New York.

Detective Clinton leaned forward in his chair. But the dental charts matched, he said. There had never been a record of Salsbury's fingerprints, but he had had regular dental care.

Dr. Broderick, Victor said.

Clinton looked even more unsettled. We checked Broderick's records with x-rays of the corpse. Perfect match, almost.

Almost?

Dental records never tell everything. His childhood dentist was someone other than Broderick. In compiling his records of Salsbury's teeth, Broderick could easily have overlooked something which showed up in more thorough crime-lab x-rays.

I assure you I am Victor Salsbury.

Clinton shook his head, determined. It would be extremely coincidental to find two people whose dental records matched that closely. They are almost as distinctive as fingerprints. The corpse was Salsbury.

Victor gathered courage, cleared his throat. X-ray my teeth right now. Compare them with the others.

Clinton was reluctant, but there was little else he could do. This Salsbury looked like *the* Salsbury, had the same memories (although strangely second-hand), the same abilities. He had probably just finished twenty-foot stacks of forms and reports closing out the case, but the case would not die yet.

They went to the labs where a gray-haired man named Maurie took the x-rays, compared them. This Victor Salsbury's dental charts were almost a duplicate of Dr. Broderick's files.

Upstairs, Clinton shook Victor's hand, looking very depressed at the prospect of re-opening the investigation, and said, Sorry to cause you all this trouble, Mr. Sals-bury. But the resemblance was amazing in so many ways. I wonder who in the hell he'll turn out to be?

Victor shook Clinton's hand and left the station. He could have told the detective who the corpse was, even though the man would never discover it on his own. The corpse, most definitely, was Victor Salsbury.

* * *

For a while, he sat in the car, wondering if his secret masters, whoever had hypno-programmed him to kill Harold Jacobi, had also killed the real

Victor Salsbury to solidify his cover. But that seemed illogical, for there was the fact of the suicide note and the overdose of barbituates Salsbury had taken before throwing himself in the river in his melodramatic method of ending it all. Somehow, Victor's masters had known that would happen, had known the real Salsbury's death would be unclear enough to allow for the imposition of an imposter.

But how did they know? They must have known far in advance of the suicide, for they had fed the real Salsbury's past into him like applesauce on a spoon.

And why did he look like Victor Salsbury? Enormous coincidence? He thought not.

What did he think?

He didn't know. His mind was a caldron of doubt, boiling, spouting streamers of steam downwards into his body.

He went to the apartment Salsbury had rented in the upstairs of Marjorie Dill's house. It was a place of slanted ceilings and dark paneled walls. Mrs. Dill, a spry thread of a woman with hair the color and texture of steel wool, followed him everywhere, alternately shocked, frightened, apologetic, and scornful. Yes, she had sold his things. Yes, maybe she had moved a bit quickly. However, there was the back rent. And he was supposed to be dead. She was so sorry. But that was rude of him, leaving without word, making no arrangements about the rent.

He found three cartons of papers she had not thrown out, Mrs. Dill said they had a great many drawings which she thought she might have framed and sold. After all, he had no relatives. Parents dead. There had not been anyone to contact to claim the corpse. Of course she was sorry she had acted so swiftly. He didn't think she was being mercenary, did he?

He loaded the drawings in the car and cautioned Intrepid not to bother them. He had to move the dog in the front seat on the passengers side and pack the boxes in the luggage area. He drove off with Mrs. Dill looking after him, somewhat depressed that all those saleable drawings had slipped through her fingers, but happy that he had not thought to ask for the excess money she had obtained through the sale of his furniture and drafting equipment.

He had lunch in a cluttered, noisy restaurant that, despite its lack of decor and atmosphere, served an appetizing meal. Later, confronted with Intrepid's sad, drooping face, he bought a can of chicken meat dog food and fed him too.

At ten minutes of five, he called the advertising agency he-or the real Salsbury-had worked for, and talked to Mel Heimer, his boss. He listened to the ranting and raving about his ten-day disappearance, then informed them he did not want the job back. He listened to Heimer's face fall three inches, then hung up.

He felt no pleasure, particularly. It saddened him a little to know that telling Heimer off was probably the one thing the real Salsbury wanted to do more than anything else in the world.

There was one more errand he wished to make, and that required him to drive across the city to an art store his phony memory assured him he had visited many times before. As he drove, he listened to Intrepid appraise the passing cars. The little ones were usually worth a stare that turned him around in his seat. The good models drew an easy, low snuffle. When a Cadillac or Corvette went by, the hound bounced in his seat and whuffed at them. He was actually a pretty fair judge of quality; except that he saved his best reactions for beaten up pick-ups and little noisy motorbikes.

At the art store, Victor walked up and down the aisles for more than two hours, choosing things. Pastels, illustration board, oils, brushes, canvas, solvent, pencils. His fingers touched shelves, came away with what they wanted. He knew, subconsciously, exactly what was needed to start a studio from scratch. Each item gave him a sharp bitter-sweet feeling of *déjà vu*. He also bought a huge drafting table, attachable light, sketch filing cabinet, enlarger, portable photocopier, light tracer. He paid five hundred in cash, wrote a check for the rest. The clerk had looked so nervous (possibly wondering if this was a sadist who piled up a purchase to be delivered and then paid with a phony check, all for fun) Salsbury could not bear paying him by check only.

At a quarter until nine, he stopped and ate at a hamburger stand, two for him and two for Intrepid. He could not find a water fountain, so he bought the dog a Coke as large as his own. The mutt was so excited about the taste of it that he forgot his table manners and slobbered the stuff all over the seat and himself. Salsbury took it away, wiped the spilled portion up, and explained the importance of reservation. When he let the dog drink again, he was much more careful.

By nine thirty, he was starting the hour drive back to Oak Grove.

He didn't know what kind of a night it was going to be.

It was going to be very bad.

* * *

A shower, tooth brushing, and flat tire saved his life. The combination of the three served to keep him up and awake much later than he intended.

The flat tire was first. When he settled the car along the curb, he took off his jacket and set about changing the tire, only to discover, when he brought the jack down after all his work, that the spare was also flat.

He remembered that a gas station was somewhere ahead, though he could not think how far. He took the spare off the car and set out rolling both of

them, then hefted them, one arm through each. Fifteen minutes later, he felt as if he would die; he was not much surprised to discover the prospect delighted him. His arms ached, and his shoulders were bent like plastic left too long in the sun. He rested for a time, hoping a car would come along to give him a lift. None did, and he went on. The third time he stopped, he sat on the tires to catch his breath and fell asleep. He woke ten minutes later when a truck roared by, oblivious of his roadside presence. At last, he came to a station that was just closing, managed to persuade the owner (via a five dollar bill above and beyond the charges) to fix both tires and drive him back to his MG.

At home a good deal later, he staggered through the living room and upstairs with only a night light for a guide. The upstairs hall clock said it was ten minutes of one in the morning. He could not escape the bathroom, for the call of nature was too strong. While there, he took a quick, warm shower because he felt greasy, and stopped on his way out to brush teeth that looked de-pressingly yellow.

Without these three routines-the flat tire, the shower, and the tooth brushing-he would have been asleep long ago and perhaps dead long before his time.

He flopped into bed, moaned as the mattress seemed to rise up and engulf him like some ameoboid creature. The only thing in his awareness sphere was a tremendous pitch cloud settling down, down, mercifully down.

Then Intrepid was barking, snarling, making thick muttering sounds deep in his throat. Victor had left the bedroom door open, and the dog had gone into the hallway. Salsbury turned over, determined not to let a stupid hound interrupt his precious sleep, lovely black sleep. But Intrepid kept it up. Finally, unable to pretend he did not hear it, he got out of bed and padded into the hall, thinking of all sorts of tortures that might be applicable to a dog.

Intrepid was standing at the head of the stairs, looking down and snarling bitterly. Salsbury politely asked him to be quiet. The hound looked at him with bared teeth, whined, turned to gaze back down the steps.

Victor went back into his room, closed the door, started toward the fluffy bed. When he finally got there, he lifted his cement legs onto the mattress, crawled forward on his steel knees, flopped onto his stomach, and slapped the pillow over his head, seeking silence. He brought it tight against his ears with both hands, sighed, and proceeded to summon that old, soft-hued dream land. But the barking was sharp enough to penetrate the chicken feathers. He tossed the pillow to the floor and sat up. Damn dog! Damn, damn mutt! What did he want from him? He had saved the mutt from falling off a cliff, hadn't he? What more could he want?

He shouted at Intrepid to shut up.

The dog merely barked louder.

Finally Salsbury decided, buddy or no buddy, the beast had to go outside

for the night. He had proved himself such a gentle, quiet companion before. This outbreak was out of character but just as intolerable as if it had been common. Victor got up, went into the hall.

Intrepid was still at the head of the stairs, looking down, straining as if he would leap. Victor saw that the hairs on the back of his mutt's neck were standing up, but that did not register with him as it should, as it would have, had he not been so sleepy. He could think only of bed, soft and cool. He trudged up to the dog, bent to pick him up, and froze.

Even in his condition, half asleep and with every muscle longing for the touch of eiderdown, he could see what the dog was barking at. Indistinctly

In the shadows at the foot of the steps.

And it was coming up.

His mind was filled with visions of lizard-things with sucking mouths, eyes bright as hot coals. He was riveted to the spot, waiting for the long cold hands to touch him, for the sweet warm horror to envelope him.

Intrepid rubbed against his leg, seeking solace, wondering why his master seemed so unmasterful in this moment of crisis.

Then the thing below moved out of the shadows, shattering all of his preconceived notions of the nature of this nightmare. It was not a lizard-thing, but a man. Merely a man.

No. Not merely. There was something subtly wrong with this man. He was over six-feet tall, every bit as large as Victor. He was dressed in brown slacks, a short-sleeved white shirt, and loafers that seemed so corny Victor wondered if there were pennies in them. Yet he could not have passed for normal on the street, mingling with other people. His face was strangely like that of a manikin, smooth and waxy, flawless almost to a flaw. And his eyes They were blue, just as the cigarette and cologne ads said a hero's eyes had to be, but they were oddly flat and lusterless, as if they were not eyes at all but painted glass marbles that had been popped into his sockets. His face was handsome but expressionless. He did not smile, frown, or in any way betray what was going on inside his mind.

Salsbury was certain the stranger was coming to kill him.

Stop right where you are, Victor said.

But he didn't stop, of course.

Instead, the intruder doubled his speed, came up the stairs fast, faster than Victor had been anticipating. Salsbury moved back to the hall. He was the stranger's physical equal, but there was something about the looks of the other man that told him his muscles would do him not the least bit of good. Besides, he was bone weary from lack of sleep and from ceaselessly working over the mysteries of his existence, trying to come up with clues about himself. Any extended physical match would only prove that the intruder had more endurance than he did. He was almost to the bathroom at the end of the hall

when he heard Intrepid's screech of sheer, unadulterated venom. He whirled to face the steps just in time to see the mutt leap onto the man's throat and sink bared fangs in to the hilt.

The stranger stopped, looked perplexed, though his broad features moved as if they were nothing more than interconnecting slabs of plastic, moving on springs and hinges and hydraulic arms. Then he reached up, pulled the dog off, and threw him into the master bedroom, pulling that door shut. A second later, Intrepid was still game enough to slam against the door from the other side, all but frothing in his fury. But for all his heroic determination, he was effectively out of the fight.

One thing bothered Salsbury. He could see the holes where his dog's teeth had sunk through the waxy flesh, but he could *not* see a single droplet of blood.

The stranger advanced as if nothing important had happened. Any normal man should be groveling on the carpet, mortally wounded, kicking like a trapped rat.

Salsbury realized too late that he had passed the door to his bedroom in his rush to get away from the head of the stairs, and his pistol was now out of reach. The stranger was advancing too fast for him to be able to run back to his room without being caught.

Behind him, there was a popping, blistering sound. He looked, saw the wall to his left was poked deeply, blackened and smoking slightly. There were chips of plaster scattered across the floor and a fine pall of dust in the air, slowly settling toward the floor like fine snow. He turned back to the intruder, found that the man was still emotionless, a cigar store statue that could not possibly possess human feelings behind that wooden face, that chiseled rock expression of blandness.

He pointed the second finger of his right hand at Salsbury. It was capped with something that looked like bright, polished brass, though it was most certainly nothing so simple. While Salsbury was staring, the stranger flicked the finger, discharging a smooth flow of golden light, almost invisible, like hundreds of fine sequins catching the overhead light and reflecting it, refracting it. The beam missed him by inches, smashed another hole in the wall.

Salsbury turned, leaped three steps into the bathroom, slammed and locked the door before he realized a lock was not going to be of much value against his enemy's firepower. In the next instant, the golden light struck the outer side of the door. The entire portal screeched, rattled on its hinges to produce a sound like a sack of dry bones being shaken. The thick oak bulged inwards as if it were not wood at all but some sort of woodlike plastic. Then it splintered, though it did not break clear through. It would require another shot, maybe two, to achieve that. Then the portal would be in shards around

Salsbury's feet; he would have nowhere to hide from the sharp blade of pretty yet deadly luminescence. He wondered, grotesquely, what the light weapon would do to human flesh. Would it pock it as it had the plaster? Leave smoking, discolored craters in his stomach and chest? Or would it splinter his flesh as it was now doing to the door, shatter him into thousands of separate slivers?

Either way, it would kill him.

He shook his head, angry at himself for his terror over such a simple thing as a vibrabeam. Then he stopped, astounded, at the realization that he knew what sort of weapon this futuristic thing was. For a moment, he almost lost all touch with reality, trying to cope with this new aspect of his mind. But he found that the thought had come from iron Victor, all but gone from his psyche now. Iron Victor knew that was a vibrabeam, and it scared him almost as much as it did soft Victor.

Salsbury looked around, deciding on a course of action. He stood on the toilet seat, unhooked the single window on the outside wall, and pushed on it. It stuck, made a protesting whine, then swung outward without any screen to block it. He looked down, craning his neck to assess the bad news. Instead, it was good news. Relatively He did not have to leap two floors to the ground, for the porch roof was only five feet away.

The second vibrabeam blast hit the door and blew the top of it to shreds, a howitzer striking a nightgown. Twenty feet beyond, the intruder stood in the corridor, his firing arm raised, brass-capped finger pointing at the bottom half of the door. His blue eyes reflected the chandelier light, but there was no depth to that reflection. Just two blue pennies.

Salsbury grabbed the shower rod with both hands, walked his feet up the wall, and went through the bathroom window feet first because he did not want to turn his back completely on his enemy. For a moment, he thought his hips were going to stick and deny him exit. He grunted, did a bump and grind, and was suddenly free. Next, his shoulders threatened more problems, though he worked them swiftly loose just as the bottom half of the bathroom door exploded in a shower of shavings and sticks which rattled like locusts against the tile.

The intruder with the magic finger was half a dozen feet beyond. He raised his weapon toward Salsbury's head. The brass gleamed. Then Victor was through the window, dropping onto the porch roof, slipping, falling, rolling painfully toward the edge.

He dug his fingers into the shingles, lost his hold when a fingernail ripped and sent wiry, burning pain stabbing through his hand. He had visions of falling fifteen feet to the ground, flat on his back on a raised stone in the flagstone walk, his spinal column snapping like a pretzel. He flailed wildly, tried to forget the aching fingernail, and managed to catch onto some of the

ill-fitted shingles that offered support. He lay there a second, sucking in and blowing out the cool evening air, blessing the roofer who had not slipped shingle to shingle without a seam. A moment later, he came onto his knees, aware of the folly of staying within view of the bathroom window. He rose, crouched, and went back across the roof, against the wall of the house.

He listened, heard what was left of the door crash inward across the bathroom floor. Thankful that porches ran almost continually around all sides of this old place, he turned toward the rear of the house and ran lightly along the roof. He came to the end of the side porch, looked at the three-foot gap between this roof and the roof of the rear porch. He would not only have to leap, but leap around a corner. Hesitating, he looked back to the open bathroom window. The intruder's head was stuck out, and he was trying to aim his brass fingertip.

Salsbury leaped, landed on the next roof and stumbled across it as if he were leaning into a strong wind, waving his arms and trying to keep from falling.

His balance regained, he walked to the spouting at the edge of the shingles and looked onto the back lawn. It was only fifteen feet, and doubtless iron Victor would have thought nothing of it, but it seemed a mile now. He bit his lip and jumped.

He hit the dewy grass, rolled onto his side like a skier taking a fall, and came quickly into a crouch. He listened for the sound of the intruder's feet on the roof above, but heard only a curious leaden silence that made him think, for a moment, that all that had just happened was a nightmare. Then, distantly, Intrepid began barking again, still shut in the master bedroom. Poor, noble dog, locked out of the fight. But teeth and claws seemed useless against the stranger with the flat blue eyes. A sense of reality returned to Salsbury. He was on his own.

Now what?

If he couldn't fight on a man-to-man basis, the only thing left was to run. He moved slowly around the house, staying with the hedges, trying to be as much like a shadow as possible, which was a bit difficult considering that his feet were bare and gleamed whitely. His pajamas, too, were a dazzling yellow, not exactly the thing for stealthy activities. At the corner, just before he moved around the front of the building, he thought he heard a tiny scraping sound, a shallow, echoless click. He stood very still and alert, trying to pick up something else.

The night was suddenly cold.

He thought, suddenly, if he was pretending to be a shadow, maybe the intruder was involved in the same game.

But none of the other shadows moved-as far as he could tell.

Five minutes passed without any further disruption of the ethereal silence.

Salsbury was reminded of the GT parked on the graveled drive, the spare set of keys taped under the hood where he had put them at the suggestion of the used car salesman. What he would do when he got away from the house, where he would go, when he would return-all of these were questions he did not particularly care about. All he knew was that a tall, blank-faced killer was stalking him, a man not the sort who gives in after an initial failure.

At last, unable to hold still any longer, he walked around into the shrubs at the front of the house. He looked up into the glassed porch, but saw nothing beyond the normal quota of sun furniture. The lawn was empty, rolling serenely down to the GT at the foot of the walk. He examined the arrangement of the car's hood latch in his mind so there would be no fumbling once he was exposed, out there where the killer could spot him at a casual glance. When he was satisfied he had thought of everything, he stood, half bent to make himself as small a target as possible, ran to the car, and got the keys from under the hood. He went around to the driver's door, his fingers shaking but generally pleased at the way things were going. He unlocked the door, started to open it- and happened to look inside.

The intruder was sitting in the passenger's seat, his brass-tipped finger pointed directly at Salsbury

In a surprisingly short time, he had come from near exhaustion and thick mental weariness where thoughts took forever to transverse his mind to full physical and mental alert. It was as if he had been trained to consciously draw upon his body's reserves of strength, as if he had been taught how to unlock the storeroom doors of his adrenalin supply. The moment he recognized the killer sitting in his car, the storeroom turned into a fountain, pumping adrenalin out his ears. His body seemed to move from one plane of activity to a higher one where he lived faster and more completely. He jerked upright to shield his face, heard the harsh, brittle shattering of glass and felt bright slivers sting through his pajama tops and into his chest. Then he fell and rolled to keep away from further blasts, came up against the hedges and onto his knees.

The killer was getting out of the car.

Salsbury did not know whether the stranger thought his little trick had worked or not, but he wasn't waiting around to find out. Staying by the hedges, praying fervently the shadows made it difficult for the killer to see him, he rounded the corner of the house and ran. He crossed the lawn, bare feet slipping now and again in the spring dew, went into the orchard, pulled to a stop under the first of the trees, and paused to catch his breath.

When he looked back the way he had come, he saw the killer standing behind the house, looking down the darkened landscape toward the trees and, it seemed, directly at Salsbury himself. Abruptly, Victor started to move again, for the last thing he saw was the killer starting after him at a brisk

walk, almost a run.

He ran forward through the trees, no longer certain where he was going or what he would do when he got there. The ground underfoot was stonier than it had been, and he felt the sharper pieces cutting into him. The pain was a distant thing, however, something that nagged him like a forgotten errand or residual guilt. Much more immediate was his fear.

His breath came like liquid fire, burning his lungs, setting all his insides ablaze. His stomach was a glowing coal. There was a bellows in his head that kept providing a draft for the internal flames. Tiny red tongues burned in his feet, and the constant slap of them against the ground did not seem to help dampen the fire.

He burst through the end of the orchard almost as if a gossamer net had been strung as a barrier, stood at the bank that overlooked the winding creek, trying to think, desperately in search of some plan that would salvage what seemed to be beyond reclamation: his life.

He turned once, expecting the worst, expecting the killer to be looming over him, bringing up its brass finger for the last flash, but he could see nothing in the darkness of the apple trees. He held his breath so there would be no noise for the enemy to hear, picked up the crash of the other man's feet as he made his way through the brush. He found he had to breathe again and that, no matter how hard he tried, he could not draw breath quietly.

In desperation, he came up with a plan of sorts, the only thing that might work. He scrambled down the embankment and worked his way out on the ledge that led to the cave where he had found the three trunks and where he had slept for two weeks. Halfway along it, he stopped and looked overhead. There were rocks, roots, and branches of scrub brush to cling to. It didn't look like the easiest of plans, but it was all he had. He grabbed some protruding rocks and started climbing up.

Three minutes later, gasping, his hands raw from the climb, from skinning them on rocks, burning them on branches, he was perched eight feet above the ledge, only a foot from his head to the top of the embankment. If the killer did either of two things, Salsbury's plan might work. If he did neither, Victor knew his worries would be finished anyway, finished by a sharp, sparkling blade of yellow light

If the killer followed Salsbury's trail perfectly in some mysterious fashion, he would go down the rain cut and onto the ledge. In that case, Victor would drop on him from his higher perch, feet first. Hopefully, both feet ploughing into the stranger's head would weigh any subsequent fight in Victor's favor—and just might crush the man's skull straight away. If, instead, the killer came to the embankment and searched along it, standing near the edge, Victor could reach up with one hand, holding to the rocks with the other, grab an ankle, and attempt to topple his adversary into the creek thirty feet below. There

were a lot of sharp, lovely rocks in that creek. And even if the fall did not kill him, it should sure as hell slow him down some.

Victor waited.

In a few moments, he heard the stranger coming out of the trees onto the smoother surface near the bank. He walked to the edge some ten feet to Victor's left and stood looking across the creek to the black wood beyond. Even in the darkness, here away from any light source but the thin moon, his eyes glowed dully.

Salsbury pressed himself flat against the cliff, hoped he looked like a rock. The killer began walking along the embankment, examining the far shore of the creek where several feet of mud would have left a trail of his escaping prey. He stopped a foot to the right of Salsbury's position, making it awkward for the man to reach up and grab his ankles. But he would move away, Salsbury realized, making contact even more difficult. Tensing, holding tightly to a branch with his left hand, Victor reached up quickly to grasp the killer's ankle.

For a moment, all seemed lost. His hand brushed the stranger's leg too lightly to gain a grip. The man jerked in reflex but moved closer instead of farther away. Salsbury grabbed again, yanked, felt the man's foot going out from under him. He risked a glance up, saw the killer flailing for balance. He pulled harder, almost lost his own hold, and sent the man crashing over the side into the water and rocks below.

Salsbury wasted no time in launching himself up, pulling over the cliff edge and kicking onto level land. He crawled back and looked into the creek. The killer was lying face down in the water, very still. Salsbury laughed; his throat was so dry that the laugh hurt, made] him cough. He sat up, watched the stranger for a few more moments, then started to get up with the idea of going down and examining him to see if he could learn anything. Then he saw the killer was starting to move

His face had been under the water long enough to ensure his death, but here he was kicking again. He rolled onto his back, his flat blue eyes staring up at Victor with malevolent intent.

Salsbury turned and ran back toward the house, his mind swelling like a balloon ready to burst. He wondered how long he could hold onto his sanity in this nightmarish scene where the pursuing monster could not be killed. His only chance now was the gun, still in his room, loaded.

The back door was locked. He screamed at it, rattled it, then knew that was no good.

He started around toward the front of the house, remembering that the intruder must have come out of the house that way to get in the car, then looked down toward the orchard.

The killer was coming.

Fast.

Salsbury had only seconds to spare.

The porch door was open, but the front door was locked.

He fancied he could hear the pounding feet of the killer closing on him.

Grabbing a patio chair, he smashed the window in the door, reached through, unlocked it, and went inside. He took the stairs two at a time, though his legs were ready to buckle. He glanced down once, saw his pajama top was a bright red and punctured with fragments of the car window. He had a moment of dizziness, stopped to hold the railing and shake away the vertigo that sought to claim him.

Then he heard the killer's feet on the front porch.

As he went by the master bedroom, Intrepid began barking again. Salsbury called out a word of encouragement, went into the other room and picked the pistol and shells up from the nightstand. When he came out into the corridor again, the stranger had just reached the top of the stairs.

He raised the pistol and fired twice. The boom of each discharge slammed against the walls and echoed through the big house as if all the doors were being slammed simultaneously. Two holes appeared in the stranger's chest, and he fell sideways against the railing. His face was still passive, as if he were watching a boring motion picture or contemplating the lint in his navel.

Slowly, he raised his firing arm.

Salsbury emptied the other four slugs into him in quick succession. The impact knocked the stranger backwards. He rolled over and over to the bottom of the steps, six chunks of lead in him.

Salsbury went and looked down on him.

Slowly but surely, the killer started to get up.

Die, damn you! Salsbury shouted hysterically.

The pistol clicked several times before he realized there were no more bullets. By then, the killer was starting back up the steps; he aimed his brass finger at Salsbury. A golden thread of light smashed the railing, threw a cloud of wooden chips into the air.

Salsbury retreated through the corridor to a point where he could not be seen until the killer topped the stairs again. He went down on one knee, fumbled shells out of the box and loaded the pistol again. When his target lumbered off the last riser, he placed six more chunks of metal in his chest.

With the same result as before: nothing.

No blood.

Just little black tunnels in his flesh.

The killer was bringing up his vibrabeam.

Salsbury rolled sideways, clutching gun and ammunition, through the open door of his bedroom, up against the three trunks there. He could hear the killer coming down the hall, lurching somewhat but advancing nonetheless.

Frantically, he loaded the pistol, closed the chamber just as the man stumbled into the doorway. There was nowhere to go now. If these six did not bring him down, Salisbury was dead.

The killer opened his mouth, said: Gnnhunhggggg.

He put three shots in the killer's face. For a moment, he thought he had won, for the man stopped, was perfectly still, eyes hardly blue at all, but more of a gray. Then, painfully, the arm with the brass vibrabeam tube rose toward Salisbury.

A premature blast erupted from the end, struck the computer trunk, glanced off without damage.

Gritting his teeth, every cell screaming to every other cell in his body, Salisbury put the last three bullets in the killer, all in his chest again. When that was done, he threw the gun at the man, watched it bounce off the impassive face.

Inexorably, the firing arm continued to raise.

He was going to die. As surely as he had killed Harold Jacobi. But this time, there was an assassin who did not bleed, who was not human. And what would the thing do with him when he was dead? Stuff him in some hole it would dig in the orchard? Let him rot out there to help grow the trees? He had a picture in his mind of this thing, full of eighteen.22 slugs, face half destroyed, chest almost one gaping hole, dragging Victor Salisbury to the orchard and putting him in a grave.

Screaming, mad now with terror, Salisbury leaped, crashed onto the killer, bore him backwards. The other man's skull struck the bedpost, opened in two before he went on to the floor. His head, laid open, was mostly hollow, except for several sets of wires and transisters. While Salisbury pressed him down, the last false life leaked out of the robot and it was still at last.

Robot. No blood. Wires in its face. Salisbury struggled off the inanimate form, his head pumping up and down on his neck like a wooden horse on a brass merry-go-round pole. Up. Down. Up-Down. Pretty music. Up. Down. A computer in a trunk. And he had a dead man's past. Up. Down. Up. Lizard-things lurked in the walls of his cellar. Up. Down. Down. Up. Sucker mouths. Down. Up. Now a robot with intent to kill. Up. Down. Round, round

He found the master bedroom, opened the door, welcomed Intrepid who bounded against him. His dislike for this room had faded now that he had become a victim too-or intended victim. It put him in sympathy with Jacobi. All he wanted was to sleep now. He was so tired. If he could only make his head stop going up and down. He clamped his hands on it and bit his tongue. Vaguely, he was aware that he could hurt himself biting on his tongue, that the next step was to swallow it. But his head did not go up and down any longer. Just down and down and down, down, down

CHAPTER 7

Once, he opened his eyes and saw a faint gray light seeping through the windows and across the floor, playing like soft fingers on his eyes. He thought about getting up, seriously thought about it. That seemed like the proper thing to do. He got his hands under himself and pushed, managed to raise his head a foot off the floor. Then the little strength he had left was gone, carried away by the fingers of gray light. His head fell and he cracked his chin on the floor. There was no more light at all.

He was in a beautifully furnished room of pleasant and airy proportions, waiting for something, though he could not remember what. He paced around, admiring the decorating job, wondering if the Fabulous Bureau had done it, just generally passing time. When he touched the top of a smooth and darkly finished writing desk, the thing opened like a mouth. There were little sharp-edged teeth made of pipe. It slammed shut, trying to chomp off his hand. He retreated from the desk and sat down in a comfortable black chair, sucking the ends of his fingers which the desk had barely nipped. Suddenly bars slid out of the chair arms across his lap, locking him in. Nothing, it seemed, was what it appeared to be. He screamed as the chair began to swallow him.

Someone told him to take it easy, that they were going to get help, get help very soon now He smiled- or at least he tried to smile-and told them that was all very nice and quite thoughtful of them but that the chair was swallowing him and could they please hurry. The black chair. The comfortable one. DO SOMETHING! Then the swirling face that he could not see clearly and the reassuring voice that accompanied it were gone. He was fading back into the room with the vicious chair and the cannibalistic desk.

He didn't want to be in this room. He looked for a way out, found a tall, white door set flush with the walls. As he walked toward it, the desk to his right began flapping its wooden mouth and growling angrily. The chair, taking up the chorus, began thumping around, rattling its sturdy wooden legs against the floor and slowly converging on him. The ends of the legs were carved like animal paws, and Salsbury was certain he saw the toes wriggle. He hurried to the white door, flung it open, and found there was no escape. The door was nothing more than another mouth. He had opened it and stepped slightly into it. Beyond was a pink, wet throat, the heavy nodes of the tonsils hanging like stalactites. The big, black teeth started coming down to cut him in half. Oddly enough, he noticed that their biting match would be perfect. Behind, the chair rattled closer, snarling thickly. He screamed again.

This time when he woke from the room of living furniture, there were two

voices. He recognized one as the same that had gotten him to open his eyes earlier. It was soft, concerned, and sweet, the sort one hears in television commercials and over public address systems in some of the more pleasant airline terminals. The new voice was gruff, older, definitely male. It was closer to Salsbury, almost directly over him.

Then he saw the face that matched the second voice: heavy-jowled and wide-mouthed with a ski-slope nose, two velvety black eyes, a heavy, bushy mustache the same gun-metal gray as the thinning head of hair.

I think it's chiefly exhaustion, the man said.

Will he be all right then? the woman asked.

With some rest, yes.

What about his chest?

Nothing deep here. I don't see how the deuce he got that. Doesn't make sense.

You've seen the car?

Yes. That still answers nothing.

Will it hurt when you take the slivers out?

It won't hurt me a bit, the man said. When she slapped him playfully, he said, I've never seen you so solicitous of anyone. He chuckled deep in his throat. Especially a man.

You're an old goat, she said.

And you're a young lamb. About time you found yourself another pasture mate. One marriage doesn't mean a thing, dear. This one might not be anything like Henry.

You're insane! she said. Then she said, He isn't.

The man chuckled again. Well, it won't hurt him. I'll just give him a sedative first to make sure. A mild one. He won't feel a thing.

I don't want to have a sedative, Salsbury said, still dazed. His voice sounded as if he had the vocal chords of a frog.

What's that? the man asked.

The woman's face appeared, a truly lovely face that he had seen somewhere before. Certainly he just could not remember where. He could not remember much of anything, in fact.

Vic, she said, reaching a hand to touch his face.

Shush, the gruff man said. He's delirious. You can wait to talk to him.

If you give me a sedative, Salsbury said, The door will swallow me up.

No it won't, the gruff one answered. I've muzzled the door.

The chair, then. The chair or the desk will eat me alive!

Not much chance, he said. I've given both of those devils a very strict warning.

Then there was a sudden sharpness in Salsbury's arm, a coolness, a moment of exhilaration, and darkness. It was a quiet, empty darkness this

time, without any mystery room or cannibalistic furniture or other horrors. He settled into it, pulled a flap of blackness across him like a blanket, and stopped thinking.

When he woke much later, he was one big stomach. There was no room in him for any sensation but hunger. He blinked at the white ceiling until he was certain he was not dizzy, then took stock of his body, lying there quietly letting the nerves signal the brain, cautiously interpreting the reports they made. There was a dull ache in his jaw; he remembered cracking it against the floor. His hands tingled as if he might have scraped them. His chest felt odd, as if it might be afire, though the feeling was not altogether unpleasant. His feet were tender; he had a brief memory of running barefoot across sharp stones.

Then the whole fabric of his memory returned like a gunshot. He sat up in bed, trembling, expecting a hot and golden beam of light to slice through him. Instead, he saw only Lynda Harvey.

She had been sitting in the emerald colored chair to the left of the bed. She rose and came to him, put her hands on his shoulders and pressed him down. He allowed himself to relax. The robot was dead. A pile of debris in the other bedroom. He could afford to relax now, surely.

How do you feel? she asked.

He stretched, considered the question, said, Not too bad, considering.

Don't try to get up. I'm supposed to feed and water you the moment you come around.

I'm about to start gnawing on the furniture.

No need. I've got everything downstairs that you'll need. Give me a few minutes. She started for the door.

Wait.

Huh? She half turned, stunning in profile.

How did you find me? Who was that man poking at me? What-

Later. Let the cook do her job first. Then she was gone, trim legs flashing brown. He leaned into the pillow, smiling, and thought about her pattering around in his kitchen. He liked that thought very much. But there were other thoughts which he was not too fond of at all

He thought of the robot It had taken so long to kill simply because it was so loaded with backup circuits and secondary tubes to replace primaries when they were shattered by fragmenting slugs. He was also unsettled by the consideration that it was his almost superhuman reflex pattern that had saved him and that a normal man (like Harold Jacobi) would not have survived. So it seemed that the robot had come to kill Jacobi, not Salsbury. Is that what the computer meant when it said Jacobi would have died in a month anyway? But a month had not passed. Hardly a week, even. Oh, yes, two weeks of sleep in the cave. But that was still more than a week shy of a month.

Was that why the 810-40.04 was maintaining silence? Did it think the target date was still over a week away? If so, Salsbury hoped, if there were more to this operation, the damn machine broke silence before any future encounters with the enemy.

As there should most certainly be. Nasty encounters.

The lizard-things were not the type to give up easily. He had no doubt at all that the robot had come through the portal in the cellar wall, through the blue circle of light, the window to another world.

But why hadn't one of the lizard-things come to do the job itself? Fear? That seemed unlikely. The lizards, he thought, would show little fear in a battle situation. They had the look of a race that had come up too fast. Technology had boomed, had grown like a nuclear mushroom, while their cultural and social development had progressed slowly from the caveman stage. They looked like savages-keenly intelligent, clever savages. Savagery is only applicable in a social sense; they looked as if killing and other assorted uglinesses were a very recent part of their heritage.

When would they send the next robot through the portal? Or make their first in-person visit? He thought a moment, realized all the nights of the singing noise and the arrival of the robot had been at approximately one-thirty in the morning. Whether that was the only time the portal could be opened or the time most preferred, he did not know. But by one-thirty tomorrow morning, he better be prepared.

She came back into the room, carrying a tray which she slipped onto the night table. She sat on the edge of the bed. Toast. Buttered, although the doctor said plain. Chicken soup with noodles, though the doctor said just broth.

You get a kick out of disregarding doctor's orders?

She ignored him. Also fruited jello, a glass of orange juice, cuts of bologna and cheese and tomato. Coffee. Broth is for sick little girls, not beefy gorilla types like you.

He tasted the soup, said it was delicious. After she smiled, he said, Now how did you find me?

She hopped onto the bed, sitting in a yoga position, a delightful expanse of brown legs showing. She seemed unaware of her own attractiveness. I was handling the rental of a Barberry Road cottage out this way. When I was done there, I decided to stop by since you were only five minutes out of my way. I called you last evening, and here she blushed, but you weren't home yet I thought I'd stop by this morning and see what you'd found about that dead man in Harrisburg.

I parked out front behind your car, saw its door open and the ceiling light on. I shut it, wondering why you'd forget something like that and let your battery run down. Then I saw the smashed window. I thought you'd had an

accident, I came up and knocked on the porch door. You didn't answer, but I could see the front door was open. I went to the front door, shouted for you, and was greeted by Intrepid. He yipped like a mad dog. Scared me at first. He kept stumbling up the stairs, then falling down, then stumbling back up until I understood he wanted me to follow him, just like in Lassie movies. I found you lying here on the floor.

He finished the soup, started on the cold cuts and cheese. The doctor. Who was he?

Jake West. He's been our family doctor for years. He's stopping by tomorrow to look you over, chiefly to find out what happened to you. After he left, I found that your bathroom door-

He found it a bit hard to swallow, washed the meat down with juice.

What did happen? she asked, green eyes wide, leaning slightly forward toward him.

I'd rather not say just yet. Maybe later. It's hard to believe anyway.

He expected a typical female reaction: sly wheedling at first, then cajoling and fencing to get him to spill something, and when that did not work, a bit of conjecture with an attempt to get him to agree or disagree. Maybe some indignation after that, then fury in hopes a woman's anger could break him. But she simply shrugged, smiled and was perfectly willing to forget it- at least outwardly.

He was thankful for her reaction. How could he have gone about explaining this sort of thing? Lynda, there was a robot here last night. He was sent by a bunch of lizard-things. Intelligent lizard-things, Lynda. He came to kill me. Had a vibrabeam in his finger, for Christ's sake! Lynda, I killed Harold Jacobi.

But I can tell you something I found in Harrisburg, he said.

She grinned, leaned forward again.

He went through the story, about the body being a mistake, about Mrs. Dill, about buying art supplies.

They came, she said. A drafting table and everything. I had them pile it all in the living room because I didn't know where to tell them to put everything. They brought it around two.

In the afternoon? What time is it?

Nine o'clock in the evening, she said. You slept all day.

One-thirty was just four and a half hours away. He would have to get rid of her before that and plan something for the lizard-things and their robot zombies. Well, he could let her stay another two hours perhaps

Why did you go to all this trouble? he asked.

I guess I'm just the motherly type. I take in lost kittens, tattered dogs, birds with broken wings-

You're fishing.

and half-crippled men with bloody chests, she finished, blushing. I'm sorry. You don't want to talk about it, and I don't want to force you. You know, of course, my curiosity is eating me alive, malting up stories far worse than the truth, most likely. But in your own good time.

She was a magnificent woman, far more lovely with her crooked front tooth (which he had just noticed) than a hundred starlets with plasticized lips and artificial mouths behind them. She radiated an earthy sensuality that almost had an odor, a taste, a touch. She carried herself so casually yet coolly. He found that he liked her far more than he had realized; maybe it went beyond a mere liking.

How is Henry these days? he asked.

The question had the effect of a pile driver coming down on top of her head. Her face grew depressed, then savage. She fisted her little hands, then seemed to grow calmer. Why do you ask that?

He felt instantly crude. It was not the thing to do, dredge up old pains and make a friend relive them. He realized he was beginning to feel possessive towards her and that the question had been spawned by jealousy. I heard Dr. West mention him just before he put me to sleep.

Let's say I'll tell you later, Vic. That makes us even.

I'm sorry, he said. I should have known that was restricted grounds for conversation.

Oh, hell, now it sounds like a 'dark mysterious mess,' which it really isn't at all.

Nice weather we've been having, huh?

I want to tell you, she said. Does that make me an emotional bore?

Do you spill your woes to everyone?

You're the first.

Which doesn't mean you're working in an emotional bore pattern.

Why should I want to tell you, though? I mean, I don't really know you. In fact, I disliked you at first. You were cold and uncommunicative. Even when you started being friendly, I thought you seemed sort of-

Yes?

Well, hollow. Like you were pretending to be someone you really weren't.

The response shook him considerably, though he thought maybe he concealed his surprise. Now?

Well, there's still something odd about you. But you seem fuller, more of a person than before.

Perhaps, Salsbury thought, that was because he had recently gone through hell and come back alive. Trials made any man a more solid individual.

They looked at each other, felt their gazes click and mesh. They each held a new understanding of their friendship, one that either would make it strained or help it grow into more than friendship. Slowly, haltingly, she told him

about Henry.

* * *

Henry March was brutishly handsome, rugged, with a muscular body he preened as a cat preened. Dimples in his cheeks. Slightly conceited, not boringly so. From a well-to-do family. Himself a graduate of Princeton. A social figure. To an eighteen-year-old girl who had been reading Hemingway since she was thirteen, he seemed almost perfect. At first, the marriage was good: the joy of taking meals together, of finding his dark hairs on the brush, the smell of his cologne, the sound of electric razors at early hours, the touch of warm flesh in the middle of the night, both waking with surprise at their separate but similar needs. Then something happened.

At first, he began complaining of her coffee. Then her meals. Then the acts of their most private sanctums. She began to wonder why she was no good in bed. Or at anything else. Under his tongue, she lost weight, began mixing herself extra drinks to be able to face him when he came home from his graduate classes.

There is a sort of man who can never face his own inadequacies, who must find a scapegoat. In America, where success is considered the only essential commodity of life, this man abounds. He drives his women to despair, eventually breaks them. The woman is his child-raiser, his maid, cook, and sex machine. No thought is given to her, for she is merely a thing, a necessary acquisition on the road to success. These are the most despicable criminals of contemporary society. They kill human dignity. But first they torture it.

Henry was one of these.

Relatively few women escape them. The ones who do are usually shocked into awareness when they take an outside job out of desperation to prove they are worth something. They find they are good workers, earn promotions and praise. Suddenly they see through their

Henry and seek a quick divorce or enter into a knock-down, drag-out, teeth and nail, fist and feet fight to bring reality back into their marriage. Or maybe they have an affair and find out they *are* good in bed. Or finally something happens to show that hubby isn't perfect either.

She came home from work early because the Dean of Instruction (her boss) was ill and closed his office. She found Henry in bed with the girl. A student. Sophomore. In Henry's class. Buying her grade, apparently. When Henry, confused, almost incoherent, took the girl away, Lynda went into the bathroom and vomited into the toilet.

God, Vic, Lynda said, taking a sip of his coffee, replacing the cup on his bed tray, what was so bad was that when he returned he tried to act like he

was still on top. He bullied me, told me she was better in bed than me. And she was a scrawny nothing! Her face wasn't even pretty. Tiny eyes, close-set. No chin. And he was trying to make me think she was more desirable than me. He almost succeeded. He almost really did. He had me so twisted up that-

Still sitting yoga fashion, she lowered her head onto her breasts, balled her fists at her side, and cried softly. He sat the tray aside, brought her to him, stroked her yellow hair, murmured comforting things to her. She had bottled this up, thinking it was over. She had only wanted out of the marriage, time to find herself as a human being. The quickest way to do that was to deny that she had been-almost-turned into an egoless, self-pitying wretch by a man unworthy of her pity, unworthy of her. Now she had been forced to pull the cork and taste what was in the bottle. The fumes had made her nauseous.

He caressed her, trying to think how to calm a woman. When her crying softened, he raised her head and kissed her. He found her lips were parted. There was a moment when the world was nothing more than a tongue. Then they pulled apart, breathless, and engaged their eyes again. She came back after a moment, more demanding now. His hand found the light, flicked it off. Somehow, he had a strength he was unaware of.

CHAPTER 8

Was it all very sordid? she asked.

If you want to make it like that.

Ouch. I guess I asked for that. Maybe he made me into a masochist.

And I'm not going to lay here and build your confidence by ranting and raving about how good it was, what a beautiful thing we have together.

Because that's not necessary? she asked. Ummm. I guess then what I'm feeling is maybe not so silly.

And what *are* you feeling?

She turned on her side, brought the long clean lines of her body against him. What he felt now was not desire so much as a warm contentment at the touch of her, an appreciation of her line and form and loveliness.

I'm feeling that this somehow pieced us together. I can tell a difference in you. In the way you treat me. You are human, warm, open now. You were an enigma before. And I feel more complete than I have since the divorce. It isn't just sex. I could have plenty of that any time. We're like two pieces of a dollar bill that has been torn in half somewhere along the line. One piece ends up in the wallet of an old man in New Jersey, the other in the wallet of a young man in Milwaukee. One day both turn up in Miami in a restaurant. The old man's half falls out of his wallet when he pays the cashier. The young man sees it, takes out his own half, finds they match. Its so impossible you want to hold your breath for fear of blowing the halves apart.

She snuggled against him, her mouth against his neck. Her fingers traced patterns on his chest. The smell of her was warm and feminine, musky, yet sweet. He could see why she had been attracted to him from the first. She had married a man she thought she understood and found a demon in him. This time, she would be drawn to a man more complicated, one she could not fathom, in the hope that a simple, sincere man lay beneath the surface. Iron Victor would have presented the mystery she wanted to start with. Soft Victor was the simple, sincere man she sought

Suddenly he felt like an ogre worse than any Henry March, for he was concealing so much from her when she had leveled so totally with him. Come on, he said, getting out of bed and slipping into a pair of jeans, a T-shirt, loafers without benefit of socks. There's something I have to show you.

Your explanation now?

Right.

She slipped into his robe, which was enormous for her, followed him into the hall, past Intrepid who had been lying watching them. He remembered Intrepid had not been fed and watered, but found she had taken care of that

after all.

He took her to the bedroom where the robot lay, turned the thing over for her inspection. He told her the story, beginning with the morning he had awakened in the cave and set out to buy the Jacobi house, omitting only the fact that he had killed Harold Jacobi. She sat very still and quiet.

She accepted the story, despite its apparent absurdity. Partly, this was because she was reluctant to consider her lover a madman, partly because there were the marks of the vibrabeam to prove what he said. There were also the featureless, lockless trunks.

It's now a quarter to one, he said. Which means you will pack and leave before the shooting starts.

Bull! she said shortly.

You might get hurt. It was an inane statement, one of those lines from a book that are verbal translations of such visual obviousnesses that they cancel themselves out. Perhaps in a moment of stress, all men were reduced to the formula plotting of the fiction they read, mouthing inanities from other stories.

And you might be hurt too. You might need someone like you did last night.

Look, Lynda, he said, ignoring the finality, you'll be in my way.

Bull. She just wasn't playing the part of the fragile heroine the way she was supposed to. Are you throwing me out?

Of course not! But if you stay all night, people will think-

You have no neighbors, and I could really give a damn about what they thought if you did. What concern I have for the opinions of the general populace could be placed in a Coke bottle without obscuring the bottom.

That was a pretty heated delivery, he said, grinning in spite of himself.

I can stay then?

You can stay.

Her reaction, surprisingly, was like that of a small girl. She threw her arms around him, giggling. She was an intriguing, multilevel woman, terribly adult one moment, delightfully child-like the next. The result was sort of a delightful, playful schizophrenia.

But now we have only half an hour to decide what to do.

She wanted to stay. She had made that quite clear. There was no way he could persuade her that it would be best all around if she left.

She wanted to stay. She most definitely did.

Still, she shuddered.

* * *

As they discussed what should be done, Salsbury bent to work on the

hand of the robot, disconnecting the vibrabeam weapon within the core of the plastic finger. Lynda expressed amazement that he knew the weapon was detachable and knew how to go about detaching it. He was somewhat surprised himself, but had learned to live with the often hidden tidbits of knowledge that now and again surfaced when they were needed. In ten minutes, he had the vibratube in his hand, the simple stud-end trigger ready against his thumb.

In the end, after much planning and alternate planning, they decided not to go into the cellar where, perhaps, the robot would be able to solicit aid from the lizardy aliens. Instead, they moved the furniture in the living room to form a fortress of stuffing, wood, and springs behind which they could hide and observe the cellar door. There was no way of being certain another robot would be sent, though the lizard-things must surely have known the first failed. If they knew that, they would consider it an enormous fluke, and would think it could never happen twice.

Indeed, had he been Harold Jacobi, it never would have happened again, for he would have been stone dead. But he was quicker than a man should be, cleverer, and now he had a vibrabeam tube himself.

One-thirty came and went in silence. They did not speak for fear of missing some vital sound from below. Even a moment's distraction might mean the difference between success and failure-and failure would, of course, mean death. There was no ringing noise, no thrumming moan. He remembered that the portal had not required the strange vibrations to open itself ever since that night when full visual contact had been made; that night the demons looked through the wall as if only a pane of glass separated them from Salsbury.

At twenty minutes of two, ten minutes into their silent vigil, they heard soft footfalls on the steps coming up

Linda was positioned beside him, shielded by a couch. He was at the end of the same piece of furniture, looking through a crack between the sofa and the easy chair they had pulled next to it. She had her head above the back of the sofa, watching the door. He put a hand on her skull and pushed her down out of sight. She started to protest, then remembered the need for silence. Or perhaps she remembered what the vibrabeam had done to his bathroom door and suddenly had begun to extrapolate on what it might do to flesh. She stayed down, safely behind him, waiting.

As he watched, the cellar door swung easily into the living room. It shielded the bulk of the robot from him, but he was in no great hurry to make contact with it. Salsbury knew he could take the machine before it could reach either of them; that realization made for a great deal of confidence.

A moment later, the robot stepped from behind the door, very alert and cautious as if even its steel and glass brain could know fear. It started along

the wall, staying where the moonlight from the windows did not touch. When he was but a few feet from the stairs that led to the second story, Salsbury thumbed the stud on the vibrabeam tube. The cold waves of sound flashed out in a golden stream, struck the machine and made it bounce and buck as if a sledge hammer had been swung into its guts. It lurched, turned, its blue eyes sparkling flatly in the darkness, seeking.

Rising to stand beside him, Lynda grasped Salsbury's arm and sucked in her breath. The lack of any emotion on the robot's face, the deadly blankness so like a psychotic's countenance, was enough to chill anyone. It had nearly sent Salsbury climbing the walls the first time he had been confronted with it.

The beam continued to play.

Victor fancied he could hear things breaking inside the robot. Its entire body hummed with the impact of the killing waves.

It stumbled toward them, raising its firing arm, pointing the brass finger. Salsbury ducked, trying to hold the vibrabeam on his opponent. But it wavered, swept across the stair railing to the mechanical's left. The wood splintered, popped, danced into the air in hundreds of shards, rained down on Lynda and him where they stood ten feet away.

The mechanical's own beam smashed into an easy chair, blew a cloud of smouldering stuffings into the air. The littlest pieces, glowing orange, came down and stung their bare arms where they touched. Lynda slapped at her robe and at Salsbury's clothes to keep them from catching fire.

Salsbury depressed the firing stud again. The robot backed, trying to avoid the weapon. But there was nowhere it could go. It came up against the wall, shivering like a man left in his underwear on the tundra. Seconds later, it pitched forward, smashed onto its face. It tried to get up, managed to make it to its knees, then crashed forward again, bouncing on the carpet. Its fingers groped at the nylon, trying to find something to help pull it erect. The brass tip of the weapons finger was bright with reflected moonlight. Then, at last, it was still.

You got him! Lynda cried. She was reacting like the little girl again, exuberant despite the still pervading terror of the scene about her.

Salsbury stood, his knees cracking painfully, aimed the vibrabeam at the robot's head and blew its metal skull open, spilling its mechanics onto the rug.

It was over.

His entire body seem to expand, to swell with triumph.

He turned to Lynda to say something and caught the movement of the second killer out of the corner of his eye.

CHAPTER 9

It had come up the cellar stairs with the stealth of a cat, its movements further concealed by the activities of the first robot, the excitement of that fight. It was a mirror image of the first and exactly like the robot of the previous night. The lizard-things wasted no money on a variety of molds. He only wished they would have seen fit to endow the mechanicals with something other than those two blue penny eyes that seemed to eat into everything they settled upon. Now, as they stood congratulating themselves, it moved through the cellar door, coming fast, leaped the couch, came down heavily on cushions, bouncing, and was almost on top of them.

Victor raised his vibratube to fire, not very hopeful about getting a shot in. The mechanical swung its arm, cracked Salsbury's wrist a solid blow that rattled his teeth in his jaw like pearls on a string, set every bone between his hand and teeth vibrating like tuning forks. The tube sailed into the air, arcing backwards out of reach, turning lazily over and over to clatter in a dark corner somewhere completely beyond reach.

Lynda screamed.

Victor grabbed her, pushed her backward, turned in time to feel the rush of air preceding the mechanical, then the full impact of its heavy, component packed body. He was catapulted to the left, struck an oblong coffee table with his knees and went over that with a great deal of explosive grunting and even more pain. His chin cracked the end of a lamp base exactly where it had been bruised in his fall the night before, then skidded on the rug, brush burning it. It was almost as if some hostile fairy sprite were sitting overhead planning the choreography. He spat out a piece of tooth, tasted blood. His chin burned. The weight of the mechanical adversary was pressing upon him.

He strained, heaved, pushed the robot sideways enough to squirm out from under it. He rolled quickly to see where it was and to get out of the thing's immediate range. He flopped onto his back just in time to see that it was directly overhead, coming down in a crushing body slam. Then the thing was on his chest, had knocked every ounce of air out of his lungs in one heavy gush. It threw a thick arm across his throat to hold him still. It brought the other hand around; the one with the vibrabeam finger.

Salsbury heaved again, only succeeding in making the mechanical increase the pressure on his throat. He gagged, wondered vaguely why he had to be vibra-beamed *and* strangled. One should be enough surely.

The brass tip pointed somewhere above and between Victor's eyes. The top of his head would go easily, wetly.

Abruptly, there was another impact as something struck the back of the

robot. The thing pitched over Salsbury, carried forward by whatever had slammed into it. He rolled sideways, sat up, gasping to get air into his aching lungs, massaging his sore throat. Now, as his watering eyes cleared, he could see what had thrown the mechanical off balance in the last moments before its success. Intrepid had bolted down the stairs (or had stumbled) and had leaped into the battle without a single reservation. He had his teeth sunk into the robot's neck, his claws scrabbling on the broad back. The mechanical stood, swaying, and tried to shake the beast off. It reached behind itself and pounded a heavy fist into the furious mutt. Intrepid squealed with pain but held on, Seemed to chew his teeth in more deeply.

After a few more useless attempts to dissuade that noble canine, the robot stood, wavering under the weight of the mongrel and the fury of his attack, pointed his laser at Salsbury and fired, realizing his duty was not to himself, but to the masters who had sent him to kill.

Salsbury rolled, came in under the destructive swath of golden light. Behind, the sofa whuffed with the beam boring its interior. The corded covering caught fire. The flames illuminated the room, sent dancing shafts of light off the mechanical's pale skin, off Intrepid's bristled fur.

The robot fired again.

This time Victor did not move fast enough, slowed by the pain that still arced through him, by his certainty that a second shot could not come so fast, that the mechanical would have to orient itself. The beam seared his shoulder, sent fragments of flesh exploding outward. A shot any more direct would have burst him like a ripe fruit fallen from a tree. Blood dribbled down his arm, hot and sticky.

The room swayed.

He thought he heard Lynda shouting.

He fell, came to his knees, agonizingly aware that he would have to move fast if he were to avoid the next burst. When he looked up, he was staring directly into the gleaming brass tip.

Then there was the sound of the vibratube, and Salsbury waited for the worst. But it was not the mechanical that had fired. It was the target now, the gold illumination blossoming on its chest. It turned, seeking the source of the beam. When it found Lynda standing in the corner where the other tube had fallen, it raised its arm to shoot her.

And it was all over.

The robot's chest, under the concentrated beam from Lynda's tube, bulged outward, burst and spewed glass and wire and plastic shrapnel. It stood, eyes dimming through lighter and lighter shades of blue. When they were utterly dark, it toppled onto its face, dead as a machine could get, Intrepid still on its back with his teeth sunk into the artificial flesh.

Salsbury started for the cellar steps, stepping around the dead machine,

then remembered that it was Lynda who had the weapon, not him. His arm ached dully, and his head was spinning. He turned back to find her just as she came to him. Give me the tube, he said, reaching for it.

Why?

Got to go down see if there are more of them.

I'll go along.

You'll stay here, he said, taking the tube from her.

Damnit, who killed the last one?

He looked to the mechanical that Intrepid still toyed with. He shook his head. All right. Be careful.

They switched on the light and looked down the steps. There were no more mechanicals on them. They went down, Lynda behind and holding onto him. In the basement, they found nothing. The portal in the wall was gone again. After checking the basement three times, they went back upstairs and turned off the light, closed the door. The shooting was over. At least until tomorrow night.

Come on and let me look at your arm, she said, dragging him into the kitchen. He followed like a dumb animal.

He sat in a straight-back chair while she washed the burn. It was approximately two inches long, an inch wide, and an inch deep. That was a goodly sized chunk of flesh for anyone to lose, even for a man who seemed to heal miraculously fast. I told you about healing so quickly, he said. It won't need medicines.

I'm putting a dressing on it all the same.

It's already stopped bleeding. It'll be heavily scabbed by tomorrow night and healed in a few days.

She ignored him, got alcohol, gauze and tape. By the time she had finished bandaging it, the pain was gone. They cleaned up the mess, made something to eat. They were both ravenous. Just as they were finishing, Intrepid came padding in for some bits of lunchmeat.

Later, in bed, she said, Are you sure it's safe?

Positive. The portal only opens at that one time. Besides, there's Intrepid.

He whined from his position by the door.

But what do we do next, Vic? Call the police?

No. They'd get curious about Jacobi. He said it before he thought. Then he could have bitten off his tongue.

You think they killed him? she asked.

He tried to answer, could not.

What is it?

I- Well, he decided, it was best to get it over with. She would listen, leave. She would not want to stay with a killer. He told her swiftly, though not without emotion, conveying to her his own horror at having murdered a real,

flesh and blood man.

She did not go. She said nothing, merely accepted and understood. He felt warm hands on his chest. Then her comforting arms were around him. He tried to fight, to tell her that she would taint herself; that it would be no good; that she could never adjust to him as a killer. But she was softness, warmth. He let his sensations carry him like a roller coaster. They clutched each other to keep from falling out, riding higher and higher, growing ever more dizzy, breathless as the speed of their rollicking, rocketing love carried them faster and faster

He gave no thought to lizards or robots.

It was not the time. Besides, they would not encounter the demons again until tomorrow night, twenty-four hours from now, at the witching hour of one-thirty.

Now they were safe; or so he thought.

He was making a big mistake.

CHAPTER 10

They woke a little before nine the next morning. They might not have risen that early, except that Intrepid, who had quite obviously been awake for some time, decided to crawl onto their covers and perform his imitation of a child's rubber ball for their entertainment. When the pandemonium died down, there was no sense in pretending they could go back to sleep. They took turns calling Intrepid names and laughing at his happy responses, then took turns in the shower. He offered to let her go first, wary about the length of time a woman would take, was happily surprised when she came into the bedroom fifteen minutes later, finished.

When he got downstairs, breakfast was ready.

Will you marry me? he asked.

She looked up from her eggs and toast, grinning. She ate like a she-wolf, the firm muscles of her tawny jaw tightening as she chewed. Is this a proposal.

Sounds like that to me.

Extremely romantic. In my excitement, I am liable to spew a mouthful of eggs all over the table.

Sorry I'm not the Gary Grant type.

They exchanged banter of that sort throughout the morning, Doris-Day-movie-talk on the surface, but easy and fun as such conversation can be between two people who have no need to impress each other. In the backs of both their minds, however, was the terror and doubt about the cellar and the things that came out of it in the early hours of the morning. It was only their ability to fill in the waiting with banter that kept them from madness.

Victor did some heavy moving, taking the things out of a back guest room and storing them in the attic, then moving his art supplies upstairs, thankful that the heaviest pieces had come dismantled. It was odd to be engaged in domestic chores when his life might hang in the balance, when his future was totally unpredictable; but, there was nothing else to do. He had just finished putting together the heavy drafting table when Dr. West returned to check on his patient.

He was astounded at the degree of healing on Salsbury's chest. He was perturbed when Salsbury evaded his questions about the nature of the infliction of the wound. When he discovered the bandaged arm where the vibrabeam had struck the night before, Lynda explained that he had fallen and cut it. Victor, playfully, he hoped, refused to let West look at it, joking about the medical debts he had already incurred beyond his ability to pay. The doctor left unsatisfied and suspicious, but ignorant, which was all they cared

about.

They ate a light dinner, agreed to go into town for supper and to pick up some of Lynda's clothes, a toothbrush, toiletries. It was impossible to persuade her to leave now, while the mystery had not yet been solved. Meanwhile, he brought sketching materials down to the front porch stoop and made ready to draw a realistic view of an elderly Dutch Elm at the corner of the drive. Lynda and Intrepid left to walk in the orchard. With his tools in his hands, he felt more at rest than ever before.

He did not know what would happen within the next half hour.

As he started drawing, he realized that, though he was not Victor Salsbury the artist, he *was* an artist in his own right. In moments, he had outlined a drawing, blocked it, gave it shape. Instead of filling in detail, he flipped to another sheet and did an impressionistic view of the same elm. It took longer, but it proved that he was not merely a renderer, but creative as well. Whoever had educated him for the role of Victor Salsbury had done a rather thorough job.

Shortly after two, as Victor was fleshing out the first sketch into a full landscape, Intrepid came through the front door to the closed porch door, barked to be let out. Victor called for Lynda, decided she must still be in the orchard. You want out? he asked the dog, reluctant to stop sketching.

Intrepid barked again.

Salsbury did not stop to think that Intrepid only barked in situations of great strain. Other times, he snuffled. The dog came through the open door, watched Salsbury return to his work. After a moment, he shook his big head as if satisfied Salsbury was his master, padded along the side of the house. He looked into the orchard, then turned and faced the man with the pencils.

Out of the corner of his eye, Salsbury saw the dog running toward him, thought nothing of it. But as he got closer, Salsbury realized that the mutt's playfulness could ruin his drawing. He brought up an arm to ward him off and was bowled from his step onto the grass as the dog hit him, still running top speed.

The dog rolled past him, not making a sound, came onto his feet as Salsbury was shaking his head and reaching for his sketch pad. Before he realized what was happening, the dog charged again. This time, his teeth were bared. They were unnaturally, supernaturally long and sharp.

Intrepid! he shouted.

The dog leaped.

Salsbury whirled sideways, out of his path, felt claws scabble weakly at him as the beast went by.

Stop it!

But the dog came again.

This time, the beast waited until the last moment to leap, then leapt to

Salsbury's right so that the man whirled into him instead of out of his way. Salsbury felt teeth graze his shoulder. The dog's claws hooked in his shirt and the tops of his jeans, and it came around for another nip.

He avoided the vicious bite with no room to spare, saw another one coming. He grabbed the animal's front paws and pried them off, threw it, kicking, into the hedges. The dog lay for a moment, as if groggy, then bounded to his feet and came between Salsbury and the porch door-the only escape route.

Intrepid! he shouted again, trying to make the canine come to its senses.

Then he saw its eyes.

They were flat and blue.

The eyes of another robot, not the eyes of his noble mutt A deadly imitation.

Sometimes, just as the worst is transpiring, you think of how monumentally stupid you have been, of all the warning signals you have ignored, of all the things you should have seen and interpreted as leading inexorably to the disaster now at hand. Standing there facing the mechanical killer, Salsbury thought of a number of things that should have put him on his guard. Firstly, there had been no place in the cellar for a man-sized robot to hide when they had investigated it last night; but a dog killer was considerably smaller. Secondly, if the first robot had been able to broadcast reports through the barrier to the lizard-things, it certainly would have reported Intrepid as a nuisance. Preparing a killer in a familiar form, therefore, would have been a logical next step. Thirdly, if this was Intrepid, how had he gotten into the house without Lynda to open the back door for him? Fourthly, Intrepid never barked except when extremely excited. This robot had made a mistake in that line, and Victor had obliged it by overlooking the error. Five: he had left his vibratube upstairs, thinking he would not need it until the portal opened again at one-thirty. But he had ignored all the signals, the flashing obviousnesses. And there it was looking big mean and slightly mad.

Salsbury crouched a dozen feet from it, watching it carefully for the first indications of an impending attack. At the same time, his mind riffled through all that it contained; through what he seemed to know almost innately, looking for some piece of combatant's lore that would serve him now. How did you cripple a dog? This was not a dog, but a robot; still, it was dog-form and might be at least partially vulnerable to the same things a real dog would be vulnerable to. But those were few. A dog was compact and fast, vicious in a fight. Even if Salsbury had had a gun, it would have been almost useless against a trained killer dog-or a machine built to look and fight like one-for there would be no time to aim. There was only one moment when a dog was open to defeat: when it was in the air, after it had leaped. There might not be

time to fire a well-placed shot, or pull a knife and sink it home, but there was time to do one thing.

He began thinking again of the data buried in his mind. Here was a plan for handling a killer dog, something only a commando ought to know. Another mystery. Who had programmed him to know this? Who had foreseen the dangers? He stopped thinking about that and concentrated on the dog machine.

When the beast was in the air, coming at him, it would be relatively defenseless. Its teeth would be out of range, its claws useless while in flight. Its front paws would be tucked weakly back and would not spring forward and unsheath their claws until the last second before contact. If Salsbury moved quickly enough, reaching forward to intercept it, he could grab one of those paws, twist it as he fell, and throw the machine over his head as hard as he could manage. Its own momentum would ensure that it would fall fairly far off and that it would hit the ground with great impact. The least he could do was stun it badly and break a leg. If he were lucky, it would break its neck or snap its spine.

Then there was no time for contemplation as it rushed him head on. Its claws scabbled on a bare patch in the lawn-*clickity-click-click*-and it jumped.

He grabbed a paw, closed his hand around it, twisted, fell and threw, certain that his timing could not be right, though his body seemed pleased with the maneuver. A second or two later, there was a solid thump as the robot mongrel smashed into the earth fifteen feet behind him.

He came to his feet, turned. He could see that the thing had been damaged by his trick, but that the wounds were not anything like he hoped for. It got to its feet and staggered, as if its gyros had been disturbed, then gained its balance and seemed as sure-footed as before. Its artificial fur was badly rumpled and did not smooth itself as real fur would. But its neck was still distressingly intact. Its legs had not been damaged. Of course, Salsbury told himself, he should have expected steel bones, should have known they would not snap as easily as calcium ones.

He looked to the door, decided it would be suicide to attempt to reach that. The moment he turned his back and ran, the dog machine would be on him, on his neck with those nightmarish, over-sized fangs. There would be a great deal of brilliant blood, searing white pain. Then his throat would be gone and his brain would die as the blood ceased pumping to it. Maybe thirty seconds altogether.

He confronted the dog and waited for its next move, hoping his luck would hold out and that he would be able to get the machine with the same combat device he had just used.

He thought the chances of that were slim.

It recovered in short order and charged again, taking quick little steps,

then a long, gliding leap that would put it squarely on his shoulders, its fangs buried to the hilt in his neck. Unlike robot men, Salsbury would bleed, bleed like hell. Despite his fantastic capacity for recovery, his fast rate of healing, he would die, for he could never mend as swiftly as the machine could tear him open.

He went under it, repeated the throwing trick, tossed it behind him. Surprisingly, he had gained another few moments of life.

This time, the robot required longer to get up, but it was back on its feet at the end of a minute, looking as deadly as ever. Those blue, shining eyes were much more sinister in that canine face than they had been in the man-form robots. They gave the thing the look of the demon, a werewolf, a hell-beast come to judge.

Watching it, Victor was sure something must have broken. A tube or a circuit board; a snarling of wires; a fracturing of condensor, transistor-something. Anything.

But nothing had.

It came after him again.

He repeated his single trick, sent it careening into the side of the porch steps where it bounced off the concrete and thumped onto the ground, shivering as if it could know the meaning of fear as thoroughly as man. When Salsbury got to his feet, the machine was already standing.

The sun seemed terribly bright, murderous.

Victor was breathing heavily, sweating like a stoker on a steam locomotive. He wiped the perspiration out of his eyes and clamped his teeth together. This could not keep up forever. Despite his overdeveloped body and reserves of adrenalin, he was flesh and blood. The beast, however, was metal and plastic. It would not tire. Sooner or later- most likely sooner-it would get the better of him, simply because exhaustion would dull his senses and make him more vulnerable.

When it charged this time, he noticed that its right front leg was slightly bent. It wobbled as it ran, though it still maintained an adequate, killing speed. Spirits brightened a little, Salsbury moved forward more anxiously and clutched (that leg, twisted for all he was worth and threw his opponent. It landed like a snow plow dropped two miles from a supply plane without benefit of parachute. Victor fancied he felt the earth tremor. When it got up, the right leg was dangling, almost useless.

Salsbury chuckled. When he heard what the chuckle sounded like, he bit down on his lower lip and cut the sound off. It had the touch of insanity that precedes total madness; the sharp and biting shrillness of a man pushed too near the edge.

When the mechanical demon came this time, it did not leap. It darted in for his leg, moving as fast as it could only on three limbs. Before Victor

realized it had changed battle tactics, it had sunk its teeth into his left calf and was beginning to back-pedal in order to rip his flesh. He swung his right foot, smashed it alongside the head. The thing's jaws opened long enough for him to pull his wounded leg free. Then he kicked hard again, sent the demon tumbling into the shrubs. The only trouble was that in doing this, he lost his own balance, fell backwards, and cracked his head against the concrete steps.

Blackness swept in like a wave, and he had to keep running to avoid getting wet. He was losing the race. He tried to concentrate on getting up before the machine returned to finish him off. He raised to a sitting position, got his hands under himself. By the hedges, the robot was back on its three good legs, calculating its next attack. Salsbury pushed into a stoop, lost his balance when someone dropped a mountain on his head. He fell backwards again, onto the grass.

Groggily, he looked around for the robot.

It was taking a few tentative steps in his direction.

One Another.

Closer

The unconsciousness swirled through his head, less complete than it had been, a blackness tinted with hints of ruby and emerald now. He would not pass out, but neither would he get up in time to save himself.

The dog machine crouched, took a tense step.

Then he remembered that he was up against the porch steps and that the door was immediately behind him, a few feet up. If he could launch himself fast enough, he might reach the portal and roll through, slam it behind before the mechanical killer could reach him. He put his hands under himself to make a try, then realized he was too late.

The killer was coming at him, fast.

CHAPTER 11

When the killer was halfway across the open space, closing swiftly on Salsbury, it seemed to jolt like a slipping motion picture film. It barked viciously, snarling and yelping enough for a pack of wolves. Victor wondered, briefly, why the thing was bothering to make a pretense of being flesh and blood when its mechanical nature was now so obvious. At first, of course, it had barked and panted and lolled its tongue to make him think it was real, not wire and plastic. But now a moment later, he discovered the snarling was coming from behind him, from Intrepid—the *real* Intrepid. The mutt launched himself past Salsbury, slammed into the robot, and went rolling across the lawn in a tangle of claws and teeth.

Lynda screamed behind Salsbury, then was at his side.

Get the vibratube! he shouted. Hurry!

She was gone then, the porch door slamming behind her.

He watched the dogs fight, the long-toothed, battery-powered demon and his own noble mongrel. Judging from the manner in which he attacked the mechanical beast, Intrepid seemed to think he was a super dog himself. He rode its back, snarling and digging into its neck with his teeth, raking its sides with his claws. The robot staggered under his weight, nipped at him over its shoulder but could not get in any good rips with its long teeth in such close-quarters combat.

Stay with it, boy! Victor shouted, his voice a long, wheezing croak.

The mechanical beast rolled, twisted, got away from Intrepid, then launched itself back at him, got its teeth into his shoulder and ripped with a fury only a machine could have contained; such violent aggressiveness would have burned out an organic brain. Even from where Salsbury sat, he could see the rich gleam of blood against the tan fur of Intrepid's shoulder. The mutt yelped a painful series of noises, but he did not give up the battle. He got his own teeth into the robot dog's neck, right where the jugular should be, and tore. He came away with a mouthful of fur and pink plastic jell that exposed wires and tubes beneath a clear plexiglass casing.

But he drew no blood.

It was hopeless. Intrepid must have sensed that too. But he went for the throat again, gnashing teeth on that transparent casing.

Lynda seemed to be taking a damnably long time. He wondered if she remembered where the tube was; if she had to hunt, she might not find it in time. Lynda! Salsbury shouted, frantic now that his dog was losing. Lynda, damnit!

The robot had torn Intrepid's shoulder into a raggedy mess. Now it

changed its tactics, satisfied it had accomplished all that it could with the shoulder. It went for the base of the dog's throat, bit there. Intrepid squealed, pulled away, losing some fur and dribbling blood from his throat now. He staggered and went down on his hind legs, as if he were very weary, too tired to much care any longer.

The robot circled him, bit him in the haunch.

You son-of-a-bitch! Salsbury screamed. Leave him alone!

The robot bit Intrepid on the haunch again, worried the flesh a moment before letting go.

Intrepid made a half-hearted muttering growl deep in his throat, seemed as angry at his own weakness as he was at the enemy.

Lynda! Where was she?

Intrepid gagged sickeningly and made a few meaningless passes at his adversary, never once getting a score. The robot came around the front of him, again, went in for his shoulder. Intrepid managed to bite the robot's nose, a nip that would have stopped an ordinary dog. But this beast was not ordinary.

Suddenly Lynda was next to him with the vibratube.

Can you see which one? he asked.

She nodded and aimed.

The weapon hummed. The beam caught the mechanical in the rear, made its fur stand on end all over its body, as if each hair were an individual wire. The thing let go of Intrepid and looked around, turned toward them and began a rapid hobble on its three good legs. It had been sidetracked by the necessity to put Intrepid out of the action; it was now returning to its original mission: to kill Salsbury and Lynda too, no doubt.

Halfway to them, it shuddered-the beam still played on it-and tried to turn around, instead, dropped to the ground again, its neck casing shattered. It was still. Dead and finished.

But Intrepid was also still.

Salsbury's head felt like a cracked egg with things leaking out of it, and there was a small though bearable fire in his calf where the robot had sunk its teeth. Ignoring both of these pains, he made his way to Intrepid and knelt beside him. The dog looked up at him with huge brown eyes, slightly dulled now, licked his lips with a pink and swollen tongue. He didn't even whine. Salsbury thought there was a point where stoic courage became foolishness.

Is there a veterinarian in town? he asked Lynda.

Dr. Debert.

Get the car started. We're taking him in as fast as you can drive the damn thing.

She ran off to get the keys and left him the job of getting Intrepid into the car. He looked the dog over. There was not much blood coming out of his

throat, but there was a good deal seeping from his shoulder and one haunch that the robot had worried. Salsbury slid a hand under the mutt's hind end, trying to avoid touching the quivering, open wound. He nestled the other hand under the dog's shoulder where the wound was simply too large to avoid. His hand got sticky with blood. The dog whined when Salsbury squeezed the shoulder together but made no move to avoid his master. Victor stood with him, somewhat unsteady, and carried him to the car. Lynda was waiting and opened the door for him. He climbed inside and held the mutt on his lap all the way into town. Intrepid made no move, and his eyes were heavy. The greatest reaction Salsbury got from him was in the form of a thank you: the dog licked his hand.

Dr. Debert had a modern clinic on the east end of town. They took Intrepid into the waiting room, his blood dribbling on the white tile. The nurse at the reception desk came to her feet, sucking in her breath. I'll get the doctor right away. He can drop what he's doing.

So he stood with the dog in his arms as if Intrepid were a child. He could feel his own heart thumping heavily, almost as heavily as Intrepid's. His eyes were unaccountably blurry, and he couldn't seem to clear them. He decided he must be crying a little. Just a little; for a god-damned dog.

When Debert came out, he stopped, shocked at the extent of his patient's wounds, then came briskly forward. What was it?

Another dog, Salsbury lied a bit It attacked me, and Intrepid defended me.

In here, Debert said, leading the way back into his office.

They followed through a book-lined study into a white room with white fixtures and a blue-covered operating table with special clamps and straps for animals. There was already a poodle on the table. It looked at them with a thin, pointed face that was more nasty than cute, barked in a high, brittle voice.

I'm afraid we'll have to take Poochy into the waiting room, Mrs. Wallace, Debert said to a matronly woman in an expensive, blue-knit suit with a line of yellow alligators stitched across her left breast.

But Poochy has glass in his foot! she said, wrinkling her doughy face in consternation.

This dog may be dying, Debert said, straining to remain polite.

But Poochy was here first, the woman said, turning to Salsbury.

He did not know what sort of expression was on his face, but it must not have been too charming, for she turned paler than she had been, the rouge on her cheeks like red clouds floating over the milkiness of her face. Quickly, she took Poochy in her arms and hustled back to the waiting room.

After Debert strapped Intrepid down and put him to sleep with sodium pentathol, Salsbury and Lynda went back to the waiting room. They were there for an hour. The doughy woman made a show of her displeasure. She

talked to Poochy in that stupid tone parents use when chucking their fat babies under the chin. When it barked, she went into long, wailing monologues about her poor suffering canine. At the end of an hour, Debert came out, a few spots of blood on his blue smock.

How is he? Victor asked, feeling somehow absurd being so concerned about a dog, yet, remembering what the dog had done for him; where he would have been without Intrepid. He would have been, simply, dead on the lawn, leaking blood all over the grass.

I put twenty-six stitches in his shoulder, Debert said. The wound on his hip was a little more ragged. I couldn't really use stitches there. I stopped the bleeding; powdered it heavily; drew it together with a tape and cloth compression bandage. He lost a good bit of blood and needed a transfusion. Shot of penicillin to protect against infection. He'll sleep for another hour or so under the drugs, then drift into a natural sleep that should last until late this evening. He's going to live, though it will take a few weeks for him to heal properly. He might always have a slight limp in the right foreleg, due to the separated shoulder muscles. That'll be his only mark, though. I'd like to keep him for a week. Then you can bring him back once a week for a month until we're sure everything has knitted properly.

They thanked him. Vic felt like someone had found him under a concrete mixer and had thankfully brought a crowbar and worked him loose. He paid Debert, surprised that the bill was so low.

On their way home, they stopped at a grocery while Lynda bought two thick steaks and all the trimmings. They also collected a few of her things. The ride home and the preparation of supper in which they both took part had a curiously manic air. They were, they knew, over-reacting to the news that they were all, once again, alive after an assassination attempt. They were cheering their good fortune so the gods might not think them ungrateful. And, in a way, they were trying to pretend, at least for a short while, that the trouble was over. The big showdown had come and passed; now they could settle down and live like real people.

But lurking in their minds was the understanding that anything might yet happen-anything at all. And whatever *did* happen, it would be highly unpleasant. Thinking these thoughts but mouthing jovialities, they dug into their steaks and baked potatoes sometime around six-thirty. They were just finishing with dishes of sherbert when the noise came from the living room, the banging and thumping of something negotiating the turn of the staircase leading from the second floor.

Victor Salsbury, a cool, well-modulated voice said.

It was the 810-40.04, awake at last.

It was time for another briefing.

CHAPTER 12

The computer trunk, featureless as before, floated into the kitchen, seemed to register his presence with some invisible bank of sensors. You are accompanied by someone else, it said. Identify them, please.

My wife, Salsbury said, stretching things a bit.

The computer was silent a moment, adjusting to the information that was certain to require more than a little shifting of data. You are not permitted it began.

Whatever authority you had over me is gone, Salsbury told it.

On the surface of the trunk, two squares began to glow yellow. Place your hands here for your next series of orders, the computer said.

I repeat, Salsbury said, that whatever authority you had over me is gone.

On the glowing plates, the computer said.

If you expect to have authority over me, even the littlest bit of authority, you will have to tell me enough about this thing to keep me alive. As it is, I've killed three robot men and one robot dog sent by those lizard-things, though I have no idea what in the hell-

Lizard-things? But you must be wrong. The vacii invasion is not to begin for several days yet. Put your hands on the glowing-

Go to hell! You can come look at the parts of the robots if you want. You can stay until one-thirty in the morning when the portal opens in the wall and more of them come through. Or maybe the lizards will come themselves this time.

There was another pause. The plates on the trunk surface ceased to glow. You are telling the truth, it said, as if it had lie-detecting devices wired into it.

Damn straight. And I've just decided that this isn't worth sticking around for. I can't trust you'll tell me everything. I think the wise thing for us to do is get out of here now, fast, move somewhere else where I can paint and-

That would be unwise. The computer's voice was a monotone and had already begun to sound hollow and boring.

You think? Why?

Because, the 810-40.04 said, if you don't continue the plan and defeat the vacii, they'll pour into this continuum, overwhelm it and establish one of their cultural experiments. In six months, they'll rule this world.

Six months? An alien invasion? That's insanity!

You've seen them in the wall, Lynda reminded him.

He shook his head in agreement. Let's get this over with, then. Brief me.

Put your hands on the glowing-

No, he said matter-of-factly. I will not let you delve into my mind and fill

me up with orders I don't even know you've given me. Brief me verbally.

It would be impossible to control you as before. You have become too human in time since the last stage of the operation. Your psyche has been allowed to recover from its hypno-training.

Verbal, he said.

You must carry the first briefing, it said. My data banks must include the present situation.

He told it all that had happened since he had left it in the cave to go purchase the Jacobi house. When he was done, he said, Now maybe you can tell me why you wouldn't respond when I came to you to find out about the lizard-things and the robots.

You must realize that an 810-40.04 has a contained power source and that I can only operate in the time allotted by the plan. Otherwise I risk draining my reserves, which could be disastrous. Without computer briefing, you might fail. The plan might fail. We mis-estimated the time of the first vacii attacks. Seriously mis-estimated. Otherwise, you would not have had to face the robots unarmed.

Who am I working for? he asked, not bothering to comment on the first answer, afraid that the well of information would dry up if he didn't fill his buckets quickly.

The oppressed people of the vacii experimental society of Earth Number 4576.

Salsbury waited for more. When there wasn't any more, he said, What is that supposed to mean? Where are these oppressed people?

Two-hundred-and-eighty-five years in the future, the 810-40.04 said.

They sat still, hardly breathing. Vic cleared his throat. And what Is Well, is that where I came from? From 2255 A.D.?

Yes.

But why doesn't he remember that future? Lynda asked, leaning over the table toward the trunk as if it were a person.

Because he never lived it, the computer said.

Wait, Salsbury interrupted. I'm not tracking clearly. When *did* I live, then?

Never, the computer said. You're an android.

He looked at Lynda; she at him. She took his hand, which was the sign he needed to maintain his confidence. He spoke to the 810-40.04 again. I'm not made of wires and tubes. I bleed real blood.

Android, not robot, the computer said. You were a product of the Artificial Wombs, grown from a chemically simulated egg and a chemically simulated sperm, each with carefully engineered genes. From all appearances, you are a natural born man. You think, feel, and react like a man, like Victor Salsbury who was chosen because data about him had survived the centuries; his work gained renown after his death. You have, it is agreed, a soul like any

man, for you are in all ways human except for those differences built into you. They are three. One: in a crisis, you react with more speed than a man should, for your mental processes are stimulated by danger and you can tap them with the fluency of some wild animals. Two: you have an ability to produce and use an adrenalin-like substance which is secreted by a mechanism buried in your liver. This has the single drawback of making you highly susceptible to alcoholic beverages, but this cannot be helped. Three: you have great recuperative powers far beyond the normal. Otherwise, you are a man.

If this cause is so important, Victor said, why not send one of those oppressed people back? He would be more fanatical. You would be more certain of his cooperation, though he would not have my recuperative powers or reactions.

That is reason enough, the machine said. But, also, a man cannot travel so far into the past, unfortunately.

Why not?

As he travels backwards, a man grows younger. If he begins his journey as a fifty year old, travels twenty years into the past, he is then thirty. No man can, therefore, return further into the past than his birth date. Since, in our future, the average age under the vacii is only eighty-two, we have no chance of finding a real man old enough to come back to this period and still be an adult when he arrives.

But why didn't I react like a man? Vic asked. He suspected why. The suspicion lingered in the back of his mind, frightening yet tantalizing.

The computer continued in a level tone. The artificial atmosphere of the mechanical wombs can help us achieve many things. The flow of time can be compressed or stretched. In your case, we made the interior of the womb capsule an accelerated time pocket. It took two years to create you, but you were carefully aged 310 years in that time. When you came back into the past in the normal time-flow reversal, you ended up in 1970 as a twenty-five-year-old man.

Salsbury could think of nothing to say, nothing to ask. He could only look at his body, his hands, and think about how old he was how really really old.

Lynda thought of something. If we stop these these vacii and can live a normal life, will Vic live to be 310?

The computer seemed to take a moment for reflection. He will be a fixture of the present, will not wink out of existence. He will live a healthy life, though it is not certain he will grow to be 310. He will not be living a preordained life, but a future of his own choosing. His mortality should be every bit as shaky as anyone's in this era.

You've more or less convinced me the vacii must be stopped, Salsbury said. But why? What are they and where are they from?

They are an intelligent extra-galactic race. Not only have they conquered faster-than-light travel, but probability travel as well. Or at least one probability line of them has.

Salsbury looked properly perplexed, and the computer's sensors must have registered the expression.

Imagine, the computer said, that this is not the only Earth that exists. There are thousands, millions, billions, countless Earths with slightly different histories. There are an infinity of probabilities, all existing in the same space and time, but separated by quasi-dimensional spaces. Traveling from one to the other of these probabilities involves finding the weak spots in the quasi-dimensional spaces, the places where the probabilities almost touch. Once these are found, equipment is erected to weaken these places further until, finally, a bubble develops between the two probabilities, a bubble through which you can pass. At first, living tissue cannot move through the bubble and survive, for it is a vacuum filled with randomly bouncing electrons freed when the quasi-dimensional space is broken down to form the bubble. These electrons have a mass all out of proportion to their size. Tremendous density. They're like bullets that are of micro-micro size; they corrode the flesh, though they do not harm the plasti-steel alloy of the robots specially built to transverse the primitive bubble.

Once on the other side, the robots can bring through equipment to set up a beam generator from this side of the bubble. When the beams from both sides are locked, the bubble becomes a doorway that even flesh can pass through without difficulty. The vacii have sent robots through to destroy you but have not yet opened the bubble to animal transport. They will do that shortly, as soon as they have killed you, or before.

But to return to the origins of the vacii, the lizard-men. They landed on an Earth of one of the other probability lines and conquered it. From there, they spread out in both directions on the plane of probabilities, defeating one counter-Earth after another. We are the seventy-sixth to fall. We have not essentially been conquered from space, but from our own other probabilities. Here, at Harold Jacobi's house, in the summer of 1970, the vacii took over this probability. They established an experimental station, then proceeded to worlds beyond ours, into other probabilities.

Unknown to the vacii manning the station, on this world, our world-the future from which you and I have come-man discovered time travel. It was obvious, at once, to those in our future, that a time machine could be used as a weapon against the vacii rulers. If someone could be sent into the past to stop the vacii takeover of our worldline, the future would be entirely different. Man would be free. And, perhaps, the other vacii empires could fall like dominoes, backwards through the other probability lines they conquered; one Earth becoming free after another.

That was it. But it was too complicated to grasp all its significances in one sitting. Salsbury could only let it settle into his mind where he could later proceed to try to understand it. The lizards in the wall were aliens. But they were coming from a counter-Earth, not directly from the stars. He had been sent from the future of *this* Earth to stop their invasion before it began

What do you mean by experimental stations? Lynda asked. And what is the future like under the vacii?

The vacii, the 810-40.04 said, are nearly emotionless creatures. Perhaps they do experience love, pity, and hate among themselves, though to a small degree; but they have no feelings toward men. They look to man as an inferior animal to be experimented with. Where man's personality includes creativity and human interaction, the vacii have only scientific curiosity. They live for their experiments. The purpose of the race is to glean knowledge from the universe, or thus has developed their chief philosophy. Man is not the only race they have brought under their rule. There are other species throughout several galaxies. With each new race it subdues, the vacii begins controlled social experiments. How will men, for instance, react in a world of total anarchy? To find out, the vacii produce a world of anarchy and watch for a few centuries. The experiment *never* ends really, continuing as long as one human being is left alive in that experimental situation. Or maybe they create a world of pure democracy. Or a world ruled by teen-agers. Or they introduce a certain invention into the established society, perhaps a new weapon, perhaps something making genetic control possible. All sorts of things.

And on this probability line, in our own future? Salsbury asked.

Fascism, the computer said. Man has had his two-hundred-and-eighty-five years of Hitlers. It is not a pleasant place-your future.

Three-hundred years of fascist rule

The men who structured this operation were confident of your cooperation up to this point. It was realized that you would begin to grow less like the Puppet and more as a human being, which you are. Whether you would be anxious to help at this point was not known. If you rejected direct briefing through my sensor plates, then a series of senso-tapes was provided to show you the world of your future, show you what it will be like as a vacii experiment.

A hundred questions had risen now. Why, Salsbury asked, couldn't all this knowledge have been implanted in my mind to start, as well as a complete set of orders?

Because, as you grew younger, all the knowledge in your memory cells would fade. You arrived here with a blank brain and would have arrived blank even if you had been briefed in the future.

Then how did I know to kill Harold Jacobi?

A small chemical tape, impervious to unaging, was built into your brain. It

played back your orders on your arrival. While you slept those two weeks in the cave, I filled you in on your background as Victor Salsbury, but there was not time to tell you more, and no room for another chemical tape to have been implanted at the start

The senso-tapes, Lynda said. What are they?

They affect all your senses, the computer said. If you will each put a hand on one of the glow plates, I will transmit them to you. The nerves in your fingertips are enough to guarantee reception.

Salsbury grabbed Lynda's hand as she reached out. He spoke to the computer. This would be a fine moment to indoctrinate both of us, to turn me into a Puppet again.

No, the 810-40.04 said. It would not work. You are no longer receptive.

He looked skeptical.

You are too humanized now, the computer said. Surely you can see that.

He shrugged, reached out as Lynda did, touched the transmission plates on the top of the trunk. They faded into another world.

You are in a cell. Underground. There is no window. Only the gray cement floor, the gray damp walls, and the black iron bars that seal you off from the dimly lighted corridor beyond. You have not been fed your breakfast; it is getting toward the end of the lunch hour as well, and you have had nothing. A rat runs across the floor, stops at your bars and looks in. You realize, for the first time, that you are lying on the floor, on a level with the rat. The rat is looking directly into your eyes, its own eyes gleaming crimson, hot. It shows its teeth, very pointed teeth, in a vicious grin, the grin of every predator since time immemorial. It would like to chew on your eyeballs. You can't let that happen. You try to move and get halfway up, fall back onto the floor. You are so terribly weak. The rat comes closer. You try to think why you are here in this place, why this is happening. You were on the wrong side of some political issue, but you can't remember what it was. It hardly matters in a fascist regime. But it couldn't have been this important, could it? The rat scampers two feet closer. Could it? Closer You scream. But there is no one interested in your plight.

You have been taken from your home in the middle of the night along with a bag of books the local police-a division arm of the Gestapo-have labeled left-wing. The most damning one was the antitotalitarian novel 1984. They rammed the books into the blue denim bag, handcuffed you, and led you out. They kept shoving you all the way to the patrol car. When you tried to strike at them, they knocked you down and kicked you in the hip. Now you are at the police station, in a small room with

featureless walls. There is no furniture except a wooden bench to which you have been tied. They have left you alone for an hour now. You are trembling, waiting to find out what will happen. There is the faint smell of vomit and urine in the air. You wonder what they have done to previous prisoners to make these smells permeate the chamber. Then they come in. Four of them. The chief officer, a fair-skinned, blue-eyed man with a belly slung over his black leather belt. They are dressed in dark brown uniforms, wearing shiny, knee-length boots. The chief officer slaps the soles of your shoes with his billy club. The impact jars half your body. He asks you to confess, but when you ask to what, he just slaps your feet again. Well, that will not be too hard to take. Just so they don't go beyond that. But two hours later, your feet are swollen and aching. Your legs are on fire. Another hour, and your feet swell until the seams of your shoes split. You wet yourself. You know where the smells come from. You can feel the vomit in the back of your throat. Slap, slap, slap, slap

There were ten scenes in all, propaganda most certainly, but propaganda at once so horrid and believable that there was no denying its persuasive effect, Salsbury had been willing to cooperate, but had he not been, this would have convinced him. Not only because the entire population (save a handful of dictators and their staffs) of the world was suffering, but because he and Lynda would suffer too if the vacii could break through into this probability line and establish another experimental outpost.

When it was over, they settled back from the computer, trembling, white, perspiring. Whatever future man had been building for himself, no matter what degree of stupidity, it could never match the nightmare of that fascist experiment, of that place where alien vacii maintained the psychotics in power. That was a society various nations had accepted before, eventually to reject it. But if Vic didn't continue with the plan, that insanity would be his own future.

Well? the 810-40.04 asked.

Tell me what I have to do, he said numbly.

After the explanations were given, questioned, and understood, there was a good deal of work to be done. It was not particularly difficult labor, though it was tedious. At the computer's directions, Salsbury brought the two other trunks down from the upstairs bedroom, into the cellar, pressed them down against the floor before the spot in the wall where the vacii had opened their portal. The computer opened the other two trunks with an electric impulse broadcast to their interior locks. The lids popped open, revealing a great many wires and tubes, machine parts. It was Salsbury's job to put the pieces together like a jigsaw puzzle, following the 810-40.04's directions. He was

assembling, he found, a prober exactly like that of the vacii. When the aliens tuned in tonight, Salsbury would lock their beam with the vacii beam and open the bubble between probabilities to the passage of living tissue. This living tissue would be Victor.

The fact that their would-be mechanical assassins waited on the other side didn't help the slimy rollings of his stomach. If there were fifty robots however, he would be ready for them, for the 810-40.04 was equipping him for almost any eventuality.

But did a hero's knees knock together? Or did his breath come difficult?

No, he wasn't feeling much like a hero. He felt more like a little boy who has been playing a game with older kids and then abruptly discovers they're getting too rough for him and that there is no way he can graciously get out of the game. He was trained to fight. The chemical tape that had played itself the night of Harold Jacobi's murder had crammed thousands of pieces of commando combat techniques into his brain. But all the tricks of karate and judo and savate seemed weak when pitted against gray, scaled, sucker-mouthed things from somewhere a few million light-years and a few probability lines off.

By ten o'clock they finished rigging the probe machine. It was a rather rickety looking bunch of lightweight, sectioned beams supporting panels of intricate mechanisms. There was a chair for the operator. To operate the thing, Salsbury knew, one only needed to sit in that chair, flick a single switch, grip the handles on the sides of what looked like a spotlight, and aim the projector. There were little screws on each handle to work with your thumbs to change (ever so slightly) the flow pattern of the beam so that a good lock could be achieved.

They decided, with the computer's agreement, that things would move more quickly if Lynda were to operate the prober, lock beams, and open the probability doorway. Salsbury, meanwhile, could be standing next to where the portal would solidify, could leap through without having to first climb down from the prober.

At Lynda's suggestion, they left the computer to grab a bite to eat. Salsbury could only choke down half a sandwich and a cup of coffee. At a quarter after eleven, they went back into the cellar to wait. It was a nervous time. Vic paced, and Lynda bit her nails. The 810-40.04 went over and over the instructions until they were all ready to scream. At last, it was one-thirty. Lynda took her place at the chair; he stood alongside the wall, next to where the portal would open.

One-thirty came. And so did the vacii.

The blue spot began to glow on the wall, slowly clearing.

Lynda snapped on their own prober.

The two beams met. The window began to clear.

Now! the computer said.

And Salsbury leaped sideways and through into the other probability line,
into the room where the vacii operated their own prober.

CHAPTER 13

The first thing he saw was the face of the vacii operator, its toothless, sucking mouth all drawn up, the thin gray lips writhing wildly as if someone were jabbing pins into them. The red eyes gleamed, eyes of a rat, of pigeons, eyes of bowery winos sleeping in doorways and greeting the sun crossly. When he had been in his basement, with the bubble separating him from the aliens, the eyes had seemed merely red. Here, close up, he could see the minute webbing of pulsing blood vessels that gave them their color. The operator started off his machine, his mouth suddenly wide as if to yell something. Salsbury brought up the new hand gun the computer had provided and fired it. The lizard-thing gasped; its face dissolved as it toppled from us perch on the heavy-duty model prober.

Vic! Lynda shouted from beyond the portal, then followed the calling of his name with a shrill, piercing scream.

He came around out of reflex, going down on one knee as he pivoted, hoping to avoid any blow that might have been aimed for his head. There was no one immediately behind him.

He was screened by the bulk of the vacii prober, and it was entirely possible that no one else in the room knew he had come through. No one but the operator, and his head was too scrambled to imagine he could warn anyone else. Then why had Lynda screamed? He turned, looked back at her, saw that one man-form robot had gone through the portal, coming towards her where she sat on her prober chair. Another of the things was halfway through the port, one foot on either side.

Victor raised his gun and shot the one halfway through, trying to bring him down and get a clear shot at the mechanical that posed a more immediate threat to Lynda. The back of its neck peeled open like an apple dropped out of a tree onto stones. It pitched forward, crashed down with a great deal of clatter. The thing closing on Lynda turned to search for the source of the uproar behind it and collected Salsbury's second shot square in the center of its stomach. Glass, steel, and plastic jell that had been posing as flesh erupted in all directions.

The floor in front of Salsbury burst, showered up fragments, and smoked heavy blue clouds that had an acrid, rancid meat odor. He rolled sideways, against the base of the vacii projector, and swung his head around to see where the vibrashot had come from.

The room behind was crawling with robots. On a quick sweep, he estimated there were twenty of them.

Less than a second after he pulled his head back behind the bulk of the

prober, another beam sizzled into the metal work where his face had been, made little rivulets of molten steel dribble down and harden on the concrete floor. For a moment, he had a nauseatingly crystal picture of his head pocked with holes, each hole dribbling molten flesh. But flesh didn't melt, it burned. He squinted to keep the smoke out of his eyes and concentrated on getting out of there alive. While making sure none of the robot man-forms of the vacii inside enjoyed the same privilege.

One of the man-forms, without concern for itself, rushed across the floor, trying to get behind the machine for a try at Salisbury. He got the thing just as it moved over him. The impact of the gun's discharge knocked it backwards ten feet where it lay in pieces, humming slightly.

He thumbed the proper stud on the gun to convert it into a machine pistol a thousand times as deadly as it had been. He got off his knees, crouched, then darted into the room. The robots were clumped relatively close together, for they had been planning on marching single file into Salisbury's probability. He fanned the barrel of the heavy weapon, holding down on the trigger, and watched the gray gas pellets sink silently into them, expand from the friction, and explode from within.

The effect was not as dramatic on robots as it had been on the living tissue of the vacii, but it was adequate. If one pellet met too tough an area to penetrate far enough, another in that heavy barrage he was putting down, would surely turn the trick. Inside of thirty frantic seconds, the floor was littered with the parts of robot man-forms, some of the tubes still lit

Then there was quiet. Except for a strange, heavy noise like sandpaper on sandpaper. He looked around, trying to locate the source of the noise, wondering whether it was friendly or hostile. His heart began beating faster when he realized the sound was coming from some place quite close. Then he realized it was the sound of his own breath that he had begun to fear. It came raggedly, heavily into his lungs, burning them.

Victor, the computer said from beyond the portal, from the safety of the basement.

He walked across the man-form strewn chamber and peered through to where the trunk floated beside Lynda. Yeah?

The pack.

Lynda held out the rucksack that bulged with the things he would require. He took it, startled by the lines in her face, the deep etchings of tension and terror. He could almost summon a hate for those men of the future who had sent him back, had put him and Lynda through all this. Yet, without those same men to create him, he would never have existed to meet the girl. Be careful, she said.

He nodded.

Remember, the 810-40.04 said, with both beams locked we can keep the

portal open forever if we want. But if a vacii technician happens to come into that room over there and sees what has happened, they'll overwhelm us in seconds.

I'll try to handle it as quickly as possible, he said, feeling as if he were trapped in some fantasy.

I have instructed Lynda on the dismantling of a robot and the securing of its vibratube weapon. She will take care of that when you leave and arm herself.

It was Salsbury's turn to say, Be careful.

Don't worry, she said.

He slipped the rucksack on, shifted it until it rested easily between his shoulders. It wasn't bad. It only weighed eighteen-thousand pounds. All he had to do was tap some of that marvelous adrenalin-like juice that his special little liver-encased mechanism produced, and he could tote that pack around without a single twitch of a muscle.

The only thing that kept him going now was the knowledge that his actions to this point must already have had an effect on the future of their probability line.

He turned and made his way back across the room to the door. He held the gas pistol tightly in his right hand. The 810-40.04 had reminded him, earlier in the night, that he was ambidextrous; in the event he had a hand shot off, the computer wanted him to remember to shift the gun to his other paw. Somehow, such a suggestion had not raised his spirits any. At the door, he sucked in a hot breath, hooked fingers in the handle to slide the thing open.

I love you, Lynda said from the basement.

He couldn't answer her. If he did, if he turned to say something, his courage might snap and go tumbling down around his feet. He was working on sheer grit at this point, his sense of reason momentarily suspended. He could not risk a glance at those green eyes or that crooked tooth.

He slid the door open, looked into the corridor beyond, stepped through, and slid the door shut on the messy scene in the projection room.

* * *

The vacii, being an alien race with alien heritage and with, certainly, alien patterns of thought which would not be ever totally conceivable to a man, did not build in any way similar to human architectural concepts. Salsbury had noticed, while in the prober room, that there were no straight walls here, no perfectly angled corners. That room had been like the inside of a very large igloo, white, slightly rough like pebbled ice, and domed. The walls were not regular, but cut with nooks and crannies, tiny blind ends where things were stored, where equipment was built in, or where, oddly, there was nothing but

emptiness. It was as if the place had been hacked out of stone; it had the feeling of a cave, not a room. No, more than that. It was the kind of building one might expect man-sized insects to build.

The hallway was no different. It was much like a tunnel, large enough for three people to walk abreast and still leave a foot on each side, boring straight away in both directions. The light was dim and yellow and came from glowing stones set at regular intervals in the rounded ceiling. He hesitated only a moment, then turned and walked left in search of a stairwell. If vacii had stairwells.

Thirty feet from the projection room, he came to an abrupt halt and listened intently; he picked up the screeching, giggling noise he had caught a sliver of moments before. It was loud and clear now. He judged it was coming from somewhere just ahead, off to one side, probably from a connecting passageway. It continued, a keening babble. Two separate babbles; vacii speaking in their native tongue. The sound of it chilled him, and he thought of them more as lizards than ever. Their tone, the syllables of their native language spoke of claws and caves, of scaly love-making and slimy burrows of antiquity. It was so unhuman, so much more unhuman than their appearance, that it nearly unnerved him, almost froze him to the spot.

Which would have been disastrous.

Then they were so close he could hear their broad, splayed feet slapping against the cold floor. Any moment, they would appear ahead of him, would look up, perhaps gasp, then spread the alarm Unless he killed them. But if he had to start stashing bodies in closets this soon, he would be discovered by some janitor before he had finished with the operation. He looked around anxiously, caught sight of a closed door five feet ahead. He bounded to it, trying to land silently on his toes, and slid it open, his gun still in his hand.

Luckily, the place was empty and dark. He stood against the wall, slid the door shut and waited. A few moments later, the voices passed the door, heading back the way he had come. He stood sweating, trembling, waiting until he could not hear them before returning to the corridor.

Then he had a bad thought.

What if they were going to the projection room? And found the bodies. And found Lynda. And

He slid the door part way open and peered after them. They came to the proper room, passed it without slowing. A hundred feet beyond that, they turned into a side corridor on their right. Their voices faded, faded and were gone at last, letting the oily quiet of the place slide back over the walls.

Acting the part of the cat burglar, slinking, eyes slippery inside his sockets, ears primed, gun hand nervous, Salisbury went into the corridor and hurried along, looking for stairs. Fifty feet from the room in which he had hidden, he found a stairwell, looked both ways down the hall to be certain he

was still unobserved, then started up the steps.

He found he could not look up the well to see if there was anyone above him, but the construction also made his own position safe from anyone higher on the stairs. The steps themselves seemed to be hacked from the wall, rugged, white, worn slightly yellow-brown in the center with the tread of vacii feet. There was a landing fifteen steps up, another and another. Thirty flights and fifteen stories later, he came to the end of the stairs.

He looked into the top floor's corridor. There was no traffic. He stepped out and ran lightly and, he hoped, silently, to the extreme right end of the corridor. The building seemed about two blocks long, so the run was a feat performed not totally without damaged nerves. He expected any moment to run head on into a group of vacii, to be carried down by their long arms and splayed feet. But he reached the end and stopped, panting. Quickly, he removed his rucksack from his back, took out one of the many finger-sized bombs the computer had supplied.

The plan called for the planting of dozens of these weapons in various parts of the structure, each a thing of nuclear capacity. The vacii built to withstand a nuclear blast, but dozens erupting in their midst would be more than the building could absorb. This would more than likely not stop the vacii invasion of their worldline, only delay it. But if the vacii managed to push through again, the men of the future who had sent Salsbury back to destroy the installation would send back yet another android to bring down the next installation. It would be tit-for-tat for a while, though the men of Salsbury's probability's future hoped to discourage the vacii in the end. It was a small hope, but the only one.

He kept hoping he could think of something better.

He jammed the pronged end of the white bomb into the plaster-like material of the wall. It blended almost perfectly. As hastily as possible, he planted a second one at the other end of the top floor. Then he ran back to the stairwell and went down a floor. Only fourteen more levels to go.

He knew he could not hope to accomplish all that without meeting a vacii.

Unfortunately, the trouble came early. On the eleventh floor, with eight bombs planted, he encountered his first opposition.

CHAPTER 14

As before, Salsbury heard them coming before he saw them. Their screeching voices grated on his nerves so harshly that, in seconds, he felt like raw, quivering meat. He had planted the second explosives package on that floor, and was making for the stairs like a cockroach on his way to a crack in the baseboard when he heard them coming up the stairs. He skittered backwards, out of the stairs and into the hall, up against the cool white wall, trying to look like an irregular hunk of plaster.

He could wait there in hopes the vacii would pass this floor by, but what if their destination *was* this floor? A rather nasty scene would ensue, surely, if they found their temple had been violated by a human being with a gas pellet pistol in his hand and a rucksack full of microminiaturized bombs on his back.

The seconds sped past while he fought his own terror to reach a course of action. He wondered, caustically, where the speed of mental processes the 810-40.04 had spoke so much about was. Finally, when the voices were so loud they seemed to be coming from inside his head, he back pedaled to a door on his left, slipped his hand in the groove and waited. If the vacii continued up the stairs, there was no problem. He would be in the clear, free. But if they got off at this floor, he could be into this room before they saw him. But he didn't want to open the door and risk finding out what was on the other side unless he had to. He had to.

He caught a glimpse of a blue robe and the darker, overlaid harness of a vacii costume. One withered lizardy leg appeared at the edge of the door from the stairs. They were coming to this floor despite his prayers. Sliding the door open, he went into a lighted room that was much like other rooms he had seen thus far, and slid the portal shut behind.

Zee gee' sa tiss ga', a vacii said, coming from behind a desklike piece of furniture.

Salsbury decided the words did not require an answer, but were some sort of exclamation. Just come to check the air conditioning, he said.

Scee-ga-tag! the vacii said, alarmed.

But Salsbury had taken its attention away from the hand that held the pistol at his side, gained a moment to bring the gun up unnoticed. He fired, forgetting the weapon was still on a machine gun basis, and scattered the beast into a dozen, hideous pieces.

Just then there was a noise behind, the door slid open on its runners.

He danced across the floor, came against the desk, crouched and ready, perspiration flooding down his neck, soaking his clothes. But the two vacii

that entered the room had not heard anything. They were talking to each other, and one of them had just begun to hiss what must have been the alien equivalent of a laugh. It was letting air out through its toothless mouth, puckering that obscene hole until the escaping air sounded like a leak in a steam pipe. Salsbury wondered, briefly, what a theater full of these clowns would sound like. Then he had no time for divergent thoughts. The laughing vacii stopped laughing abruptly, sucked air in when it saw Salsbury, grabbed the shoulder of the first vacii

Salsbury fired, caught the first alien in the side, kicking it backwards toward the door jamb. Before he could get a second clear shot to finish that one, the second vacii was gone into the hall, keening a sound that must have carried halfway around this world. There was no doubt it was calling for help.

No doubt it would get what it called for.

Even as he stood there listening to the ugly sound the thing made, Salsbury began to hear other voices shouting in the vacii tongue from points up and down the main hall.

He stepped over the body of the vacii with the weeping, fatal wound in its side and slid the door shut. He looked but could find no means of locking it. Had it had a knob, he could have stuffed a chair under that to keep the thing braced shut, but there was only the recessed handle for fingers to grasp.

With his back to the door, he surveyed the room just as a rat examines its cage in the first few minutes of its imprisonment. The walls were discouragingly featureless but for the crude unfinished nature of them. There were no doors into other rooms, no exits except that which he could not use. He had a sudden gory vision of the vacii pumping slugs through the door from the other side, into his back. He moved quickly away, behind the desk where he could at least make some sort of stand with a minimum of protection. As his eyes finished the scan of the chamber, they stopped on a small, black square set high in the wall, near the ceiling. His heart pounded like a twelve ton piston, and he stepped gingerly over the shattered vacii until he was standing directly beneath the hole. Cool air wafted out. A ventilation shaft.

The noise from the corridor grew louder. He could tell there was a group of vacii standing beyond the door, not prepared to open it and face his gun yet, but building up the courage and the fire power to take the chance any moment.

He brought the dead vacii's chair over to the wall, stood on it, bringing the ventilator hole even with his face. He stood on tip-toe, reached into the shaft and levered himself up until his feet were off the chair. He scrabbled with his knees and feet against the wall, tried to drag himself forward with his arms. But he needed something more for purchase. He felt around, stretched his hands and fingers until he found a rugged one-inch shelf in the plaster floor of

the shaft. He hooked his fingers over that and pulled, managing to get into the opening to his chest; the ragged edge of the wall cut across his belly, making breathing painful. The way ahead was Stygian and smelled vaguely like the inside of a crypt. He tried to shut off his nose, wriggled forward, kicked with his feet on the edge of the outlet, and sprawled full length in the shaft

The passage was so narrow that he could not kneel to crawl, but could only stretch out flat and belly forward like an infantryman nervously making his way up an enemy-held beach, expecting a barrage of mortars at any time. Ten feet farther along, the light from the other room behind completely blocked by the bulk of his body, he heard the booming of a gun and the door shredding under the vicious cover of fragmenting slugs. They weren't going to enter that room until they were positive nothing could be alive in it. That was just as well, for that gave him more time to make his get-away. If he could. After all, there was no guarantee this shaft led anywhere. It might even narrow to a little pipe far too small for him to squeeze through. Then they could come in at their leisure. Or gas him and drag him out. There were all sorts of unpleasant possibilities,

It didn't narrow, though, and struck inward another fifty feet before ending where two other tunnels branched off, one to either side at ninety-degree angles off the main run. There was also a drop shaft from the floor here to the ceiling of the ventilation level below.

He looked to the left and right, his eyes conditioned somewhat to the darkness so that the tunnels were a dim gray gloom rather than impenetrable pitch. Either way looked equally appealing. Or, rather, equally unappealing. If he went left or right, he would still be on the eleventh floor when the building-wide search was initiated, as it surely would be. But if he went down, he could work closer and closer to the projection room and the portal that linked this probability with his own. True, the plan had developed hitches, but he was not as concerned with the mission now as with saving his own skin. Thank heavens iron Victor was no longer in a position to control him! He left two of the micro-bombs behind and went down the drop shaft, using his knees and hips and shoulders to brace against injury.

One floor after another, tearing skin off his fingers on the rough surface of the tunnel and shredding the knees of his jeans and the shoulders of his shirt, he went down, leaving a trail of bombs behind. It was not as good as distributing them evenly throughout the building, but it was the best he could manage under the circumstances. When he had counted off ten floors and knew he was downstairs, down where the projection room waited, he scrambled back along the main tunnel, looking for an outlet into an empty room.

He found three. Behind the first, in a small, dimly lit room, half a dozen vacii slept in hammock-like affairs slung at varying heights between the

rough, alabaster walls. Getting through there would be like trying to plod through a field of porcupines without touching a quill. Sooner or later he would wake one of them, and they would pull the roof in on him. The second and third rooms were both working chambers and had two vacii each. Perhaps he could have aimed his weapon from his hiding hole and killed both of them before they could make a sound, but he did not. Killing vacii was not as physically disturbing as killing a human being; he would not have the traumas from murdering aliens as he had from murdering Harold Jacobi. Perhaps that was a mistaken philosophy, an outgrowth of xenophobia implanted in him by his makers. However, he felt that it was morally the same. He knew his future creators had not meant him to be a wanton killer, otherwise they would have made it easy for him to murder.

The fourth outlet was into a dark room. He looked out of the ventilation outlet, surveying the gray and brown and purple shadows until he was certain the place was empty. Then, moving as quietly as he could manage in his agitated state, he clambered from the shaft and dropped to the floor of the chamber. His feet made slapping sounds on the rock.

There was silence.

Now he had to try to decide how much the vacii knew. Did they realize where he had come from? Or did they think he was a trespassing human from *this* probability line? He could hope they had not yet realized the enormity of the situation, for if they hadn't there was yet a chance he could reach the projection room and get across to the basement where Lynda and the 810-40.04 waited.

But if they figured it out Well, there would be a heavy detachment waiting inside the projection room, none too happy about what he had done to the vacii prober operator and the twenty robots lined up for the invasion of his probability line. None too happy at all

Cautiously, he opened the door and looked up and down the corridor. It was mysteriously empty. He located the projection room and debated making a run for it. There was something about the hallway, though, that made the calm, the emptiness seem artificial.

After five minutes of intense staring which made his eyeballs feel as if they had been marinated in lighter fluid, he shrugged his shoulders and walked out of the room, leaving the door open behind in the event he had to make a quick break for cover. He walked along the hall, keeping against the wall, his pellet gas pistol ready. As he passed the opening to the stairwell, he was aware of motion out of the corner of his eye. He turned. It was a vacii.

No. Not *a* vacii. Two of them.

The first was raising a pistol. Salsbury fired from the hip and caught the alien in the chest. It slammed back against the steps and went down with a terribly vacant gaze in its red eyes. Then something connected with Salsbury's

hand and knocked his gun arm above his head. The gas pellet pistol clattered across the corridor, out of reach. The second vacii, who had kicked it from Salsbury's hand, was keening loudly for aid.

Salsbury swung a roundhouse right with every ounce of strength he had in his specially crafted body, caught the vacii on its skinny neck and sent it tumbling loosely onto its dead companion. It gagged, shook its head, and tried to stand, its bony left hand pawing desperately at a black holster for a pistol much like that the first alien had aimed at Salsbury seconds earlier.

Salsbury raised his foot, kicked the alien's hand away from its gun butt. He could hear the wrist bones crunching under the impact and felt somewhat ill. The vacii screamed, fell against the wall and slid to the floor, sobbing and making wet noises with its sucker mouth, holding the limp wrist as if it were a dead friend.

As he turned back to the projection room, Salsbury saw a second detail of vacii-which had obviously been stationed at the far end of the corridor, hidden in the en-tranceway to a room-coming at a dead run, leaning forward as if a gale were blowing in the hall, hands either full of lethal looking hardware or groping wildly at holsters to obtain them. While he watched, almost frozen to the spot, the lead lizard fired. A burst of tiny needles studded the plaster of the archway next to which he stood. Something wet and yellow dripped from them.

Poison?

But that seemed a stupidly primitive weapon for such an advanced species. While he was searching for something to do, to get him out of the present mess, something struck a glancing, ringing blow against the back of his skull.

He weaved, almost went down, but fought against the sudden blackness. He turned to find the vacii whose wrist he had broken. While his attention had been diverted toward the oncoming guards, the alien had unholstered its weapon, had stood up despite the smashed wrist, had used the gun as a club in its good hand. Why it had not merely shot him, Salsbury could not guess. Perhaps the alien was still dazed by its wound. Now, as Salsbury watched, it thought of that and tried to change the gun around to a firing position. Salsbury hated to have to do something like this to such a spunky character, but he kicked out, snapping his shoe into the creature's good wrist. The gun flew, cracked against the wall, came apart in three pieces.

Salsbury leaped over him and started up the stairs in hopes he could find another room unused on the second floor and get back into the less dangerous grounds of the ventilation shafts.

When he reached the first landing and started up the second flight toward the floor above, he collided with another guard detail coming down. The vacii in the lead rounded the landing, looked surprised to see its quarry coming up,

lurched and shouted something to those behind him. Salsbury reached forward, lifted the withered thing by the black, silver-studded harness it wore, and pitched it backwards, over his head, down the stairs he had just climbed.

The second vacii in the group fired its pistol.

Salsbury heard needles rain against the plaster behind him.

Then he had this creature by the harness too, lifted, turned, and threw it downward.

There was a group rising from below. The falling vacii struck their leader, knocked him down. Salsbury looked back to those above him, saw two more vacii prepared to shoot. He rushed forward, coming under their barrels, and tackled them, an arm around each pair of skinny legs. They went down like new-planted saplings in a hurricane.

The group below was recovering.

The vacii on Salsbury's right bounced its skull on the floor, moaned and was still. The other one, however, was going to be trouble. It got a leg between itself and Salsbury, kicked out and caught the man on the chin. Salsbury saw stars, rainbows, and pretty multicolored snow-flakes, then cleared his head with a monumental effort. He swung a fist, felt it jar against the sucker mouth, knew he was in the clear.

He clambered up the steps on his hands and knees, trying to gain his feet. On the next landing, he stood, looked backwards, and was just in time to see a spray of needles spinning lazily toward him.

They bit into his side, arm, and leg.

He turned, wheezing, and started up the steps again.

But someone above was pouring a thick brown fluid (maple syrup?) down onto him. He could hardly move his legs in the stuff. He could hardly breathe. Or think

The brown syrup grew darker and darker still.

Then it was black, speckled with thousands of stars of blue and white. Someone reached up and flicked off the switch. The stars faded like pinpoints of light on a thousand television screens, were gone. He let the nothingness envelop him.

CHAPTER 15

He was on a wide, flat and bitterly cold desert at midnight. There was a harsh white moon shining on the flat rocks and glistening in the sand. Then, behind him, he heard the keening, turned to run again. It was a wild ululating cry. He made it to the top of the rise, looked back. The first of the sucker-mouthed lizards came into view, then others. A hundred. A thousand. Hundreds of thousands and millions after that. A sea of alien faces. Then he began to scream-

* * *

He woke.

The reality was not much better than the nightmare. He was strapped firmly in a chair, his hands tied together with some plastic-covered wire that ensured they would remain together, a hasty handcuffing but an effective one. Behind him and to either side were vacii guards with their guns drawn. In front, another vacii paced. When it saw the flutter of Salsbury's eyelashes and realized he was awake, it slipped into the chair opposite him and stared with those mad crimson eyes.

How did you get in, it asked, the voice a thin, hissed guttural whisper.

When he refused to answer, the guards shifted uneasily. He tested the wire and found it was as tight as it had seemed at first, much too tight. He thought, still, if he saw the worst coming, he might just be able to break it. It would require all his strength and some of that adrenalin chemical from the interior of his liver. What the wire would do to his wrist while he strained to break it would not be pleasant, but it would be preferable to death. And death might be exactly what the vacii had in mind. He thought about what he had done to their fellows since he had arrived in this probability line, and he wondered how strong their revenge motivations were. Then he remembered the 810-40.04 had said vacii were nearly emotionless; he felt just the slightest bit better.

Please make it easier on yourself, the vacii said.

I broke in, he said. They did not seem to know of the violation of the proper chamber, and he was not about to tell them.

How? the inquisitor asked.

Through the front door. When the guard wasn't looking, I-

The inquisitor dispensed with such lies simply by refusing to listen to them. He stood and paced in front of Salsbury, sucker mouth working, puckering, then going flaccid and loose like the pendulously lipped mouths of

drunkards, then puckering again. There was a faint, unpleasant odor to the alien that Salsbury had noticed on other vacii, and which had been stronger in the ventilation shafts. It was the odor of fish, of slimy things that laid in mud flats and sunned themselves. There iss no guard on the door. There iss no way you could have gotten in except by palm-printing the lock. And your printsss would surely not be on file!

Salsbury said nothing.

The inquisitor pointed to the weapons next, the gas pellet gun and the micro-bombs in the rucksack which they had opened and gone through. It wanted to know where he had obtained such things.

They aren't mine, Salsbury said.

The bony hand slapped him hard. The question was repeated, I found them here, he said.

He was slapped again. His head trembled, as if his neck had turned to jelly. There was a ringing in his ears; colored lights did sloppily choreographed dances behind his eyes. I made them, he said next.

How? Even filtered through the alien voice box and the sucker mouth, there was scorn in the words.

With my tools. In my basement.

You are very foolissh. We haven't the devicess to make you talk here. But on One Line, there are such thingss.

He turned to the other vacii guards and instructed them. The straps were yanked loose, and Salsbury was hustled to his feet without any ceremony. The guards took him into the corridor, down to the end of it where another alien lounged against the wall, chewing on a bright orange stick, his eyes heavily lidded. The tallest of Salsbury's two guards slapped its hand, knocked the orange stick away and said something in sharp native vacii. The new alien shrugged and led them into the room.

It was a high-ceilinged place full of machinery dotted with lights that bunched and scopes that pulsed, complex and at once interesting. In the center of the floor there was a platform upon which a sled stood, a six foot long slab of glistening metal with four seats bolted to it.

One of the guards prodded Salsbury in the back with a pistol barrel. Get on cart. It sounded as if it would take any excuse possible to break Salsbury up a little. He stepped onto the platform as directed, then turned abruptly, three feet above the guard now, and smashed a foot into the vacii's face. The thing toppled backwards, gurgling, the gun out of its hands.

Halt!

The second guard, the taller of the two, swung the barrel of his needle weapon around. Salsbury launched himself from the platform, came down on the alien before he could fire. He knocked the wind from the creature, managed to grind a knee into its stomach before he got up. Then, when

success seemed so close at hand, the heavy-lidded clown who had been chewing on the drug stick brought a chair down on his back, slamming him forward into the cart platform and unconsciousness.

When he came to this time, he was strapped into one of the chairs on the cart, and the cart was moving. Yet it wasn't moving. It seemed, instead, that things moved around the cart while the vehicle itself remained stationary. There were flickerings of light and darkness, of color, of different shades of white walls. Salsbury snorted, cleared his head, and blinked his eyes until they were no longer watery. When he could see well, it was plain that it *was* the cart that remained still and the surroundings that flickered, swept past, changed. They seemed to be jolting from one room to another, one identical platform to another without moving.

He realized, quite suddenly, what was happening. They were teleporting him from one probability line to another, from one bubble to another, heading back toward what the inquisitor had termed One Line. That would be the world where the vacii had invaded from out of the skies, the line from which they had spread to conquer counter-Earths.

Even as these thoughts pounded through him, he began to think once again of escape. The scenery about them abruptly stopped moving. They were in a gray, metal-walled chamber on another platform. The guards stood, unstrapped him, ushered him down onto a cold metal floor.

They had arrived.

In One Line.

In the vacii starship.

And if he was going to make one more try for freedom, he did not have long in which to work.

He was ushered into a steel corridor, farther along to a room apparently used as sleeping quarters, judging from the vast rows of vacii type beds. The guards placed him in a hammock, produced more wire and tied his ankles together, his hands were already bound. They left, then, closing the door. He could hear them talking in their hooting language. Moments later, there was the sound of one pair of broad feet slapping down the corridor. The other guard, it seemed, had been left behind to watch over their human charge.

Salsbury tensed, strained his hands away from each other, testing the wire yet again. It made deep grooves in his skin, made his fingers swell fat and red. He relaxed, collected his strength, and tried again; this time with everything he had, tapping the super strength and the adrenalin. The wire bit into his wrists and hands, gouging the flesh. Blood welled up and ran down his hands, dripped from his fingertips. For a moment, he was ready to give up, call it quits and spend the rest of his time nursing his wounds. Then he remembered Lynda back in the basement. Very soon, the vacii would use some brain-washing techniques on him and make him reveal how he had gotten into the

installation. Then they would go for Lynda. He bit his lower lip and strained even harder against his bonds. There was a wrenching, a snap, and the wire broke in two places.

Though he wanted to moan and gibber at the pain in his wrists, he tried to keep from making any noise that would draw the attention of the guard beyond the thick door. With blood-slicked fingers, he removed the remainder of the wire and freed his ankles. He stood, swaying, and walked quietly about the room until he was confident he had full use of his blood-starved feet again. His hands would be weakened due to the slashes that bubbled blood, but there was nothing to be done for that at the moment.

When he had full control of his limbs and felt the dizziness in his head reach a low ebb, he turned his concentration to getting out of there. This was no easy task. There were no windows, no doors except that through which they had come and beyond which the vacii guard waited.

Think, think! he told himself. *You have damnably little time!*

The first guard would return with a superior, or with orders to take the human elsewhere for interrogation. He had to act while there was still only a single vacii to contend with.

He found a chair in the far corner, one that was magnetized to the deck. He pulled it loose, hefted it, tried a few practice swings. It made his wounded wrists ache, but there was no lighter and effective weapon to be had. When he was certain he knew what he wanted to do, he went beside the door and, puffing his lungs full of vacii-scented air, bellowed a chilling, spine-cracking scream.

The portal slid open, and the alien rushed in, waving its pistol. It saw Salsbury too late. The chair connected with its scaly scalp; it crumpled under the blow like a paper cup under the heel of a young boy trying to make it pop.

Salsbury put the chair down, took his own gas pellet pistol from the vacii, and went out into the starship without a single damned idea about what he was going to do next

The ship was a maze of passageways and rooms. He crept through alcoves and empty chambers, leaving the corridors whenever the sound of approaching vacii feet grew too loud for comfort. Ten minutes after he left the room where he had been imprisoned, there was a soft moaning noise through the ship communications network. It sounded very much like a siren. Then a vacii announcer began hissing, screeching.

Ahead, doors began to open in the hallway. It was a search alert.

They had discovered he was missing.

He pressed into a recession in the wall where a window—a circular port, really—gave view to the Earth of One Line. He saw white, irregular humps of buildings. He had never seen the exterior of a vacii construction, but there was no doubt in his mind that that was exactly what these shapes were. This

meant the starship was the center of a sprawling complex; even if he did manage to get outside, there was going to be a great deal more ground to cover before he was safe.

Leave the ship

He was startled by what he was thinking. His only chance of returning to his own probability line, to Lynda, was to remain in the ship and find that room with the teleportation cart. Yet even as he considered that, he realized how impossible it was. With a full-fledged search now begun, he had no chance whatsoever of reaching the teleportation chamber, of crossing the probability lines. He had no choice but to get out of there.

Quickly

A vacii charged by, wide feet pounding the deck, skidded as it caught sight of Salsbury from the corner of its eye. Salsbury brought up the needle pistol which he had also secured from the guard, filled the alien full of narcotics. It went down, rolling over and over until it came to rest against the wall twenty feet farther along.

Behind, there was shouting, excited keening. They knew exactly where he was.

He looked at the window, trying to decide if he could get through it. But it was much too small. Then he became aware that the port was actually set into a pressure door; the seam split the metal, a thin, darker crack against the uniform gray. He searched for a handle and found a set of three studs. The first made nothing visible happen. The second started a humming sound and made the deck tremble underfoot. The third stopped the humming and swung the door outward, noiselessly.

A spray of needles clattered against the wall next to him, making angry bee noises. One ricocheted into his hand. He plucked it out before much of the yellow fluid could seep into him, threw it away, fired a few shots down the corridor to force the vacii to take cover. Then, turning, he leaped out of the starship onto bare ground, ran for the shadows between two humped white buildings. A city of the things towered on all sides.

He slid against a rough wall, breathing hard, and wished he could shrink to mouse size or smaller. The alarm would spread from the ship throughout the entire connected complex. In moments, vacii would be pouring out of these buildings just as they had come out of the rooms of the ship in search of him.

Looking back to the starship, he saw the long curve of its flank for the first time, a dully gleaming mass of metal quite huge and formidable. There were vacii at the portal now, looking out to be certain he was not waiting nearby to ambush them. He fired a round of narcodarts. The first alien, leaning out, took the full charge and kicked outward, unconscious before it hit the earth.

Slipping on the now wet ground, Salsbury moved back along the building, staying with the shadows like a cockroach again, slithering, holding the narcotics pistol out to his side. Behind him were the sounds of heated pursuit.

He turned a corner, hurried across a stone-floored courtyard where his shoes made agonizingly loud sounds, and darted into the gaping mouth of another dark alleyway. He rested there, looking the way he had come, then the way he had chosen to go. Neither looked promising. The pursuers were surely gaining. If he listened, he could hear them shouting questions to one another. But the way ahead was uncertain. He might be heading for a dead end, or circling back to the ship. The last possibility sunk into his chest like an arrow. Frantically, he tried to remember how the alleys had turned, how he had come across the courtyard. Would he bumble into the search party, fall into their arms through his own stupidity?

It was a distinct possibility.

For the first time, he fervently wished he were iron Victor, moving according to program without a worry in the world.

Furious with himself for his confusion, he continued down the backstreet, his feet sucking wetly on soggy earth. There was a shout to his left as he passed another alley mouth feeding into the one through which he was running. Surprised, he tried to increase his speed, succeeded only in slipping on a patch of mud. He went down hard on his hip, cracking his head against the side of a building. He saw stars a moment, then decided he had no time for astronomy. He pushed to his feet just as the vacii who had shouted came up behind him, still hollering. He rolled to avoid being shot, pumped a dozen needles into the alien. The thing went down gagging.

Salsbury went on, trying to move in a straight line, away from those chasing him.

Five minutes later, he came to another courtyard, ran into it before he saw the detachment of vacii guards exiting from a side street on the other side. There was a fountain between him and the aliens, spouting dark water. The noise of it covered the sound of his pounding feet, but they saw him anyway, as he was the only other moving object in the plaza. He tried to wheel around, made the turn too sharply, and fell again. He came to his feet as he finished the roll, his left arm numb from the impact with the pavement. He ran back into the passageway from which he had come, went half a block and turned into an alley.

Behind and in front, there were the sounds of pursuit. They were closing in from all sides; he had only minutes left.

He came to another intersection of byways, made the wise decision not to cross it until he knew whether there were vacii on the crossing street. He leaned against the wall and looked cautiously around the corner. He was immediately glad he had not acted hastily. There were half a dozen vacii to

his left, waving lights over the dark walls and in various nooks and clefts in the strange construction material that formed the compound.

Behind there was the sound of vacii drawing nearer. Then, far down the alley from the direction in which he had come, there was a play of other torches. The even, warm light cast irregular shadows off jutting sections of compound walls. Salsbury was trapped. He could not go forward without being seen; to go back meant facing an even larger squad than the one ahead. He had not expected it to end like this.

In fact, he refused to let it end like this. He looked up the irregular wall of the building across the narrow street and made up his mind what to do. Dropping the needle gun, the other weapon in his holster, the rucksack on his back (also recovered from the dead vacii guard) he ran across the alley, reached up and groped until he found an indentation deep enough to crook fingers in. Painstakingly, he moved up the wall, for once worrying more about speed than quiet.

When he hooked his fingers over the flat roof of the two story building, the search party that had been following him was directly below. The vacii stood talking with members of the other search party that had been scouring the connecting alleyway. They whined and wheezed and cackled, finally split up again, each continuing down its own corridor. When Salsbury could no longer hear the slapping of their feet and only an occasional screech of their conversation, he risked kicking up over the rest of the wall and rolling onto the roof.

He stretched out, catching his breath, and looked at the stars which shown so brightly overhead. After a moment, there was a nagging in his mind that something was terribly wrong. In an instant, he saw what it was.

There were two moons.

One of them was the size and color of the moon as he had been used to it, the moon of the Earth he had come from. The second, hanging close to it was about half as large and of a shimmering greenish tint much darker than the regular moon. He watched them for a long time, fascinated. This was, of course, an alternate probability and would have differences-like the two moons. That was a strange and somehow delightful difference. But he wondered what the other deviations would be like. Perhaps, even if he escaped the vacii compound, he would find this Earth uninhabitable, a desert, a no-man's-land. Or perhaps dinosaurs roamed it yet.

When he grew tired of frightening himself, he went across the roof to the far edge and looked at the top of the next building. It was two stories, but it was four feet away. He tensed, jumped the gap easily, landed on his toes to keep from making excessive noise. The rest of the escape was boring. He moved from roof to roof, almost like an automaton. He could not move in a straight line, for not all the buildings were two stories, and he could not leap

to the side of a ten story structure and expect to hold on. At last, he reached the end of the complex. Beyond was the wall of a valley, sloping upward, crowded with the dark, looming shapes of pine trees. It looked much like a virgin forest.

He dropped off the roof, crouched in the shadows beside the building and looked across the twenty feet of bare earth, checking the forest for signs of vacii sentries. It was difficult to see, much of anything against the monolithic pitch of that intense growth, but when he was relatively confident there were no guards, he moved out, crossed the barren space quickly, and moved into the trees, effectively disappearing from sight had any vacii happened to look his way now.

The deeper he walked into the wood, the surer he was that the forest was a virgin place, relatively unchanged through several thousands of years, certainly untouched by civilization, even this close the compound. The trees were enormous, towering monsters that blocked the sunlight out during the day so that little or nothing grew beneath them. The floor was uncluttered, as perfectly kept as a living room carpet. Just a few odds and ends of rock to pick his way around, otherwise easy going.

The land began to rise as the base of the mountain insinuated itself on the gentle hills he had met at first. Trying to keep to places where some of the moonlight managed to filter through the heavy blanket of pine needles overhead, he went upward with the land. Once he fell climbing a short rock face and skinned his shin badly. However, the bleeding ceased within moments, and the pain was gone shortly thereafter.

When he reached the top of the valley wall, he sat down and stared over the trees into the alien complex. The starship was the center of it, and for the first time, Salsbury had some idea of the true size of that piece of machinery. He estimated it at three-hundred feet in width and fifteen-hundred feet long. The remainder of the complex was made up of connecting, various-sized buildings which stretched from valley wall to valley wall and two-thousand feet from both ends of the starship.

But being able to look down on it did not make him able to feel superior to it.

He was still seventy-six probability lines away from his own world. Away from Lynda,

Lynda. He thought about her, about the smooth warmness of her flesh, the way they had embraced in the darkness of their room; the way she smiled with her crooked tooth; the ease with which she accepted all of the frightening things about him. He felt a deep, bitter remorse that he might never see her again. For how would he return to the ship? And even if he did accomplish that feat, how would he reach the cart? And once having reached the cart, how would he know the method of operation to return to his own probability

line? And, if he got home, would Lynda still be alive? Would the vacii have discovered her behind the second beam projector; would they have sent a detail of sucker-mouthed guards through to kill or capture her?

His thoughts were abruptly wrenched away from Lynda and what problems she might have. Below, at the point where the alien compound took over from the forest, a search party of vacii were entering the trees. In ten or fifteen minutes, they might top the edge of the valley, be right up here on the first slopes of the mountain with him. He stood, took one last look, and started back through the trees, running now that the blanket of needles was thinner and more light seeped through to show him the way.

Half an hour later, he stopped at a formation of rocks that marked the head of a second valley running perpendicular to the first. He had exerted himself to his outside limits; now his breath came hard, and the cold mountain air burned his lungs. He sat down to allow his quivering muscles time to settle and relax, and he leaned his head against a pillow of rocks.

Five minutes later, he woke with a start, cursing himself for letting his weariness overcome him during so dangerous a time. Maybe he was growing even more human than the computer realized, for he was becoming increasingly susceptible to the foibles of a normal man. Then he stopped cursing and wondered what it was had wakened him.

His nose brought him the first clue: a cloying stench of perspiration that was not his, a heavy animal smell like something one might run across at a large zoo on a humid summer day. He brought his head up quickly, though it seemed bolted to his chest, and looked into the coal black eyes of the beast-eyes set two inches deep under a shelved forehead. Its nostrils were wide and black, flared in a pebbly black, as the pug nose which trembled and blew steam at him. The enormous, dark-lipped mouth opened, showing yellow, square teeth. Salsbury guessed this was supposed to be a smile. But he remembered that he had often smiled at a good-looking dinner.

The beast blew steam and blinked.

Salsbury brought his gun out of his holster with a slickness that would have done well against Wyatt Earp. But even as he was depressing the trigger, the beast's stubby-fingered paw flicked at his wrist and knocked the weapon to the ground. He reached for it. The beast grabbed him by the back of the shirt before he could touch the butt, lifted him off the ground and held him at arm's length. He struggled but could not free himself. Sarcastically, he wondered where it would decide to bite first.

CHAPTER 16

While the gorilla-thing with the slimy yellow teeth held Victor up for approval like a matron shopper inspecting a piece of meat, another one of the beasts came into view behind the first. It shuffled up to Salsbury, its heavy feet making surprisingly little noise, and stared, blinking its four-pound corrugated eyelids over its sunken, black eyes. It ran a thick pink tongue over its own rotting teeth, as if it enjoyed the taste of its own halitosis. It was fully as large as the first, a good eight and a half feet tall, even though slightly stooped and hunch-backed. Its long arms did not drag on the ground, but they were long enough so that it didn't have to bend to scratch its feet.

The second gorilla made a hooing and hawing sound in Salsbury's face which made no sense to the man, though he could discern patterns to the speech. The smell that came from its mouth was bad enough to derail a train and corrode the locomotive into a pile of worthless scrap. He tried not to breathe until he saw the thing inhaling, then sucked in air before his atmosphere could be contaminated again.

As the two Tarzan movie rejects hooted at each other, he began to understand what a butterfly must feel like when picked up to be examined for the beauty of its wings. He didn't like the feeling one bit. If they were planning to rip him up and divide him for supper, he wished to hell they would get on with it. But they continued to stare where he dangled from the first beast's mitt. When he could take it no longer, he released a horrendous scream and began flailing at the same time, remembering from his judo combat knowledge that a good scream will often frighten the opponent bad enough to throw him off balance, as well as having a therapeutic effect on the screamer.

The gorilla holding him was not impressed by such tactics, however. Perhaps it knew judo too, he thought. It only snorted and batted at him with its free paw. The blow rattled his brains back and forth from side to side of his skull, left his teeth trembling in their sockets. He decided to just hang there and be an exhibit no matter how nerve-wracking that might be. It was safer.

A few minutes later, tired of examining him, the gorilla dropped him. The ground came up hard, but it was a welcome relief from the scrutiny he had just undergone. He came to his knees, spat out a little blood that was leaking from the gums around half the teeth in his mouth, grabbed handfuls of rocks to pull himself erect. While he was going through that tedious process, the two heavies stood and watched, blinking huge eyelids and showing fat, wet tongues now and again. They looked like two boys watching a housefly crawl

about after they had torn off its wings.

Vic called them a string of foul names.

They didn't react.

As the world settled down and ceased the slightly nauseating wobble that had made the trees and rocks move around him in jerky circles, Salsbury looked for a way out of there. To his right, the path led down into the new valley. But he had a strong suspicion his brute friends had come that way, and he did not relish the opportunity to meet more of their kind. That left the path he had taken to get here. He could double back on it, perhaps leave it and pass the vacii search party coming up. He started back that way, walking backwards, smiling, trying to look nonchalant but not knowing what expression these creatures would take nonchalance for. The gorillas watched him stupidly, blinking their lids and yawning. When he was thirty feet away, he turned and ran.

It looked good. They might have brute strength, but he was the one with the brains, the cleverness. He could outwit them every time now that he had gotten a head start. He was thinking all sorts of glorious thoughts like that when one of the monsters went leaping past him, covering three times the ground Salsbury could manage in a single stride. Fifty feet along the path, it stopped and turned to face him, grinning so that its broad yellow teeth gleamed in the thin moonlight.

Salsbury turned and started back, came face to face with the second beast. It was grinning too.

He turned, jumped from the path into the ferns and rocks, ran a short distance and stopped to look back. The first gorilla was loping easily after him.

He felt like a mouse in cats' territory.

Desperately, he looked around for something to use as a weapon, wishing he had managed to recover his gun from the clearing before making his break. The bombs in the rucksack were useless, because he couldn't detonate them, and because a nuclear explosion would mean his death as well as theirs. A fist fight was out of the question. One blow to the jaw or chest of those monstrosities, and he would shatter every bone in his hand. He bent over and found some two and three pound rocks. He hefted one in each hand, threw them. One bounced off the beast's chest, the other off its shoulder.

It came on, oblivious of his attack.

He tossed six other stones before it was on top of him. It batted his last missile out of his hands, struck a blow alongside his head that sent him sprawling.

Victor started to get up, doggedly plotting more resistance, clutching at rocks to throw even as he used his hands to support himself. But before he was even properly on his feet, the jumbo slapped him again with a back of the

hand blow across the seat of his pants and sent him crashing forward onto the ground again.

He laid still for a while, then got his feet under him, stood, feeling like a man three hundred and ten years old, turned in time to collect another paw in the chest that sent him down hard. Furious, he grabbed a rock, rolled, and threw it with all his strength. It bounced off the massive skull with a loud and hollow *tok*, but didn't fell the ogre. In fact, the thing didn't even stop grinning. It just waited until he was on his feet once more, then shoved him backwards so that he plopped hard on his behind.

At last, he got the point. He wasn't supposed to try to get away or to fight back. As long as he attempted either of these, he was a target for their blows, nothing more. He sat still and did not reach for anything to throw. A few minutes later, the gorilla nodded its head appreciatively, satisfied Salsbury had learned his lesson.

The other beast came up beside Salsbury's self-appointed keeper. They grumbled back and forth in low, guttural voices. When they made their mysterious decision, the keeper lifted Salsbury, slung the man beneath its hairy arm as if he were a babe, and loped back the path, back to the clearing where the other gorilla collected the gas pellet gun. Then, moving with a swift, jarring steadiness, they went down the trail into the new valley, where the trees once again grew thick over their heads, the floor beneath them smoother and less cluttered.

Half an hour later, they came out of the trees into a clearing before an impressive face of sheer rock that formed an unscalable wall of this side of the valley. Far overhead, the moon was half-hidden by the thrusting cliff top which looked, in silhouette, like a broken tooth. There was a fire going at the base of the wall, the flames spitting four feet or more into the cool night air. In the orange-red glow of the fire, Salsbury could see the gorilla settlement strung out along the cliff and built up the side of it, utilizing the caves as well as crude mud and wood buildings constructed to use the cliff as their fourth wall. He raised his appraisal of the gorillas. They were not merely beasts, but in the first intriguing stages of civilization. In this time line, perhaps man had not developed intelligence, while creatures of this sort had. Not *much* intelligence. And of a distinctly ugly hostile nature.

Then he was impressed with a thought that seemed absurd yet realistic, and surveyed his captors again. He had been calling them gorillas because, in the darkness and from the manner in which they acted and moved, that was the most appropriate comparison he could make. Now in the light of the campfire, he could see that he had been wrong; these were not men, surely, but neither were they apes. They did not, after all, have truly simian features. Their faces were broad, heavy, with none of the typical monkey sharpness. As he looked at them, he fancied there really were more human genes in them

than animal. They were most likely a freak of evolution. In his world, his probability, they had not come along. Or, if they had, their line of intelligence was defeated by Cro-Magnon man, and they had become extinct. Here, they were going to flourish one day, possibly even reach the point of a highly technical civilization.

Salsbury's keeper dropped him in front of the fire with the same brutish carelessness he had used earlier. He called out to a sentry located ten feet above the ground in a dark nook of stone. The guard came down in a single leap that would have shattered a man's ankles, bounded to them and jabbered with the two with Salsbury. He took his turn staring at the man, prodding him with stubby fingers, breathing in his face and pitting his skin (or so it seemed to Salsbury) with his halitosis. When he was finished, he grunted some more with the other two. Then the keeper picked Victor up again, and they continued their hairy, smelly odyssey.

He had the passing thought that, if this were an odyssey, it was proceeding all wrong. The hero was not winning.

With Salsbury firmly under his arm, the gorilla swung onto the cliff and began going up, using only its toes and free hand, hooking those blunt fingers over stones so sharp they should have jammed through his palm and out the back of his hand. The climb was totally impossible. That was quite evident. They continued up. Sixty feet off the ground, with Salsbury's head hanging down and pounding with an overflow of blood, they swung into the mouth of a cave where a smaller fire burned, just a few tongues of flames and a pile of hot coals which seemed as much ceremonial as practical.

Keeper, as Victor had come to think of the creature, hooted into the blackness and started back the tunnel, moving more cautiously here because he had to bend some to keep from cracking that magnificent skull against the stumps of broken stalactites. Before they had gone a dozen feet, another light appeared farther back in answer to Keeper's call. In the burgeoning glow, Salsbury saw another half-man lighting a pile of twigs and logs with the end of a torch that, obviously, was always kept lit.

They moved out of the entrance passageway into the heart of the cave—a room fully thirty-five feet wide and fifty long—where ten more half-men were sitting and lying on piles of grass and leaves. The creatures were in various stages of alertness, and they seemed, as a lot, to be in a grumpy mood after being so rudely wakened. They hooted and snarled at Keeper, threw handfuls of bedding materials at him. But when they caught sight of Salsbury, they came to sitting positions, their heavy-lidded eyes wide with interest, their paws wiping sleep matter away so they could get a better look.

Victor was the curiosity, the find of the week of the century, perhaps. They could not have much in the way of entertainments in such a beginning society. Salsbury was the equivalent of a circus. If they could have built a zoo, he

would have been their star attraction and advertised for miles around. And when he died? Why, they would stuff his body and mount it to be stashed in the equivalent of the ape men's Smithsonian. He knew now how a freak must feel; how it must be to be radically different; not just different in color or the slant of one's eyes which is, alone, enough for some men to stare twice, but so different that the mind boggles a little to contemplate your existence.

Their minds were boggling.

He was deposited on a stone ledge two feet off the floor to one side of the cave. There was no sense in making a try for the entrance to the cave, for the freedom of the night. If Keeper did not pounce on him before he was a third of the way to fresh air, another of the half-men would. He sat and endured the bad breath and prodding. They chattered and jabbered, hooted and yelped at him, then waited expectantly, as if they thought he might reply. He spoke a bit in English, but this did not satisfy them. They only frowned, which was a truly frightening and awesome expression to behold on those craggy faces, and began muttering among themselves again. He imagined they thought him too stupid to speak intelligently.

Some minutes later, female half-men entered the room, their great sagging breasts matted with a softer coating of hair than that which adorned the chests of their huskier menfolk. They moved with a refined gracefulness which Salsbury had glimpsed in the males, bearing bowls of a steaming gray-green gruel. These monsters, he knew, would require large quantities of food to sustain their mammoth bodies and to allow them the speed and versatility of movement they enjoyed. They now were ready to eat

After everyone was served, a white-haired half-man who seemed to be in charge of the group grunted something to the most firm-breasted female. She looked as if she was about to disagree or refuse him, then thought better of it. Timidly, as if she were frightened near to death of Salsbury, she edged up to the ledge where he rested and placed a bowl of gruel in front of him, then skittered nervously out of the cavern into an adjoining room, much to the delight of the men who guffawed and chortled like a bunch of schoolboys planning deviltry of the first order.

Victor had not eaten since that half sandwich hours before entering the portal between probabilities, for he had been too nervous. Since then, he had been put through quite a bit and was nearly physically exhausted. Yet he could not bring himself to eat the soupy mixture that had been placed before him. It was the color of polluted water and swimming within it were bits of dark, stringy meat of questionable origin. The smell that rolled off the surface of the stuff was reminiscent of spoiled meat, rotting vegetables, and stale corn soup. He gagged, shoved it aside, and looked back to the rest of the assemblage.

Keeper and the others were eating heartily and talking animatedly among

themselves like women at a card party. The only difference was that these gossipers did not smell of perfumed soaps and bath powders. And they lacked the table manners those matrons would have shown.

The women were called, and everyone had a second bowl of the slop except Salsbury who only wished they would remove his first uneaten portion. Some of the women smiled toothy yellow smiles, and he suspected they were being complimented on their culinary finesse. The firm-breasted half-woman who had gingerly offered him a bowl of gruel took it away, looking at him strangely, as if she could not fathom why an inferior creature like him would not go for civilized food.

When everyone was finished, and when Salsbury had become a rather accepted phenomena, the other half-man who had been with Keeper produced the gas pellet pistol and held it aloft for the assembly to inspect. There were a number of startled grunts, and Victor received several stares of re-evaluation. The only place they would have seen something that well machined would have been down the mountainside in the vacii settlement. Surely the vacii had come among them-though perhaps the aliens would not have bothered experimenting on such a raggedy, moronic group as this-and would have left reminders of their superiority by demonstrating their weaponry a few times.

Put that down! Salsbury shouted.

They looked at him stupidly.

You'll kill each other! That was not really such a bad prospect, but they might also kill him in the process.

The white-haired half-man took the gun from the other's paw and turned it over and over, fascinated with the knobs, lines of design. He was intelligent enough to see just how it was meant to be held, though his own fingers were too large to grasp it as delicately as was intended. His fingers brushed the trigger, fired a pellet into the chest of the half-man who had brought the gun into the caves in the first place.

The creature's chest seemed to expand as if it were a balloon being blown up by a giant with fantastic lung capacity. Then it burst outward, showering gore on those seated nearby. The half-man looked down curiously at its ruined body, grunted something the others of its kind didn't even seem to understand, turned and stared at Salsbury with swiftly glazing eyes, then slumped forward- dead.

The chief dropped the gun, hooting insanely, and danced to his feet, much more agile than he appeared. He was in a fury, waving his arms about, chanting over the fallen body. When he was finished, the corpse had not moved even a fraction of an inch as all of them seemed to expect it might. Keeper reached out and rolled his friend over. Together the half-men inspected the gaping hole that revealed their ex-comrade's innards. Then, almost as one organism, they turned to stare at Salsbury where he sat on the

ledge.

Salsbury felt like stone.

He knew they were thinking of breaking him down into gravel any moment now.

He stood, nervously watching them.

They were a tableau, frozen on different ends of the room. In their eyes, Salsbury was the bad guy, they were the good guys. After all, he was the odd fellow. He was the one who had brought evil magic into their snug little haven when they had been asleep dreaming half-men dreams of half-women. His gun, his evil magic, had killed their buddy. It made no difference to them that their own stupidity was involved.

Before any of them could move, Salsbury jumped from the ledge, hit the cave floor running, and burst through the archway into the room from which the half-women had brought the soup earlier.

The women were still there, squatted about the room chattering to one another, their fingers messy with gruel, the hair around their mouths matted with revolting streaks of wet food. When Salsbury broke in on them, the four of them screamed and darted into a corner, huddling together, their eyes wide under the deep shelves of their heavy foreheads. He spotted another tunnel leading away from this chamber and started across the room toward it. He would have to pass within a few feet of the women, and he didn't like to think what would happen if one of them built up enough courage to swat at him. Baring his teeth and building his voice into a stentorian roar, he shouted: Aarrggghhh! at the top of his lungs.

The half-women screamed and tried to crawl on top of one another. While they were thus engaged, trying to press farther into the corner, he went through the archway into the new tunnel and ran as fast as his weary legs would carry him. It would not be fast enough, he knew, for he could remember with what ease Keeper had loped past him in the forest.

In time with his fears, the white-haired chief and the rest of the pack entered the tunnel a hundred feet behind. Salsbury put on speed, then saw that he was running into more trouble instead of away from it. Ahead, in the cavern into which this passage fed, a lamp was lit and glowed cheery red. In that glow, he could see other half-men coming awake, roused by his pursuers who were screeching and hooting furiously.

He stopped-though every nerve in his body screamed to him to move-and searched the walls which were shot through with small, dead-end caves. One of these looked deeper than the rest; at least he could not see the back of it. Besides, it was only wide enough to admit a man. The gorilla-like morons would have a devil of a time trying to come in after him.

He didn't know what good it would do to gain a temporary respite. Did he really think dying of thirst or starving was any better than being torn apart by

the local savages? You're damned right he did! Because he could imagine how slow a process the half-men would make of his death. Savages enjoyed torturing their enemies. He did not want to be their plaything. He crawled into the opening and wriggled into the cave to a place where it widened out enough for him to turn around. Just then, the chief's face appeared at the opening, glaring in at him.

Salsbury backed up another foot, then settled down to see what would happen. The chief reached in with a long, filthy arm and groped for him, but the creature's fingers were a good five feet short of their target. Salsbury breathed a sigh of relief that he felt fully in every cell of his being. The chief withdrew his arm, mumbled with the others for a time. Several more of them took their chance, but none of them was long-armed enough.

Fifteen minutes passed without any action.

That was just enough time to give Salsbury a chance to calm down and consider the direness of his predicament. Seventy-six worldlines away from Lynda Stranded miles from the vacii ship which held his only chance of return Trapped in a cave just out of reach of a horde of gabbling, lame-brained monkeymen If he had been a betting man, he would not have placed more than twenty cents on his chances of living out the night. Or even the next hour, for that matter.

Soon the half-men were back. They had put their meager IQ's together and devised a plan. There was a rattling and scraping sound, a dimming of the light as the chief blocked the entrance again. Then something jabbed Salsbury hard on the shoulder, retreated, came back again, skinning the side of his face. They had cut a long stick, had sharpened the end, and were poking him with it in hopes of killing him, or wounding him sufficiently to make him crawl out where they could reach him.

He took two more jabs, the last of which broke the skin on his shoulder, then reached out and grasped the stick, thrust it backwards with all his might. He caught the chief off guard. The other end of the pole slipped through his paws and rammed him solidly in the chest. He heard the beast make a whuffing sound and suck in new breath. The stick was withdrawn and not used again.

But they were working their fevered little minds overtime to come up with something, and for a few terrible moments, it seemed as if they had hit upon a good idea. One of them brought a torch to the mouth of the cave and held it inside. A thin column of smoke was carried back to him. Another half-man collected a pile of grass and leaves, stacked that in the entrance and lit it. The ensuing smoke almost smothered Salsbury. It roiled by in blue-white clouds, thick as London fog. It clogged his nostrils, burned the back of his throat, and made his eyes water helplessly.

He was almost prepared to crawl forward and admit defeat when various

little facts connected in the depths of his brain to mean something important. One: the smoke was being drawn toward the back of the cave, swirling past him. This meant his cave had to have an outlet of some sort to cause the draft. Two: even if the outlet was not large enough to crawl out of, it would provide, perhaps, a pocket of air to breathe that was less smoky than that here. Instead of going forward to Keeper and Chief and the others, he turned around once more and worked with the smoke, seeking the outlet it had already found.

For long moments, he crawled with closed eyes to avoid getting them more inflamed than they already were.

His mouth tasted like the bottom of an ashtray.

It was a bad journey. At places, the walls of the narrow tunnel grew even tighter, pressed in more insistently. And, invariably, at these places, the walls were more jagged so that flesh was gouged out of his shoulders, hips and arms. The walls and floor became damp, and he crept through cold water that made him shiver uncontrollably. And there was always the smoke, just thick enough to keep him gasping and choking, but not so thick as to smother him altogether. His eyes were swollen, and tears were streaming down his face.

He came to what he thought was a dead end.

He felt around to all sides.

It was a dead end.

He beat his hands against the stone in front of him, cursing like a madman half crazed with heat prostration. Then he ceased acting like an imbecile long enough to let his skin pick up a hint of a draft. He felt around overhead, discovered that the tunnel went straight up for four feet, then broke to the left with a horizontal floor again. He squirmed up and through the bend, flopped onto the floor above and tried to catch his breath.

All he caught was a hefty lungful of smoke. He gagged, forced himself to crawl on. Slowly, the air began to improve. At last, he could take deeper breaths without coughing, and his chest had stopped its painful throbbing. Ahead, there was a dim circle of light. He made for it at a rapid crawl, pushed himself through, and fell full length onto a half-man who was waiting for him, a wide grin on its twisted face.

CHAPTER 17

There was no sense in struggling. They were even more sharp-witted than he had anticipated in his wildest moments. They had been aware that his tunnel might have an outlet somewhere, and they had dispatched sentries into the corridors of their maze to check for smoke. If one of them sported any, he was to wait there under the assumption Salsbury would follow the vapors. And Salsbury had. He was carried back into the main room where the half-men had eaten their porridge, where Keeper's friend had been killed by the gas pellet gun in the chief's hand.

They returned him to the shelf where he had been, depositing him rudely, slamming him down harshly on the cold stone. They left two guards to watch over him and gathered in the center of the floor to debate on what should be done with him. There seemed to be various factions strongly in favor of their method of punishment. Salsbury knew none of them were arguing for leniency, just for a crude and colorful form of death they preferred to administer.

In the end, they tied his hands behind his back with a length of thin but tough fibrous vine, looping and looping the stuff as insurance against a weak spot in its length. Next, they ran a heavier vine around his waist, knotted it, looped it under both his arms. A second heavy rope had been tied high above the floor, one end to a smooth projection of rock on the left, the other to an equally placed projection on the right. The rope that had been tied around his waist and looped under his armpits like a harness was thrown over the ceiling rope, and he was hoisted to his feet, then higher until his shoes dangled three feet off the floor. The pain as the vine drew tight around his waist and cinched his arms together was grueling. He gritted his teeth and spat at his tormentors. That only seemed to encourage them.

He hung there for another five minutes, wondering if they merely planned to let him hang until his arms were ripped off by the constant drag of his body. But they had more specific plans, ones that would give them some entertainment as well as revenge. A half-man came up to Salsbury, grasped him by the legs, drew him back as far as it could manage and shoved him forward. He began to swing like a pendulum, the vine cruelly chaffing his waist and arms. To make certain he did not lose momentum, the half-men formed groups at both ends of his swing and batted him back and forth. At the peak of each arc, he was slammed by a hard paw, sent back the other way. They took turns so as not to tire. He soon lost track of how many times he had been struck.

In time, after countless blows and countless arcs, he felt a sharp sting on

his side, sensed the wet flow of blood. On the other peak of his arc, he understood what had happened. They had decided to use their rather blunt but, nonetheless, wicked claws. The second slice was deeper than the first and sent hot waves of pain coursing through him, even though he thought that by this time he should have been beyond feeling anything.

Back And forth Slash And slice

He thought about coming from the future (*slice*) into the past (*slash*), from there into another probability line (*back and forth*) where alien lizardmen ruled, from there (*slash*) across seventy-six probability lines to a totally different counter-Earth (*rip*), there to be murdered by a gang of ruthless, stupid apes. He thought it was a sorry end to what had promised to be a glorious epic adventure.

There was a red haze creeping over his vision, and bells ringing out a symphony in his head. He was about to slip into darkness, utter and complete when a new, shriller tone of gorilla talk split the air from the entrance to the chamber. The half-men playing with Salsbury missed a few swipes, and his momentum dropped. The shrill voice called again, louder and more insistent. Then, in good English, a husky gravel-toned voice said, Hold on. We'll get you down as fast as possible.

CHAPTER 18

Victor Salsbury fought against darkness and dizziness that grappled with him, and he won. He was conscious when they cut him down. He dropped into a puddle on the floor, more anxious about the condition of his mortal shell than about who had stepped in to save his life like a saint in a storybook miracle. He was aching all over from the pounding he had received. Both his hips were bleeding thick crimson fluid that seeped through his tattered jeans. When he was finished accounting for every wound, he decided that, despite how he might feel, he would survive. His accelerating healing processes would stop the bleeding at any moment and would begin to knit the torn skin. He hated to think what he would have looked like, how far beyond the scope of his healing powers he would have been if he had not been cut down when he was. A few more pendulum swings, and he would have slipped into an unconsciousness where the last dregs of his life forces would have been drained quietly away.

The worst of his worries about his body assuaged, he thought of his rescuer.

He looked up, somehow expecting to see either the vacii or a detachment of marines. Instead, there was another gorilla-like man standing over him. He was different from the other things, though. The amount of facial hair obscuring his features was considerably less, exposing tough, brown skin creased heavily like ancient, weathered leather. His scalp itself was still liberally furred and pointed up his relationship to the savages. The features of his face were not as harsh as those of the other half-men, the forehead jutted out only half an inch instead of two inches. His nose was more completely formed with heavier cartilage deposits that gave it a roughly human quality. The mouth was smaller, more evenly lipped, and the teeth were well-cared for, as if they had been regularly brushed.

You are from another probability? the newcomer asked, trying to look as pleasant as he could. Despite his gorilla resemblance, he was a welcome sight compared to the heavy, vicious masks of Salsbury's tormentors.

Victor wetted his lips, said, Yes.

Good! You speak English! English is a prime Tongue in this sector of worldlines, though not on this particular one. My other languages are decent, but not so polished as is my English. Do you think? Polished? English is spoken on your alternate world, then. Is it the only language?

No, Salsbury said with effort. French. Chinese. Russian. Too many of them to list.

Most likely. A diversity of tongues is more common. But English is

dominant?

One of the few dominant tongues, yes. Look-

Oh, excuse me, the modified gorilla said apologetically, reaching out a hairy, long-fingered hand to help Salsbury up. I'd forgotten, in my excitement, that you've gone through a great deal.

Vic managed to struggle to his feet. He felt horrible. Like he had been drenched with kerosene, then lit with a torch; every square inch of him burned. That wasn't half so bad as the elephant that had been chained inside his body and was trying to kick its way out.

You see, this is the first time, his rescuer continued excitedly, that I have ever encountered anyone from an alternate probability. To speak with, at least.

Who- Salsbury began, his tongue a moth-eaten blanket rolled up inside his mouth.

No talk for the moment. The vacii will come in search of you. We must go to the lower levels which they do not know of.

Okay, Vic said, taking a few tentative steps.

Do you wish to be carried? the newcomer asked.

No. He could see that he was still smaller than the half-men perhaps only seven feet tall, but the half-men obeyed him. I'll make it on my own. You aren't as large as these brutes. Then he walked five feet and collapsed.

Much of their extra size is wasted in fat and bones, the newcomer said. He bent over Salsbury, picked him up as if he weighed in at slightly under three pounds, and started out of the room. We are simply more compact, but just as strong as they.

There were others of the more refined strain of gorilla men. Salsbury noticed, his head hanging down over his rescuer's shoulder, brilliant showers of fireflies exploding on the surface of his eyes, obscuring his view of the new men. He could see, however, that they were dressed, unlike the half-men who had been torturing him. They wore high skin boots that came to their square, chiseled knees, and tight short pants of coarse material. They carried bows, quivers of arrows, and a sheathed knife each. The one who was carrying Victor had entrusted his weapons to one of his comrades. The others, however, were prepared for combat and maintained a constant, tense vigil to all sides, their weapons armed, whether for vacii or for the more daring and surly half-men, he did not know.

Then they were moving. He couldn't see anything for the hobbling and swaying of his head. All he could make out was that they were leaving the naked half-men behind and were going down, down, farther down each minute.

There was another firefly eruption in his head. Hundreds and thousands of flickering green lights. This time, he settled back and allowed them to swarm in on him as if they were hungry, blood-seeking mosquitoes. They blotted

everything out and dazzled him with their brilliance. Then, strangely, the lights disappeared, and there was only a soft, murmuring bandage of nothingness about him.

Later, he came awake to find his rescuer holding his head up and rubbing the crushed petals of a rich purple flower beneath his nose. The odor made him gag, but it did bring him awake as was planned. He shook his head to make the stranger take the smelling salts away, then leaned back and realized he was in a chair! It was a well made piece of furniture, comfortable with cushions of dark fabric, and seemed to be stuffed with feathers or fur of some sort. This was the first sign of the artifacts of moderately civilized people, aside from the weapons and clothes he had already noticed in his groggy state. These people were more than slightly advanced above the naked half-men who had been trying to kill him.

Perhaps I should have let you sleep, the rescuer said, looking down on Salsbury with concern. But this is a very important thing. I think, perhaps, it is our chance. We must make use of it as swiftly as possible. But if you feel like you must rest-

I'm okay, Salsbury said.

Good. The creature smiled at others nearby, giving Victor a moment to survey the room. It was still a cave. They were farther down in the earth than before, for the walls were more solid, more of a piece, and there were no loose rocks. Despite the fact it was a cave, it was a relatively pleasant place. It was kept scrupulously clean. One of the walls was decorated with a mural that showed that artistic concepts here were modern, enlightened, far beyond all other cave art. Another wall was carved with shelves which held other pieces of work, mostly stone and wood sculpture, though one held a thatched strawpiece resembling a kneeling woman. Salsbury saw at once that the women of these half-men-or nine-tenths men- were closer his own idea of femininity than those of the naked half-men had been. Finally, he took in the fact that there were three other creatures seated in the room, all on chairs, some drinking out of wooden tumblers, others just biding their time.

I'm Moog, his rescuer said, turning back to him. You are?

Vic.

It is a new name for me.

Victor is the full name.

Oh, yes! Some of the creatures of other probability lines in this area do shorten their names for convenience. Though I never fully understood why they weren't given the short names to begin with.

Could I have some water? Salsbury asked, his words like stones rolling up the incline of his throat.

I have something better, Moog said. He went off for a moment, returned with a wooden mug.

Salsbury remembered the half-men's gruel. Water would be fine.
Just try this.

I-

Please.

Salsbury took the mug and sipped the fluid gingerly. It was not repulsive as he had feared. It was cool, smooth, sweet, much like apple cider, tangy but not alcoholic. He downed it in a few gulps and asked Moog to bring him more. This he sipped while he tried to fathom the events of the last few hours.

There are many things I have to ask, Moog said. Perhaps the best way would be for you to tell us your story. That would be quicker, and nothing would be missed.

I don't know, Victor said guardedly.

We only wish to help. I think you badly need assistance. Am I wrong?

You are not wrong.

Begin, then. We are listening.

Victor wondered if he should tell them the whole thing. Indeed, he did need help, and he could hardly expect them to give it unless they knew the story. He perceived that they were as sharp as he was, with IQ's every bit as high, though their civilization had not progressed as far as that on the Earthline he had come from. If he tried to hold out on them, they would reciprocate when it was his turn to ask questions. And it would help a great deal to know how Moog came to speak English, how he knew of the probability lines, why he was risking vacii anger by hiding Salsbury from them. He decided to be open. He told them the entire story.

When he was finished, Moog turned to the others and recounted Salsbury's tale in their tongue. There were questions, some of them which Moog relayed to Victor, others which he answered himself. In the end, the others were satisfied, and there was an air of excitement that was almost tangible.

Now your story, he said to Moog.

Not half so interesting as yours.

Tell it anyway.

Moog nodded and began.

The vacii had begun their invasion of Earth over a hundred years ago. It had lasted less than six hours. Some half-men had attacked the first vacii party and were summarily destroyed. The vacii moved in, took over, and had been established ever since. Recently, within the last thirty years, the vacii had discovered the presence of the first whole men in the half-man society. These were creatures like Moog who were born with softer features, higher foreheads, and IQ's ranging from a hundred-and-ten to a hundred-and-forty. At first, the half-men destroyed these more human children at birth, for they regarded them as freaks or visitations of the demons. But the vacii had started

attending every birth and studiously rescued those babies and took them away.

One of the first of such new creatures was Moog. The vacii raised him in a strictly controlled environment. Their actions were not so much generous as more in the line of scientific curiosity. They had not spared him death from any idealistic philosophy about the value of intelligent life. The vacii had no such philosophies. They had rescued Moog and others like him solely for experimental purposes.

They taught him as much as they could about his world, and found that his IQ was one of the higher ones. He became a challenge for them. By the time he had reached his late teens, they had introduced him to as much technical information as he could accept. He was taught about the vacii culture, and he recognized it for the cold, emotionless thing it was, and despised it; he was a creature of emotions himself. They moved on, introducing him to the theory of probability lines, taking him on tours of some of the other worlds, teaching him languages. (A vacii linguist requisitioned him for an experiment in determining the verbal abilities of the newly intelligent species he represented.) He had learned English in this manner.

When he reached the age of twenty-four, six years ago, Moog was privy to a great many facets of vacii life. Because of this, he learned the eventual fate of vacii experimental animals. Two things might happen. One: the vacii might allow the test animal to live a natural lifespan if only to determine exactly what it could accomplish in that time. Two: they might terminate the experiment and perform an autopsy. This was enough to decide Moog's future for him. He could not stay in the starship. In addition to the constant fear he might be slated for dissection, there was the increasingly harsh nature of the regular vacii tests. Survival experiments, the vacii called them. They consisted of placing Moog in a particularly hostile position and then observing him saving himself. Although the aliens were undoubtedly obtaining much valuable data on the survival abilities of his species, Moog decided the pain he was enduring wasn't worth it. Since no experimental animal had tried to escape before, his plans met with little hitch. He broke free, along with two cohorts, and had remained free ever since.

He and his companions had not been idle in their freedom. They managed, in two raids on the vacii complex, to free forty-six other intelligent Earthmen of their hairy breed. However, they were never inside the ship, for that was now beyond their reach. The third raid was anticipated, and the vacii killed eleven of their number, while they were unable to free any more of their brethren. With their thirty-eight, they went into the deepest caves in the mountain and hid from the lizardmen. Slowly, they established contact with the half-men above them- the naked, savage type-and began rescuing children of their own breed before the vacii got to them, rewarding the half-men with

trinkets for not slaughtering them. A great number of the half-men's pregnant women were secreted away until it could be learned whether their child was savage or intelligent. If intelligent, Moog's group kept it and raised it. They began breeding some of their own. Now, in six years, their number stood at eighty-nine and was climbing faster and faster every month.

Yet the vacii remained a thorn in their side. Fully half a dozen babies a month were abducted into the vacii ship for experimental purposes. Moog and the others were anxious to free them, anxious to somehow defeat and drive off the vacii. But, of course, the vacii had guns. The Earthmen here had bows and arrows. Moog knew how metal could be smelted, how machinery of limited complexity could be built. But, having to live in utter secrecy, unable to go out of the caves in daylight, the Earthmen were restricted from achieving the level of social order they knew they could create.

But you have a gun, Moog said.

Be careful! Victor shouted as the hairy man picked up his gas pellet pistol.

Do not worry. We are not as stupid as those whose hands you first fell into. I've heard what the gun does from the half-men. And I can figure it out, almost. But would you mind explaining?

Salsbury didn't mind.

May I fire it at that rock? Moog asked.

Salsbury shrugged. Go on.

He fired. The pellet sank only an inch into the boulder before exploding. Chips of stone flew in all directions, and a fine gray powder hung in the air. Would this work on metal? Moog asked.

Yes. Only it will take more shots. If the metal is thick, that is. The pellet will only sink a fraction of an inch into dense material before exploding.

It can require as many shots as you have, Moog said. Just so we get inside.

Inside? Salsbury thought he was beginning to lose track of the conversation.

Inside the vacii ship, Moog said, smiling, his wide mouth full of glittering teeth.

But what good will that do us? Victor wanted to know, suddenly coming forward on his chair. It sounded foolish, half-baked, unrealistic. The vacii outnumbered them. The aliens had weapons far superior to anything the men here could possess or hope to obtain. Yet, somehow, he had the feeling that Moog already considered these things and was speaking rationally, with something definite and workable in mind.

I know the inside of the vacii starship by heart, Moog said. I lived in it for twenty-four years, except when they took me on field experiments. I used that time to memorize every foot of the place in the event such information would ever come in handy. It has. I know, for instance, exactly where the ship

armory is.

But-

If you will help us with your pellet gun, Moog said, grinning even wider so that it seemed his head would split open, I think we will solve several problems simultaneously. We will be rid of the vacii at last and free to raise all the newborn children in an enlightened atmosphere, in a society where they will not have to hide by day and move at night only with fear. And you will get a chance to return to the woman you call Lynda. That should be enough for you. And perhaps we will even destroy the vacii installations across all the probability lines.

The others looked anxious, as if, despite the language barrier, they knew what Moog was saying.

But, the hairy man finished, you must understand that you will not have a promise of return to your probability. Only a chance. A chance and nothing more.

That's a hundred percent more than I had an hour ago, Salsbury said.

Moog chuckled, slapped his arm, and translated his acceptance to the others.

There was a brief but enthusiastic cheer.

CHAPTER 19

Moog's war party moved with astonishing cat-like grace and silence, considering the size of it and the size of each member. There were thirty-one in the party aside from Salsbury, all the men their settlement contained. Those left behind were women and children; even some of them had been anxious to go along, to fight the hated enemy. The decision had been to go for broke, to seize all or nothing. It was thought all men were needed (though a slaughter of them by the vacii would mean a virtual end to the colony), but that women, untrained for combat, would only get in the way.

Once, they met a party of vacii still searching the compound, walking the alleyways with electric torches. The war party was quicker, for it was expecting trouble. The arrows were swift and silent. Six dead vacii without one managing a scream was a testimony to the accuracy of the archers.

They went on to the starship.

That portion of the great hull which, Moog assured him, was on the outside of the ship's armory, was pressed close against the white walls of a building, hidden in welcoming shadows. The war party stationed itself along the walls, taking advantage of the pitch darkness, while Moog and Salsbury walked along the hull to the place the hairy one chose as the most advantageous for forced entry.

There will be no one in the armory, Moog said. There will be an armory officer stationed just outside it, in the anteroom. But by the time he realizes we are in the ship, we will be armed and ready for a fight.

I hope you're right, Salsbury said. Moog had assured him that the hull sensors were inactive and would not go active until the ship was preparing for spaceflight. Still he worried.

I most certainly am right, Moog said, shaking his burly head. Let's begin, eh?

Salsbury ran his hand along the hull, sampling the coolness of the metal. He rapped, heard only a faint booming sound. It's thick. He rapped again, listened. It'll take some time. I think we better fire sideways so the metal chips will be propelled away from us. You stand behind me.

Moog obliged, moving softly, quietly.

Salsbury aimed, fired the first pellet. There was a sharp pinging noise and the rattle of metal chips on the curve of the hull. He ran his fingers over the spot he had shot at. It was hot, though not hot enough to burn him. He found he had made perhaps a quarter to a half inch indentation in the alloy, rugged, with sharp edges, perhaps half a foot across. To make a hole large enough to admit these fellows, he was going to have to do much better than that. He set

the pistol to machine gun status and prayed there were enough of the little droplets in the gas bottle cartridge to do the job. Then he depressed the trigger and held it down.

The pinging grew louder, harsher. After two minutes of continuous fire, he stopped, waited until the echoing ring had ceased, then looked closely at what he had done. There was a rugged hole three feet across and four feet high. Only the center, big as a penny, had broken clear through. Resetting the pistol to a single shot basis, he began chopping away at the stubborn alloy, enlarging that penny-sized aperture.

Ten minutes later, he had a hole big enough to crawl through. Let's check it out, he said to Moog.

They went through into the dark interior, letting their eyes adjust. At last, when they could see well enough, they found they were only through the outer hull, in an air space full of beams and supports; three feet away, there was another wall, the inner wall, the partition that was part of the armory.

Well? Moog asked.

If this is as thick as the first, we're in trouble, Salsbury said gloomily. The gun is getting lighter; it's low on gas.

Nothing to do but try, Moog said, slapping him on the shoulder.

Salsbury tried. They were fortunate indeed, for the wall was of half-inch steel which parted much more easily under the gun's assault. When a second hole had been cleared, they stepped into the darkened armory, looked around joyously. Moog went back to usher the others inside.

Fifteen minutes later, the cache of vibratubes and slug guns the size of shotguns had been broken open. They were armed to the proverbial teeth. No, clear up to the hairline. Moog stationed himself by the door to the anti-room, looked back to make sure everyone was prepared. Then he swung it inward and went through fast, a vibratube in one hand, the heavy bulk of a frag slug gun in the other.

The others followed. Salsbury was fourth in line, willing to let two other of these Earthmen follow Moog before sticking his own tender neck out. When he entered the chamber, the vacii armory officer was lying in a crumpled heap to the left of its desk. The vibratube had done the job. It was quieter than a frag slug, but every bit as effective.

When the last member of the war party had filed in, Moog recited the plans that had been gone over so hastily before their departure from the caves. The layout of the ship was not complex. Thanks to Moog, the Earth-men had a rough blueprint in their minds. The party divided into six groups, five men in each of the first five parties, five men plus Moog and Salsbury in the sixth. The others were to spread into selected portions of the starship as fast and efficiently as they could. Since the vacii in the ship were not generally armed, the battle would be heavily weighted in the Earthmen's favor. The sixth

group's objective was to get Salsbury to the teleportation room. They would destroy vacii and vacii machinery as the other five groups, but only as the opportunity arose during their flight to the teleportation cart.

Moog opened the door, and they went into the corridor, leaving the other groups to go their own ways, intent now on reaching the transportation that might or might not take Vic back to his basement, back to Lynda. They raced along the main corridor, not bothering much about quiet now. Behind, the detail assigned to this hall was already opening doors and cutting down the vacii within. The noise was nearly deafening. Farther away, echoing from other parts of the ship, more sounds of battle arose.

They rounded a corner and confronted a small group of vacii that had come out of the rooms to see what the noise was all about. One of the men beside Salsbury pumped three frag slugs at the assemblage. The vacii dropped in twos and threes. The six still standing got themselves vibrabeamed by Moog. Then they went over and around the bodies, trying not to breathe in the stench of burned alien flesh.

Two turns and six dead vacii later, one of the boys in their group got his chest pounded open by a guard's personal pistol. Moog fired at the vacii. So did Salsbury. Their vibrabeams caught it from both sides of the head, finished it messily.

This is it, Moog said, turning into a room on the right. He bounced back, a vibrabeam sear along the top of his right shoulder.

Salsbury went down, rolled, narrowly avoided a second blast from the vacii operator's weapon. When he came onto his back, he fired, swept half the room, nearly cut the alien in two. The thing fell forward, trying to groan, and was very still. He went back to Moog. How is it?

Just a burn. Nothing important. He wasn't even clutching at the wound. Not even moaning. Or grimacing.

That's the cart, Salsbury said.

Do you know how to operate it?

I can try. The worst I can do is blow myself up, Salsbury said.

One of the men from the doorway called something. Moog looked concerned. A heavy vacii force is at the head of the corridor. They must have guessed we breached the hull with your aid and that we would be coming to the cart. We'll hold them off. I think we out-gun them anyway. But get moving as fast as you can.

Vic nodded, started for the cart, then went back and shook the Earthman's hand.

Maybe when all this is straightened out, Moog said, we'll be able to piece together the vacii machines and find out what made them tick. Maybe we'll be able to build a cart for traveling the probabilities. That would be something.

That surely would, Salsbury said. Then he climbed onto the cart and

fiddled with the controls while Moog went to direct the battle with the aliens.

There was a keyboard on the dash, much like that of a typewriter, except that the symbols made no sense to him. He tried punching them, found they were stiff, like the keys on the locked board of an electric typewriter. He tried all of them, then in desperation snapped down the spacing bar. Instantly, the walls around him faded.

He flicked from probability line to probability line, heading home. He could see no way to control the cart, no way to make it stop. Perhaps it would go past the probability line from which he had started; more likely, it was set to return to the place from which it had come, the probability line directly before his own. At least he hoped that was the case.

In the teleportation rooms in each probability line, vacii operators looked up, astonished that a human being was riding without benefit of guards. Some of them tried to reach him before he flicked on to the next line, but that was futile. Others turned toward their master consoles, but were not fast enough to stop him. He continued, fluttering backwards, hopefully toward the world-line where the vacii had first captured him.

There was nothing to do but think, think about Moog and the others. Would the spunky creature make it, or would he die in the battle? It seemed almost certain the starship would be defeated. But what would that mean to the vacii installations across the worldlines? Would they, cut off from the mother ship, eventually disintegrate? Moog had assured him their connections with the star-ship were essential to their survival. Salsbury hoped so. Because that would mean that they had not just liberated one worldline from the vacii, but many. He thought about his own safety now and the safety of his worldline. If he were taken back to the worldline next to his, he could get through into his own basement. The 810-40.04 could detonate the micro-bombs, and his worldline would be permanently safe, because the destruction of the starship on One Line would ensure an end to vacii expeditions into other worldlines. The future from which he had been sent by desperate men almost without hope, would be different. All the timelines beyond his own which the vacii had conquered after 1970 would also have different futures, for they would never become alien dominions now. He had changed their futures too. But he could not bring himself to feel heroic. He had been built to accomplish much, had been trained in the arts of combat by the computer; Lynda had given him a driving motivation; Moog had saved his life and initiated the final bold plan. He had done his part, nothing more. Anyway, he could not be bothered now with any thoughts but those about Lynda. Green eyes, crooked tooth, healthy, warm body The only island of reality in this entire affair was her smile, her kiss, the entire marvelous sum of her.

Abruptly, the cart stopped. The flickering ceased.

He knew he was in the right place.

The operator stood against the wall, chewing on a drug stick. Salsbury bolted from the machine, brought a fist into the skinny throat before the vacii could issue alarm. It went down, rolled over, drew its knees up and passed out.

He left the room and walked to the proper chamber, hesitated at the door, wondering what he would find inside. It was still the same night as when he had entered this worldline, though several hours had passed. It would be getting near dawn. The vacii might very well have discovered the mess in the projection room, might already have invaded his worldline. Lynda might be dead.

Sees tusga ji gasta! A vacii voice erupted behind.

He whirled. At the far end of the hall, four vacii stood, one with a pistol. It raised the weapon, fired. The vibrabeam connected with the back of Salsbury's right calve. He dropped to his knees in pain, then realized he had no time to worry about something so unimportant as agony.

The vacii were closing at a run.

Shaking, he gained his feet, shucked the rucksack with its bombs, and went into the proper chamber. The mess had not been discovered. Lynda still sat at the beam projector beyond the wall. The same number of bodies littered the floor, all but one of them robots. He weaved across the room, favoring his wounded leg, and stumbled through the portal into his own basement.

Detonate! he shouted to the 810-40.04 as it floated toward him.

As soon as-

Quickly!

Beyond, in the other worldline, the vacii slid open the door to the projection room.

Now, dammit! Salsbury roared.

The vacii started across the room.

The computer detonated the micro-bombs and, in nearly the same instant, swung on the beam projector and destroyed its lens with a bolt of orange light. The bubble closed in time to prevent the force of the explosions in the other worldline from carrying through into this one.

The spot on the wall was gone.

You succeeded, the computer said.

He had been going on adrenalin and nothing else for more than five hours. Now that pressure lessened and the flow of magic juice was cut off, he felt as if a million tons had been lowered onto his shoulders. He tried to speak, to say something witty to mark the occasion. He dropped over onto the basement floor.