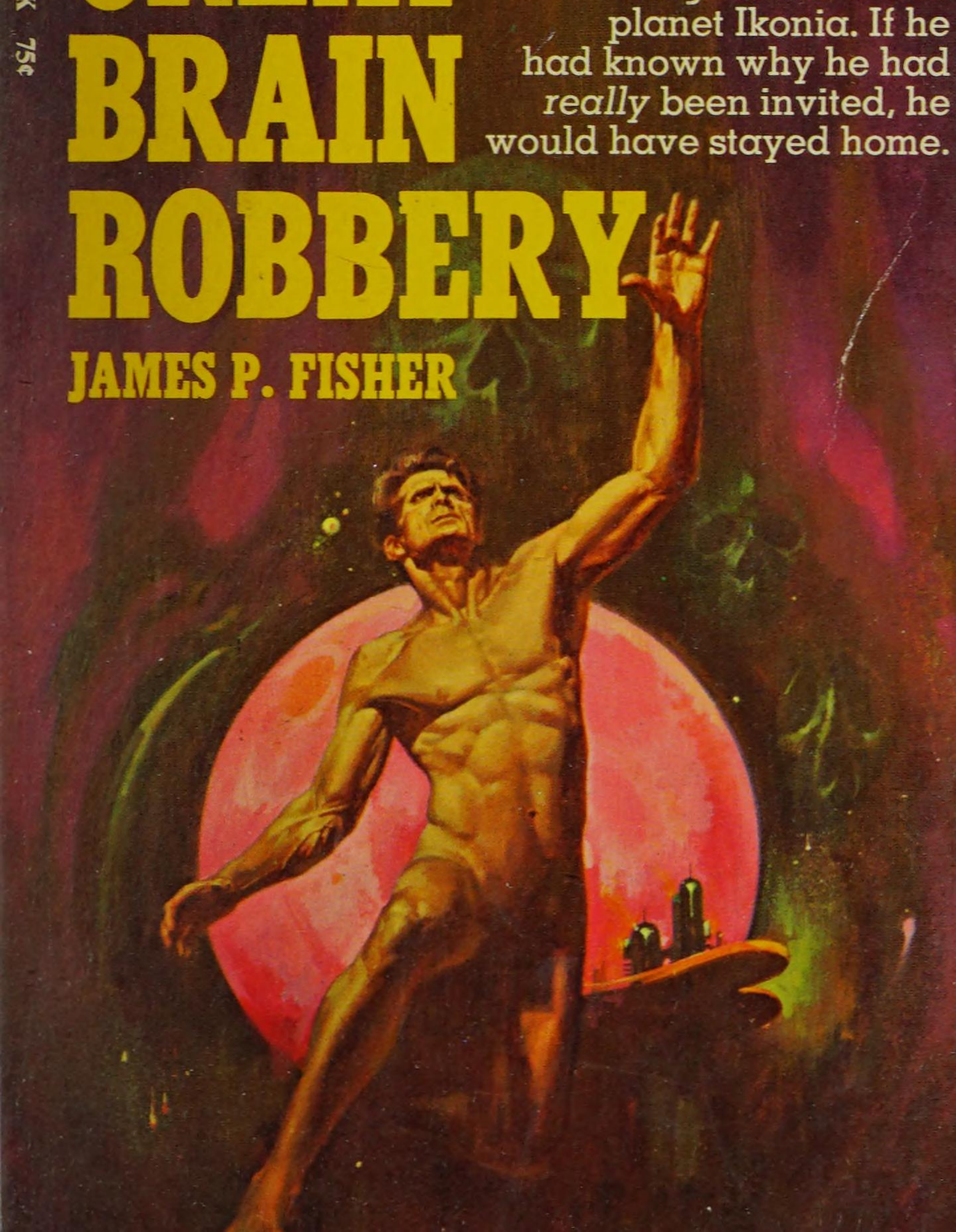
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THE GREAT BRAIN ROBBERY

JAMES P. FISHER

College student Dennis Sands agreed to go to the weird planet Ikonia. If he had known why he had *really* been invited, he would have stayed home.



Tool of the Aliens...

"I *command* you!" Cynnax shrieked. "The forces! Yield them at once!"

I'm trying! Dennis thought pleadingly. *I just can't.* Agony tore at his insides. The torture was mounting: the seventh degree . . . the eighth. . . . And yet the seething remorse within him was unlike anything he had ever experienced in his life—a gripping, constricting inner horror, the type he might experience if on the verge of committing———

The unpardonable sin! he thought, horrified. *The unpardonable sin!*

DEDICATION:

To My Good Friends

Mark Forgette and Vincent Luvera

Who Both Thought I was CRAZY
(and maybe they were right.)

The Great Brain Robbery

by

James P. Fisher

THE GREAT BRAIN ROBBERY

A UNIBOOK

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Chapter 1

He was all alone on a vast, open plain.

It seemed to stretch forever in all directions. In front of him he could make out a clearly marked horizon. Everything was shrouded in gloom, a vast, all-encompassing darkness. And there was tension, constricting tightness which portended disaster.

A shaft of brilliant light described an arc from one end of the horizon to the other, forming a tremendous yellow halo to cast aside the darkness. It disappeared, and a resounding burst of thunder shook the plain. A luminescence grew up out of the horizon in front of him. And then—and then—this *thing*, this tremendous *shape*. . . .

Dennis Sands awoke in a cold sweat.

His breath was coming in short, painful gasps. He was trembling all over. In the oppressive darkness he could hear Craig Michael's startled movements as the young man was driven out of sleep.

"What's the matter?" Craig said.

"That goddamned nightmare again, that's all." Gathering himself, Dennis pushed the covers back and sat up. "What time is it?"

Craig shifted slightly in the darkness. "Five-thirty. Hold on a sec."

He moved again, his hand fumbling on the night table between their beds. Light flooded their bedroom from the small lamp. Dennis had to shield his eyes until they became accustomed to the glare.

"That's the second time in two weeks," Craig commented gravely. "I thought you were supposed to have it only once a month."

"It averages about once a month." Dennis stretched luxuriously, clenching his fists. "Once I had it twice in one week. And then, once in a two-month period. It's a real pain, especially that weird feeling of *guilt* I get when it's all over. As if I'd done something terrible, unforgivable. The unpardonable sin. It doesn't make any sense at all. Thank God it's only a dream."

Craig flipped back his covers and swung his bare legs over the side of the bed, facing Dennis. "You're not the only one, bud. I've had my share of real lulus too."

"But never the same dream twice."

Craig nodded with conviction. "Never. That's why the whole thing's so unusual. You've had this nightmare ever since you can remember. There's got to be something behind it, some reason."

"If there was, I wouldn't mind knowing it."

Craig ran his fingers through his sandy-brown hair, his muscular forearms bulging. "I'm going to make a suggestion. Now don't think I'm trying to be funny . . ."

"See a psychiatrist?"

"It might not be a bad idea."

"I saw one once, when I was a junior in high school.

My parents knew about the nightmare. One night when I woke up screaming they decided to get to the bottom of it. But after three sessions of questions like 'Why do you hate your father?' or 'Do the voices command you very often?' or 'Do you like your penis?' I was just about fed up with that approach. Then my parents died. I came out here on my own and met you. And that's the whole story."

Craig was stroking his finely bearded chin. "That's the psychiatric approach, all right. But I've always felt there might be something to it. Something beyond all those nutty questions they keep firing at you."

"It's not for me. I can live a fairly productive life without knowing why I'm dragged through the outskirts of Hell every so often. Besides, how could I afford it? I make little as it is."

"The campus psychiatrists," Craig said. "They're at Berkeley to help students, and they're paid by the college. Remember that, if you ever change your mind."

Dennis shrugged with a grimace and threw back his covers. "Five-thirty, you said?"

"Twenty-five of, now. Got a class at eight?"

"Right. Psychology."

"I'll give you a lift if you don't mind arriving early."

"Thanks. On days like this I ought to take it easy."

They got out of bed and went into the living room. It was small and lightly furnished: a few upholstered chairs; a couch and a portable television set arranged on a rich magenta rug, which was a permanent fixture in their apartment. Two colorful abstracts by a much-maligned Berkeley artist graced the walls. The clock hanging over the television set read 5:37.

"You wash," Craig said. "It's my turn to prepare breakfast."

Dennis nodded, somewhat sleepily, and went into the bathroom. He stripped to his underpants and doused his entire upper body in cold water. Wiping

himself with a large red towel, he studied his image in the oval mirror. The picture was impressive enough: blond hair, slightly curled all over; small, symmetrical features on a reasonably good-looking face; an enviable suit of lithe, young muscles on his small, five-foot-eight frame, the end result of a year of weight-training. And don't forget that intelligent gleam in his hazel-brown eyes . . .

That's me all over, he thought as he slipped into his pants. He buckled his belt and donned a white shirt, buttoning it with unnecessary care. Then he went into the living room, barefoot, and sat down at the table in the small niche that served as a kitchen.

The odor of bacon and eggs filled the air. Dennis inhaled the aroma hungrily. "Don't burn the eggs this time, Craig."

Craig made a wry face and gave him the finger. "Sunny side up?"

"As usual. And then wash up and get some clean clothes on. This isn't a nudist colony."

Craig growled good-naturedly and turned back to his cooking.

Dennis placed elbows on the table and rested his head between his hands. He caught a glimpse of the calendar beside the stove: Friday, May 11, 1974.

With nothing else to do, he ran over the coming day's activities. Psychology class at eight, Selected English Writers at ten, lunch at twelve, Calculus II at two. Then to the supermarket, where he worked as a stock boy from four to seven Monday through Friday.

He shook his head and sighed wearily. Lately he had begun to experience a very marked decline in his usual level of energy. It had come on gradually, beginning, he felt, at the start of the second semester. Only now was the accumulating lassitude of the last months beginning to catch up with him.

It wasn't that he had grown tired of living. Rather

he had grown quite tired of *not* living. Weekdays were for attending classes, working, and studying only; there was little time for extracurricular activities. Saturday was also for working, at the market, after which he would be too exhausted to go anywhere. And Sunday was for making up that portion of his studies he had managed to put off all week.

It seemed to Dennis that his everyday activities required a deliberate conscious effort. There was none of that smooth spontaneity that had attended his previous five semesters.

Dennis snapped out of his reverie. Craig had set down two plates of bacon and eggs. "You look like you've just dragged out of the grave," he observed, sitting down and lifting a piece of bacon. "What's this? Junioritis got hold of you, too?"

"Junioritis?"

"Of course. It's the third stage of a four-year malaise experienced by most college students. I had it last year, for a while."

"I never heard of it."

"It goes like this. According to the symptomatic hierarchy, freshman year is characterized by experimentation and discovery," Craig began, his voice mockingly didactic. "Freed from the supervision of your parents, you try to 'find yourself,' as the saying goes. So you try drugs. Marijuana, cocaine, LSD, speed, the amphets and the barbitches. You get drunk at least once a week. You get laid every chance you get. You begin to take part in protests, first just for the sake of protesting, later because you can identify with the cause."

"You're putting me on," Dennis said drily.

"Not at all. There's more to it. Sophomore year you become more sober. You look back, see how your revelry almost caused you to flunk out of college. So you hit the books three times as hard as you did be-

fore, and your grades show it. Junior year you begin to experience an unfocused pessimism, like you're feeling now. All activities seem to require effort. Senior year, the final stage, you don't give a damn about anything but your graduation, and it makes no difference whether you graduate *summa cum laude* or at the very bottom of your class."

"Thanks for telling me," Dennis said glumly. "It might be that. Then again, it might not. The trouble is there's no real excitement in my life any more. Things just aren't happening fast enough."

Craig ate his bacon noisily, talking at the same time. "I know what you need. A nicely proportioned bed partner. That'll help you snap out of it."

All Dennis could do was shrug. He took his fork, broke the yolk of one egg and watched its contents diffuse slowly over the white and onto the plate.

"How about Bev?" Craig suggested. "She puts out for everybody. I could get her over here———"

"I don't like Bev. She's . . . fat."

"Bev *fat!* Are you crazy?"

"I mean she's too nicely proportioned. Too *huge,*" Dennis said languidly, lifting a piece of bacon. "I like my girls trim and lean, like me. No excess baggage."

Craig shook his head and nibbled a piece of bacon smeared with egg yolk. "Suit yourself. Just don't let it get you down. Especially not now, with finals coming up in two weeks." He brightened. "Tell you what. After exams we'll get into my Pontiac and take a little vacation up in Canada somewhere."

"We couldn't afford it," Dennis said. "You know we couldn't."

Craig mused. "There's always Malibu. Muscle Beach. We're both in great shape, and there ought to be plenty of attractive———"

"That's an even better idea," Dennis conceded. "That's just what I need now. Action! I don't care

what kind, so long as it's got excitement, so long as it's something I can sink my teeth into." He nodded agreement. "Malibu it is, unless we can come up with something better."

Craig considered him closely. "You're bloodshot. I can tell you've been burning the midnight oil again."

"Finals are two weeks away. I want to be prepared."

"Forget them for now. Tell you what. Go rack for another hour and a half. I'll wake you when I'm ready to leave."

Dennis nodded. He finished breakfast and trudged back into the bedroom. He fell upon the bed with no thought of undressing or getting under the covers.

Chapter 2

The bell rang and the thirty students took their seats in the ultramodern classroom.

Mrs. Oates, their instructor, came into the room. She looked slim and desirable in her flower-patterned summer dress, Dennis thought. She was followed by a well-dressed individual whom Dennis had never seen before. Perhaps in his late twenties, the man couldn't have been much taller than Dennis himself. In his short-trimmed tie and his impeccable suit jacket, he looked like a member of the faculty, perhaps a new teacher or teacher's assistant.

"In the interests of psychology, our lecture will be canceled for today," Mrs. Oates said. "Instead, I would like each student to review chapters eight, nine, and ten on his own while our visitor conducts his experiment." She turned to the individual, smiling her usual sweet smile. "This is Dr. Matthew Reynolds, head of the psychology department at State University. Dr. Reynolds will now take over this class and explain the nature of his visit."

"Thank you, Mrs. Oates." Dr. Reynolds moved into the foreground of the classroom. "Our program, in case you haven't heard about it, is concerned with a new technique for the interpretive analysis of the phenomenon known as brain waves. The program has been in progress for two months, and so far our findings have shed considerable light on its nature. Eventually we hope that our discoveries will give us deeper, more meaningful insights into the psychological makeup of man.

"At the moment we are seeking a cross-section of all possible psychological types and makeups. To this end the members of our psychology department and numerous prospective psych majors are conducting a type of survey in all colleges in this section of the country. Since it would not be feasible to test every single student at Berkeley, we have chosen ten representative class groups from this campus. In the coming few days, we shall attempt to test each member of these ten groups, starting with this one.

"As to the nature of the tests, I can assure you they are simple and without discomfort. They last no more than a few minutes. The equipment used remains outside the skin at all times. Of course, participation is by no means compulsory. If anyone has any legitimate objections, please feel free to speak up."

No one spoke. Silence deadened the air.

"Very well." Dr. Reynolds turned to Mrs. Oates. "I'll take the first student into the testing room with me now. I'll send him or her back to summon the next in line. Thank you very much for your cooperation."

"My pleasure, Doctor," Mrs. Oates said.

For the next forty-five minutes, from his position at the end of the third row, Dennis let his mind brush over his psychology textbook. But the greater part of his attention was at the front of the classroom, at the students who were going out one minute, coming in

the next, and summoning the next one in line. Occasionally a few words, a question followed by a comment, filtered through the relative silence.

"How was it?"

"Not bad at all."

"What did it feel like?"

"Didn't feel a thing. Not a thing."

When Dennis' turn came, it was almost the end of the period. It looked as if Dr. Reynolds would have to continue tomorrow. The psychologist had been able to cover only about half the class.

Dennis took up his books and started toward the door.

"It's the room right next to the teacher's lounge," the boy who had just returned told him.

Dennis left the classroom and started down the immaculately polished corridor.

As the door to the testing room came into view, an idea that had been hovering in his mind resolved itself into specific outlines. Dr. Reynolds was a psychologist, wasn't he? Perhaps he could shed some light on the reason behind his recurrent nightmare.

He let his hand rest on the doorknob. It was worth a try. He would go through the test first, and then . . .

He opened the door and entered.

The room was small and white-walled, with a clinical freshness about it that reminded Dennis of the college infirmary. A comfortable-looking chair had been placed in the center of the room, next to a collapsible table on which he discovered, oddly enough, an open suitcase.

Dr. Reynolds graced him with a stereotyped smile, then scanned down a list he held in one hand. "Dennis Sands, am I right?" he said with affected pleasantness.

Dennis nodded. "That's me."

"Have a seat, Dennis," Dr. Reynolds said. He

brought his attention upon the opened suitcase. "I'll be with you in a moment."

Dennis sat down. It dawned on him, as he surveyed the tabletop from his new position, that the suitcase was the housing of a rather complex electronic mechanism. He let his eyes probe over the glass-and-metal surfaces visible to him. Meters, switches, dials, levers were plentiful, and all apparently functional and well organized.

Dr. Reynolds turned from the console. "The test will be over in a few minutes," he said. "I've just set the controls for the preliminaries. Now we put the helmet on, and we're all set."

He reached behind the console and brought up another device. It looked like a converted football helmet, one bearing several metallic outgrowths and a multitude of well defined wires; it was connected to the main console by a short, thick cord.

His fingers spread upon the armrests, Dennis let the man settle the helmet on his head and strap it carefully into place. It felt rather clumsy and uncomfortable, but bearable. Its pressure seemed to be concentrated in three places, slightly above the forehead and just above each ear. Dennis had a fanciful notion that those three areas of pressure, if they so desired, could press forcibly inward, through the bones of his skull, meeting inevitably at the base of his brain.

"All ready?" Dr. Reynolds said.

"All ready."

"Fine. Here it goes . . ." Dr. Reynolds did something to the controls.

At once a gentle electronic whirring became evident. Dennis sat still in the form-fitting chair, his whole body inexplicably tensed. He realized quite suddenly that his fingers were clutching the ends of the armrests.

Unexpectedly a shrill sound impinged upon his

ears, peculiar and yet not distinctly uncomfortable. Dennis imagined that the new sensation came from the helmet itself, for the humming of the console was effectively overridden. . . .

"Do you feel anything?" Dr. Reynolds' voice filtered through.

Dennis' attention came to a point. "A moment ago I could hear the hum of the machine out there. Now only this high-pitched noise. It sounds like it's coming from inside this helmet."

"Is it an uncomfortable sensation?"

"No. Not really."

"All right, then . . ." His back to Dennis, the doctor manipulated tht controls. The three pressure points of the helmet became more pronounced upon Dennis' cranium. "And now?"

"The same high-pitched sound. And something else. Pressure, right above each ear. And above my forehead . . . where the receptors touch my head, I think. . . ."

Dr. Reynolds made no comment. He went on diligently adjusting the controls. Then his head turned a good ninety degrees, so that one side of his face was visible. His expression was as alert as that of a hawk, his visible eye cold and calculating.

"How about now?"

Dennis did not answer at once. He had the intimidating sensation that tiny white-hot wires had sprouted from the three receptors and were insinuating themselves into his skull. At the same time an ever-thickening veil began to pass before his eyes, accompanied by a throbbing pain that seemed to originate from somewhere deep within his brain.

Dennis found himself growing panicky. *Hey, wait a minute. I thought this wasn't supposed to hurt!*

"How do you feel *now*?" Dr. Reynolds demanded, with too harsh an emphasis upon the final word.

"I feel pain. Pins and needles forcing themselves into my head . . . white-hot . . . pain deep inside. And my sight—it's failing me . . ."

Dennis could sense the abrupt flurry of movement but could not see it. "Your *sight?*"

"My eyes. And this *pain* in my head. I thought this wasn't supposed to be uncomfortable . . ."

All at once, the mist solidified into a hard block of darkness, trembled, seemed to acquire depth and dimension. Dennis felt his body stiffen. He knew he was still awake. He still had his bodily awareness of the comfortable chair, the shrill noise emanating from the helmet . . . and yet that vast, immemorial space which confronted him . . .

"No, no . . ." he heard himself scream. "Stop it!"

A mammoth flicker of light. A tremendous explosion. The diffusion of light from the distant horizon, followed by the emergence of that tremendous shape, that specter from the unknown——

The scene exploded like an overfilled balloon. Dennis found himself sitting in the chair, his vision normal once again, the pain in his head subsiding by slow degrees. Both the humming of the console and the shrilling of the helmet had disappeared.

He glanced down at his hands. They were gripping each other and trembling.

Dr. Reynolds was quickly but carefully unstrapping the helmet. A moment later he lifted it from Dennis' head, placed it beside the console.

Dennis' hands sought the area of his forehead, fingered the skin above his ears. Somehow he could almost swear that the pressure points were still there, even though the physical mechanism had been taken away.

"The tests are over," Dr. Reynolds said. He did not seem in the least bit perturbed by the proceedings of the last few seconds. "You can return to your

classroom now . . .” He turned to the helmet and proceeded to disassemble it.

“Wait a minute,” Dennis said. He rose and swung around to the other side of the table. “What about my reaction?”

Dr. Reynolds eyed him curiously. “Your what?”

“My reaction! You seemed upset when I told you I’d begun to lose my sight and——”

“You began to lose your sight? When was this?”

“When you asked me for the third time if I felt anything. I *told* you, remember?”

Dr. Reynolds’ expression darkened. “Wait a minute? You *told* me? When I *asked* you?”

“Of course. While you were adjusting that thing.”

“Hold everything.” Dr. Reynolds’ brow furrowed, then relaxed. “Oh, I see. A fictitious creation. It happens sometimes during this sort of test.”

Dennis felt his diaphragm constricting. “A what?”

“A fictitious creation. The person undergoing this sort of test frequently is unable to recall anything from the moment I turn the machine on. He can maintain a conversation while it’s on, of course. But as soon as I set the machine into the final stages, the brief interval of memory is blotted out. We don’t know why. Only in the majority of cases the mind somehow fabricates a sequence of events to fill the gap.”

“My hands,” Dennis said confusedly. “They were shaking. I went through a nightmare! Why would my mind choose a nightmare——”

“The mind can be a funny creature at times,” Dr. Reynolds said, with a slightly impatient smile. “I wouldn’t let it worry you. Your brain wave patterns—,” he paused long enough to place the dismantled helmet into the suitcase and close it tightly,“—indicate that you’re a mentally healthy young man.”

“A mentally healthy young man . . .” Dennis braced

himself. Now was the moment to act. "Dr. Reynolds?"

The man had the suitcase in hand and was preparing to leave. "Yes?"

"What would you say about a person who kept having the same nightmare over and over again, at least once a month, for as long as he could remember?"

Dr. Reynolds looked at him appraisingly. "Are you this person?"

"That's right."

The man looked up at the ceiling, assuming a meditative air. A few seconds later he said, "I don't think it's anything to worry about. Just try not to dwell upon it and sooner or later it'll go away. The mind is a funny creature at times, as I told you before." And he headed toward the door.

Dennis launched himself after the man, placed a detaining hand on his shoulder. "*But every single month for as long as I can remember?*"

Dr. Reynolds eyed him once again. His impatience was clearly evident now, both in his expression and in his voice, as he said, "As I told you before, it's nothing to worry about. Now if you'll please excuse me, I must be on my way."

With a motion that was a little too abrupt, Dr. Reynolds disengaged himself and strode out into the hall.

Dennis followed him out, a feeling of uneasiness tearing his insides. But the man had already disappeared around the turn in the corridor.

Confused, Dennis massaged his temples with his fingers. He had the feeling, the very distinct feeling, that something was out of key.

His mind quickly synthesized a conclusion. *The man's hiding something from me,* he thought. That period between the turning on of the machine and the nightmare . . . it was far too vivid, far too continuous with what had gone before, to have been a fabrication

of his mind. There was something Dr. Reynolds didn't want him to know. But what? Would he ever be able to find out? Perhaps if he asked some of the other kids what they experienced . . .

Dennis snapped his fingers. That was the logical first step. He would attend to it immediately after his next class.

Walking down the wide corridor, he happened to glance into the psychology classroom. Mrs. Oates was there, along with Dr. Brigarian, head of the psychology department. Mrs. Oates' voice drifted out to him.

His breath froze.

"Wait a minute, am I to understand that Dr. Reynolds did *not* perform any tests here this afternoon?" she asked.

"He couldn't even if he wanted to," the other said. "He's been in Europe since the first of May."

Chapter 3

The next thing Dennis knew, he was walking slowly down the path away from the building, through the warmness of the late spring afternoon. Everything seemed to come into focus at once, as if he had just emerged from some kind of daze.

That, Dennis realized suddenly, was what had happened to him. He had been in a daze, a mobilized stupor, from the second his instructor's words had registered on his ears. The impact had propelled him out onto the campus, toward the street. He was just coming out of it now.

And then he felt ridiculous, stupid. His reaction had been sheer idiocy. The fact that Dr. Reynolds' machine had dragged his nightmare into the open could have been a mere side effect. It didn't have to mean anything at all.

But why had the individual impersonated Dr. Reynolds in order to test the brain waves of fifteen junior men and women? What was the motive behind it?

He rubbed his eyes, turned around. The recently

finished humanities building, all red brick, glass, and tile, reached up into the sky like a miniature skyscraper surrounded by acres of gently shifting green. Turning in another direction, he glanced at the clock of a nearby church tower. Fifteen minutes after ten. Forty-five minutes before his next class. He had an impulse to go back into the building, but resisted it and stood where he was, thinking.

He felt a queer uneasiness growing within him, followed by a self-directed fury that he should feel that way at all. It was really none of his business; he didn't have to get involved in any way. But the machine the man had used, the mysterious instrument that had dragged his nightmare out into the open during the conscious state . . .

Dennis could feel warm blood coursing through the veins of his neck. Uncertainty tingled in his nerves, but now it was overlaid by a diffused excitement. He sensed the tingling in the pit of his stomach with mingled irresolution and delight. There was a mystery here. He was going to get to the bottom of it.

Impulsively he glanced from left to right. There was a vacant telephone booth on the other side of the street. With a singleness of purpose he crossed over, slipped into the booth, and slammed the door. He picked up the receiver, let it rest between his cheek and shoulder, inserted a dime.

A directory dangled on a short metal cord below the telephone. Dennis flipped it open, ran down the list of names until one in particular passed into his field of vision: *JOHNSTON, DR. A.*, psychiatrist.

Carefully he dialed the proper number and listened for the signal. In moments a well-toned female voice answered: "Hello, Dr. Johnston's office."

"Hello, is the doctor in?"

"Yes, Dr. Johnston is in, but he is with one of his patients at the moment."

"I'd like an appointment," Dennis said. His heart was thumping eagerly. He found it difficult to keep his speech steady and audible. "At the earliest possible date, please."

"Hmm, let me see . . ." The secretary paused, apparently to consult an appointment schedule. "I have a vacancy here . . . yes, for the twenty-eighth of May——"

"But that's two weeks away." Dennis' heart sank. "Isn't there anything sooner?"

"Let me see . . . No, I'm afraid not. Dr. Johnston is booked up until the twenty-eighth. If you're in a hurry, I would suggest——"

"Never mind," Dennis told her glumly. "Thanks anyway." He replaced the receiver slowly, thinking.

Resolution came. He deposited another dime, went down the list, singled out another number. He dialed it more rapidly.

"Is Dr. Swanson in?"

"I'm sorry, Dr. Swanson is on vacation until the first of June. This is his answering service. Would you like to leave a message?"

"No, thank you." Dennis hung up, muttering.

He brightened and chose another number, closed the connection; but the results were the same. The earliest appointment would have to be at least two weeks away. *There must be more nuts around than I thought,* Dennis thought wryly. Nevertheless, he couldn't wait that long. He wanted to get to the heart of this mystery in the shortest possible time.

Then a thought struck him. He cursed his forgetfulness. What was it Craig had told him? The university kept a staff of psychiatrists on call at all times to assist troubled students, free of charge.

He turned back toward the campus and headed for the infirmary. As he moved he examined his own feelings. His excitement was growing as he approached

his destination, but somehow the fact that the problem involved his own being kept him from fully savoring the intrigue. Perhaps if the mystery had been objective, involving some other party, he thought, his sense of adventure would have been complete.

Nevertheless, a little excitement was better than none.

He walked on.

Dr. Roberts considered him closely for a moment, stroking his carefully sculptured Vandyke. He removed his glasses and laid them on the desk before him. His eyes narrowed, ever so slightly.

"A nightmare, you say."

"Seated on a cushioned chair at the other side, Dennis said, "Yes. A recurrent nightmare. It bugs me something awful."

"I see." Dr. Roberts sent a meditative glance to the ceiling, then brought his attention back to Dennis. "And how often does this nightmare occur?"

"On the average, once a month. But it's occurred three times within the past two weeks, and that's what troubles me. It seems . . . well, unusual, a deviation from the schedule, you might say."

"Uh hmm." Dr. Roberts lifted his black pipe from its resting place, drew in a few puffs, savoring them contemplatively. "A deviation from the schedule, you say? Tell me this. Did anything unusual happen to you in the past week? Something that might account for this deviation?"

"I had the nightmare twice," Dennis said. "The third time I had it, I was under the influence of a brain-wave machine of some kind."

Dr. Roberts' interest quickened. "Where was this?"

"In psychology class. A Dr. Reynolds, supposedly from State University———"

"Yes, I see," Dr. Roberts said with a nod. "In fact, it

happened not more than an hour ago, am I right?"

"He was an imposter."

"Yes, he was. I heard of it just fifteen minutes ago myself," Dr. Roberts told him, without breaking his somewhat formal tone. "Everyone is wondering who that man was, what he tried to accomplish with his machine. So far they haven't got the faintest lead. He just disappeared without a trace."

"His machine, whatever it was . . . it caused me to relive the nightmare in the waking state."

"Yes, that is unusual," Dr. Roberts said between puffs on his pipe, "since none of the other students we questioned reported any symptoms at all. But it is possible the machine could have somehow activated memory cells in your brain. Without any knowledge of the machine's nature, however, I couldn't tell you. But let us start at the beginning again, shall we?"

Dennis nodded wordlessly.

"You have the same dream at least once a month. You've had it as long as you can remember. Can you describe this dream in some detail? What goes on in it —what you see, hear, feel, how you react?"

Dennis explained the nightmare in detail.

"I see," Dr. Roberts mused. "And the guilt feeling, this feeling of having committed the unpardonable sin—it troubles you the most."

"It's awful. More awful because it doesn't make any sense."

Dr. Roberts lowered his pipe and his attention focused intensely on Dennis. There was a serious, this-is-very-important gleam in his eyes. "Do you have any reason to believe people are trying to hurt you?"

Dennis felt himself stiffen. *Here it goes again,* he thought. "No."

"Do you feel, sometimes, even very infrequently, that somewhere in this world there is one individual

whose only purpose in life is to bring about your downfall?"

"No. I can't say . . . that I know of such an individual."

"What about the opposite sex? Are you attracted to it?"

"I'd be queer if I wasn't."

"Do you feel they are attracted to you?"

"The beauties are; the uglies aren't."

"Have you ever had sexual relations?"

"A couple of times."

"Were they satisfying to you, sexually?"

"Yes, naturally."

Dr. Roberts paused to consider the answers. His fingers smoothed the edges of his flame-red mustache.

"Do you like to do things and go places with people of your age?"

"I love adventure and excitement. You might say I've tried just about everything once. I can't stand it when I can't find anything exciting to do. When that happens, when I can't find anything stimulating, I feel tired and droopy."

"Have you ever taken any hallucinogenic drugs?"

"I tried marijuana and speed when I was a freshman. That's all I ever tried. I haven't touched the stuff since."

"Did you ever experience this dream while under the influence of these two drugs?"

"No."

"Do you live on campus with a roommate?"

"I live in an apartment with my friend, Craig."

"And what kind of person is Craig?"

"He's a great guy. One year older than I am. Very considerate, always thinking of the other guy. We get along okay."

"I see." Dr. Roberts glanced to the window at his

left, as if trying to devise further questions. He turned back to Dennis. "Do you like your penis?"

"Put it this way," Dennis said, playing it cool, "I'm sure as hell glad it's there."

Dr. Roberts paused to lift his pipe and inhale for a moment. Then he considered Dennis keenly, gesturing with his pipe in hand. "Now I want you to tell me the truth. What is your impression of this technique of therapy so far?"

"That it's getting us absolutely nowhere," Dennis told him.

Fifteen minutes later, he was standing outside the infirmary building. The rest of his exchange with the psychiatrist had yielded nothing that could even remotely help him in his quest. As far as he was concerned, the whole brief session had been a total waste.

"The hell with it," he said. "I'll find the answer on my own."

Chapter 4

Stopping in front of the door to his apartment, Dennis dug into his pocket for the key. With the other hand he gripped the knob. A shock went through him when he realized it was not locked.

His attention sharpened. Craig had an important class now. Even if he had come back before his usual time . . .

Dennis shoved the door open and stepped inside. He stopped.

Dr. Reynolds was lounging in Dennis' easy chair, his legs crossed in an ease which even the boy's sudden appearance had not overturned. He flicked Dennis a smart gesture of salutation and got to his feet, crossing his arms in the process.

"Dennis Sands?" His face was set in a masklike smile.

"You know who I am?"

"I was wondering when you were going to show up," Dr. Reynolds said, with his sustained, unnatural

smile. "I have been waiting for your return for some time."

Dennis shut the door and regarded the man keenly. He seemed relaxed, composed, even somewhat dominating. He had a distinctly officious air about him, the polished attitude of a confident salesman.

Then Dennis' eyes fell upon the two black suitcases at the man's feet. His temper flared.

"You've got your nerve, breaking in like this," he fumed. "I could have you arrested. You could have waited outside or come back later."

The stranger shook his head. "No, I'm afraid I couldn't come back later. The element of time is important. I had to be here when you came back, and I couldn't very well have waited outside. It would have attracted attention."

Dennis said sardonically, "Isn't that what a salesman wants?"

"A salesman?" Dr. Reynolds looked faintly surprised. "No, I'm not a salesman. Whatever gave you that impression?"

"Those," Dennis said curtly, pointing.

"I see. No, I am not a salesman. You might say I'm a representative. You may call me by my proper name, Cynnax."

Dennis said, "Mr. Cynnax?"

"No. Just Cynnax, if you please."

Dennis approached him. "Let's put first things first, Mr.–Cynnax. What's this concern you represent? Why were you afraid of attracting attention? And what the hell was that brain wave test———"

Cynnax silenced him with a suave gesture. "All your questions will be answered in due time." He dropped to one knee beside the suitcases, opened one and threw back the cover.

Dennis stared at the rows of meters and dials ar-

ranged on the metal apparatus inside. "What's that? Another brain wave machine?"

Cynnax did not answer. His hands were moving over the surface of the machine, adjusting the dials with practiced method and precision.

"A simple spatial transfer unit," he said without looking up. He pressed something and the surface became a confusing interplay of red, green, and purple points of light. "We're going on a little trip . . ."

Dennis felt his muscles tighten. "Now just a minute———"

All at once the mechanism buzzed and a stunning mystical radiance swelled out from the suitcase, highlighting Cynnax's kneeling form in an aura of dancing, prismatic colors.

Dennis let out a wild gasp as that blinding vortex of illumination reached out, engulfing him before he could get out of the way. There was a second in which the molecules of his body seemed disengaged, free to expand like the molecules of a gas released from pressure . . . and then the dancing colors died down, dwindled to a shimmering bubble and were gone.

Dennis looked around himself in shocked amazement.

He was no longer in the living room of his Berkeley apartment.

The place was cube-shaped, perhaps ten or twelve feet each side. Walls, ceiling, and floor appeared to be made of ice. The chill which touched him a moment later confirmed this visual observation. A large metal portal had been placed in one wall. It was closed, its rivet-perimetered surface, somber and featureless.

The spatial transfer, its metered surface silent, lay on the translucent ice at his feet.

Cynnax stood facing him, arms crossed; there was a complacent look on his face. Beyond the four ice

walls, Dennis' ears caught the faint, subdued vibrations of distant machines.

"I trust the transition was without discomfort," Cynnax said. His manner was still peculiarly quasi-officious.

In his mounting consternation, Dennis forced himself to eye the man sharply. "Where am I? What is this place? And———"

"———and why have I brought you here?" Cynnax grinned knowingly. "Logical questions, all of which I shall answer. We'll take the last one first. Why did I bring you here? I brought you here, for the most part, to convince you of the truthfulness of what I'm going to propose. Unless I gave you an actual demonstration of our technology, you would not believe a word of what I told you."

"Where is this place?" Dennis asked, somewhat less harshly than before.

"At the moment we are a thousand feet below the surface of the South Pole," Cynnax told him. "The actual coordinates, if you're interested———"

"Skip the details." Dennis gestured impatiently. "*What* is this place? Where does that door go? And those machines I can hear . . ."

Cynnax dropped his gaze to the machine at his feet, then raised it to Dennis. "I'll be clear, frank, and to the point," he said, his voice suddenly very serious. "In the first place, I assume your general knowledge tells you this transfer machine is not part of your world's technology."

Dennis said hollowly, "You're not from this world." His inner agitation was increasing by rapid degrees. He was conscious of the sweat collecting behind his ears.

"No, I am not," Cynnax said. "My planet is many thousands of light-years removed from this solar system. In fact, my planet lies in the heart of another

galaxy, one which you undoubtedly never heard of."

"Where's the spaceship you came in?"

"I used no spaceship. It would have been impossible. The journey, even at light-speed, would have taken thousands of years. No, I came to this world via a spatial transfer similar to the one I used to bring us here, only on an infinitely greater scale, using infinitely more complex equipment."

"What do you want from me?"

Cynnax paused. "I want you, Dennis, to return to my planet with me."

It took Dennis several seconds to regain his speech. "You want . . . me . . . to go to your world."

"Exactly."

"Why me?"

Cynnax made an open-palm gesture. "I shall explain. In any event, the final decision rests with you."

Still somewhat stunned, Dennis said, "Go ahead. Tell your story."

"To avoid confusing you, I shall spare you the technical details." Cynnax began to amble around the machine. "The entire issue revolves around one important point." He gave Dennis an intense look. "We need Earthmen. Not one, not only you, but as many as we can persuade to come with us."

"Why?"

"Our world is in great danger," Cynnax said gravely, his eyes dark. "Forces which we are unable to control are about to rip our planet to shreds, literally, and cast those fragments into the gulfs of space which surround us."

"Then what can I do?" Dennis interrupted. "If your technology is so much further advanced, and *you* can't cope with it——"

"That's the point. What you have to offer in the way of technology could never help us. But you do have one commodity which you can offer."

"And what's that?"

"Your body."

"My *body?*" Dennis said incredulously. "What could *it* do?"

"I believe you misunderstand. By your body, I do not mean your physical strength. I mean the hypermagnetic forces which emanate from every fiber in your body. From the hair cells on your head to the nail tissues of your fingers and your toes."

"I don't follow you."

"I didn't think you would, to be perfectly frank. But let me explain. It is a force that you do not have the power to recognize." Cynnax's expression grew seriously candid, almost appealing. "On your world, in the context of your terrestrial environment, it is relatively useless, indeed undetectable. But it could be transformed—on my world, under my environmental conditions—into a potent force which we are certain could successfully combat the energies threatening our planet. You would be exposed to no dangers. Your role would be for the most part passive. Your *presence* would be the key element. And immediately after we had conquered this menace, you would be returned to your own planet and richly rewarded for your services."

Dennis pursed his lips in thought. He said, "But you say these radiations come from all human beings. Then why ask me when you could have asked anyone else?"

"Ah, you have touched the crux of our secondary problem," Cynnax said. "The structure of an Earthman's mind is somewhat different from ours. What it amounts to is that only a very small number of you, those who possess a psychic trait most nearly approaching ours, can travel through a transfer mechanism. To date, we have found only twenty-two people

on this planet who mind complexes meet this specification. You, Dennis, are one of them."

"In other words," Dennis said slowly, "that was what the brain wave test was all about."

Cynnax nodded. "Precisely. The test was a technique to single you out. Our detectors, scanning this section of the globe, had focused on the area of your classroom as one which intermittently contained one of the types we were after. But we couldn't use our general location instruments to pinpoint you exactly. We had to single you out, and do so without attracting attention."

Dennis digested that in silence.

"I have revealed my reasons for wanting you to return with me," Cynnax began again. "Bear in mind that I cannot coerce you. To move through a transfer, you must give your complete assent, one that is unclouded by drugs or any form of threat. We need you desperately, but we cannot force you to go against your will. The final decision, then, rests with you. In fact, I insist you think it over before deciding."

Dennis said, "What about the others? How many have decided to go?"

"To date, all have given their consent but you," Cynnax said. "I leave it entirely in your hands. The fate of my planet is at stake. But the choice is up to you."

"I see," Dennis said meditatively. An idea struck him. He could feel his nerves tauten. "One thing, Cynnax."

"Yes?" Cynnax said receptively.

"Right after the brain wave test, when you called my violent reaction a fictitious creation . . . were you telling the truth?"

Cynnax paused to remember. "Not at the time. You *did* experience such a reaction, the feeling of cranial

pain, the dimming of your vision. It was one of the indications that I had found the right person."

"And the nightmare. Was that part of it, too?"

"Nightmare?"

"Yes, of course. The one I've been experiencing at least once a month. Your machine dragged it into the open. Could that possibly be of any significance?"

Cynnax considered, his brow suddenly creased, his eyes staring fixedly at the machine. A few seconds later he looked up, shaking his head.

"No," he said. "It is unimportant, a mere side effect. I fail to see any significance in it at all."

Chapter 5

Dennis stood alone in the center of his living room.

He did not move. He did not even permit himself to think. But all the while his eyes were in motion, scanning the area which surrounded him: the couch, the chairs, the silent television set, the clock, the two nondescript abstracts hanging on the wall.

A moment ago none of those items had existed.

But now they were solid-looking, real.

Only gradually did he allow his mental processes to awaken, bringing on a wash of recollection. Soon after Cynnax's casual dismissal of the nightmare, the meeting had been carried quickly to its close. *The decision is yours,* Cynnax had said again. *Think it over, and decide.*

Slowly, Dennis eased his body into a chair and sat without movement, staring at the suitcase that had been left in his apartment, along with instructions how to use it. He felt himself tensing all over. What was causing this feeling inside him? Fear, apprehen-

sion? Eagerness, excitement? Or was it a mixture of both, one in which neither emotion stood out in the foreground?

"It couldn't have happened," Dennis said. "I must have imagined it all. That's it. A figment of my imagination. Contrived excitement."

But he knew the rationalization would not work. It *had* happened. It had been no hallucination. Cynnax had been real. Dennis had shaken his hand, felt its unearthly coldness, something he had not been prepared for. He couldn't have imagined that. He had sensed the frigidness of the South Pole cubicle to which he had been transferred. The chilliness below his feet had been compellingly authentic. And the suitcase . . .

He got up and went over to it, ran his fingers over its black surface. He opened it and stared at the multitude of dials, felt at them with uncertain fingers.

The machine was as real as he was. There was no possible way he could refute the fact.

He sat down again, trying to analyze his rampaging emotions. Part of his mind seemed to say, *Yes. Go along; it will be the most stimulating adventure of your life.* But another part seemed to whisper, *No. Don't. There will be too many risks. You may not come back alive.*

Dennis had a vivid impression of his dead body floating through space, its arms and legs flung out in limp abandonment, and all because of a very minor miscalculation on the part of Cynnax. . . .

But then he remembered what Cynnax had said: They needed every human being they could persuade to come with them. If this was the case, certainly Cynnax would take every precaution to protect them.

"I've got to decide," Dennis said resolutely.

He thought about the past four months of his life, the developing lassitude that had plagued him, the

lack of adventure and excitement that had rendered life so dull, monotonous, uninteresting, and routine.

"I'd love to go," he said. "But———"

The opening of the door snapped him to instant awareness. Craig came into the room carrying a large paper bag.

"Our chow for the week," he said, and forgot about Dennis' presence for a moment as he deposited the bag on the kitchen table. Then he said, "Well, look at him. Here I am, laboring in the market to select your most favorite foods, and *you* loaf."

"I just got back," Dennis explained. "Walked all the way. I'm a little bit tired. And don't forget the juniori-tis."

Craig glanced at the clock. His brow furrowed slightly. "I thought you had calculus now."

"I did," Dennis said, with a knowing grin.

Craig shrugged. "It's up to you. I guess we're all entitled to a few cuts every now and then." He turned. "Hey, what the hell's that? An addition to your luggage?"

Suddenly conscious of the suitcase, Dennis forced himself to his feet. His heart had started to pound. "It's . . . just a piece of my old luggage you've never seen before."

"Do you usually keep your luggage in the middle of the floor like that?"

"No, only when I'm examining it for cracks. I saw them for the first time today. I'll have to patch them up." He did not want Craig to know about his meeting with Cynnax. At least not now. He had enough of a burden without Craig's side-splitting cynicism. "I was going to do it now, but it can wait. We still have two weeks."

"Huh, doesn't look like any kind of suitcase I ever saw," Craig said, eyeing it curiously. "But if you like it, it's okay with me."

An idea occurred to Dennis. "What are you doing tonight?"

"Going to study till six. Then my evening is free. Why do you ask?"

"I feel in a beach mood. How about a trip to the shore?"

"Tonight?"

"You have any serious objections?"

"Not really." Craig shrugged. "It's all right by me, if you'd rather swim than study."

"We can pick up a couple of girls." Dennis winked slyly, trying to keep his heartbeat well regulated. "We can leave after I get out of work."

"We'll have only an hour before the sun starts going down."

"Don't forget the beach parties."

Craig grinned. He went into the kitchen and started assorting the groceries, putting the perishables into the small refrigerator right away. Dennis silently took the suitcase and secreted it in the bedroom closet. Then he returned to the kitchen to give Craig a hand.

From their apartment, it took them less than fifteen minutes to reach the shore. The boys donned swimming trunks and went out onto the sand. There wasn't the profusion of sunbathers and beach umbrellas that one would normally expect during the daytime. But there were small, isolated groups of young men and women up and down the shoreline, as well as solitary individuals stretched out on blankets here and there, trying to soak in the last rays of the sun. The sun itself was a ball of clouded scarlet suspended over the ocean's distant horizon. It was sinking lower and lower as the long Californian day waned toward night. The air was warm but crisp, the waters intensely inviting.

Craig ran forward, as if forgetting Dennis' pres-

ence, and plunged head first into the pounding surf.

Dennis followed him, tightening all his muscles as those crystal-blue waters lunged out and engulfed him. Responding to Craig's summons, he swam out after him, leaving the shore behind. He caught up with Craig a minute later, only to have the latter swing around suddenly, clutch him by the top of the head and proceed to give him a good, hard dunking.

Dennis broke free, snatched Craig's legs and with a burst of strength drew him under also. Dennis surfaced and swam ten yards, forcing the water out of his mouth, then turned to look.

Caught off guard, Craig finally surfaced, his hair limp with wetness, his teeth clenched in good-natured vengeance.

"The fish are going to have a royal banquet tonight!" he yelled, and plunged into the surf after him.

Dennis reached the shore first. He stood up and walked out of the water, then seated himself on the sand, watching Craig as he drew closer and closer to the shoreline. He remembered the days, a year, two years ago, when swimming had been one of his favorite pastimes.

But now it seemed that frolicking in the water, even with such a grand companion as Craig, had lost the excitement and the impact of those past years. In fact, the sight of the other young people, helping themselves full measure to the joys of the churning waves, filled him with a strong, excruciating sense of injustice. It seemed unfair that he could no longer enjoy that which had been so dear to him, when others could partake in that joy, over and over again, without the smallest degree of boredom.

He turned to the ocean, in time to see Craig advance like a lightning bolt and douse his face in a handful of salt water. Coughing, Dennis rose and chuckled in a premonitory fashion to conceal his low

spirits. He wiped the sand from his hands, coughing another time. Then he noticed that Craig, still reveling in having gotten Dennis last, had turned toward a frolicking group of youths farther down the beach.

"Come on," he said, starting toward them. "Let's find out about these beach parties."

As it turned out, there were several. The guys chose one that was being held in a spacious beach house one mile down the shore. The place was packed to saturation. It was only with the greatest difficulty that anyone attending could maneuver around the floor at all.

The gathering was riotous and cheerful, but in the midst of all the conversations, all the dancing, drinking, and making out, Dennis felt intense, gnawing alienation. It was as if the place and everyone in it, including Craig, had dimmed and receded into an unfathomable space, leaving him isolated in the midst of a three-dimensional nowhere.

Trying to summon up a workable party mood, he retreated to the veranda, which at the moment was free from merrymakers, and stared out over the ocean. The moon was a brilliant crescent set against a glittering backdrop of stars. The ocean was a vast expanse of velvet blue, stretching almost to the star-spangled horizon. From his position he could hear the incessant pounding of the surf.

He gazed meditatively into the firmament. How his life had changed in the past few months! How his favorite pastimes had one by one shed their power of attraction!

Yet the same sky which seemed to proclaim his dereliction also seemed to offer hope. He considered the stars, those tiny glowing spurs thrown at random across the blue-black celestial carpet. Somewhere up there, right now, lay the proving ground for an ad-

venture unlike any other known to man since the beginning of creation.

And he, Dennis Sands, had been called upon to participate in that wondrous adventure.

Did he have the guts to throw in his cards with Cynnax?

He clenched a fist. "No one's ever going to say Dennis Sands was afraid," he whispered savagely.

"What's that?"

Dennis turned. Craig was walking out onto the veranda. "I thought I heard you say something."

Dennis shook his head. "Just admiring the view."

"It's a pretty night," Craig agreed. "But I hope you don't intend to spend your whole evening stargazing. Come on in. I've met a nice chick who saw you and says she'd like——"

"Craig, let's go."

Craig's face reflected puzzlement. "Leave? We just got here ten minutes ago."

"I . . . I don't feel very well. A headache. How about it?"

Craig opened his mouth to speak. Instead, he closed it and dropped his arms to his sides, wry-faced. "All right, if you insist you don't feel well . . . Come on. They're throwing another party tomorrow night. You better not be sick for *that* one or some nice little girl is going to be very unhappy."

"I won't miss it," he said. *I won't even be here,* he thought. But he didn't want Craig to know. At least not right away.

Next morning, Dennis insisted that his headache had worsened. To keep it under control, he had decided to cut his first class. Craig merely shrugged with a suit-yourself gesture, and left him alone in the apartment.

Dennis waited half an hour. Then he got out of bed, showered, shaved, and dressed, all within fifteen

minutes. He took pencil and paper and scratched out a brief note: *CRAIG: Have gone in search of some adventure. Will return within a week, if possible. Dennis.* As far as he was concerned, it was a truthful statement. He left it on the kitchen table, went back into his room.

He took the suitcase, laid it on the floor beside the bed, opened it slowly, as Cynnax had instructed. The dials and switches were bright and noncommittal against their dark metal background.

He stared at them intensely. The reality of it all no longer intimidated him, no longer plagued his mind with doubts.

He had made his decision. He had no intentions of changing it.

"For better or for worse," he said doggedly.

He pressed the transfer activator and closed his eyes.

Chapter 6

When the vivid interplay of forces came to an end, Dennis found himself standing in a small ice-walled cubicle.

Perhaps it was the same one in which he had materialized before, but he couldn't be sure. The place was chill, the rivet-lined portal stark and impervious. Through the ivory whiteness of the walls he could still make out the sound of distant machines.

There was a hint of movement. The portal slid noiselessly into the wall. Cynnax was standing in the doorway, his arms crossed, his mouth arched in a gratified smile.

He flicked Dennis a gesture of salutation. "Welcome, Dennis Sands. I trust the transition was not unpleasant?"

"It was okay," Dennis said, but without as much vigor as he had intended.

"Very well. Very well, indeed." Cynnax took a few steps into the cubicle. His attitude was basically the same as before, one in which a dominating confidence

was balanced by a kind of ingratiating deference. But his attire had changed radically. In place of his suit jacket he wore a one-piece garment of shining monochrome blue which covered him snugly, with the exception of his hands, from his feet to the upper region of his neck.

And his *face*. . . . The features were the same, but of an unfamiliar red hue and grotesquely enlarged. Apparently they constituted his true appearance.

Dennis cleared his throat softly. "Well, I'm here. What now?"

"We shall proceed," Cynnax told him briskly, turning around. "The others are ready and assembled. We were wondering when you were going to make up your mind. Just follow me, please."

Dennis allowed himself to be led out of the cubicle, through a low-ceilinged passage hewn out of solid ice. As he walked he searched his feelings. Now that he had taken the irrevocable step, now that the act of deciding was over . . . did he regret it? Did the reality of following Cynnax to the transfer units fill him with a last-minute dread?

No, he decided. Not in the least. He had made his decision and was glad of it.

Cynnax stopped before another portal, gestured. It slid responsively into the side wall. They emerged into a place of monstrous proportions, a huge cavern carved out of the endless layers of ice. The place was a good two hundred feet on all sides and filled with strange pieces of machinery: cables one and two feet thick sprawled withing the gaps between the ponderous units, linking every one into a compelling electronic unity.

The air was alive with the subdued throbbing of energy held carefully in check, waiting for the command to break free and raise these alien machines to the zenith of their functional capacity.

Dennis turned to Cynnax. The alien was conversing with one of his associates, a shorter individual attired in a similar blue garment. As his eyes went beyond them, Dennis could make out other aliens in the background. All were similarly clothed and were moving among the machines, pausing occasionally for a close inspection, taking pains to make sure that every segment of the machine was in optimum working order.

The alien with whom Cynnax had been conversing turned around and headed toward one of the machines. Cynnax turned back to Dennis.

"I'll be with you in a moment," he said. "In the meantime, kindly take your place with the others."

Dennis followed the alien's finger to the other side of the chamber. For the first time he became aware of the others who had been assembled by Cynnax and his associates.

He started in their direction without thought, but his eyes were moving keenly. He saw that there were two distinct groups. The largest consisted of somewhere between fifteen and twenty individuals—young men, women, and teenagers like himself, Dennis thought with an immediate sense of fraternity. The smaller group consisted of two girls and a boy. For some reason they had broken off from the main body.

The members of each group had been conversing among themselves, but now all eyes became centered on the new arrival.

Dennis considered them narrowly. For the most part, they seemed like normal boys and girls, some older, some perhaps younger than he was. He was faintly surprised to find almost no traces of outright fear on their faces. The dominating emotion seemed to be uncertainty, highlighted by a gentle, almost childlike bewilderment. . . .

Before he could react, the male member of the smaller group had stepped forward.

"Do you speak English?" he demanded

Dennis nodded, drawing closer. "Righto."

"Thank God—thank *God*," the youth said with a frown of relief. He wasn't very tall, about Dennis' height, with a prominent scar on his left cheek. The tightly-fitting blackness of his sweater and pants gave evidence of his slim muscularity. "The more the better. Join the gang."

Dennis indicated the larger group. "What about them?"

"Them? A bunch of foreigners. Italians, French, Germans, Russians, probably. And probably a few from countries I never even heard of. They couldn't speak English to save their lousy——"

"You three . . . you're Americans, then."

"I am. She's English. I don't know about the little one," the youth said. "What's your name, by the way?"

"Dennis. Dennis Sands."

"Where from?"

"Berkeley, California. And you?"

"I'm James Trenton from Chicago." They gave each other a mighty handshake. "You can call me Jim. Hey, you've got a pretty powerful handshake, did you know that?"

"I used to lift weights."

"Same here. Half a year, during the happier times of my life. This is Pamela Griffith from Stratford-on-Avon, England, I think it is."

He indicated the girl with a negligent movement of his thumb. She was about Dennis' height, dressed in a blue-striped skirt that reached only to mid-thigh. Her face was heavily made up, her eyes large and provocative, her ruby lips quirked in a peculiar half-smile.

"And this here is—What *is* your name, little one? I don't think you told me."

Dennis' eyes shifted. The other girl was smaller, perhaps five feet two, and very slight of build. Dennis could find in her none of the accented, overdone femininity that characterized the other girl. Instead, he found all the unpretentious markings of a quiet child: wavy brown hair curled at the shoulders, small, unadorned features, a pair of brown eyes which were blinking continually, alive with an apprehension he had found in none of the others.

"She's awfully quiet, not like Pam here. Eh, Pam?" Jim sent the other girl a grinning glance. "Come on, what's your name?"

The smaller girl forced a weak smile. "Cindy."

"And where might you be from, Cindy?"

The girl hesitated, as if tongue-tied. "New York."

"All right. Now we can properly address one another," Jim said. He turned to Dennis. "If you want her, she's yours. I'll take this one—" He placed his arm loosely around Pam's waist, grinned at her reciprocating smile. "She's for me. Right, baby?"

"Anything you say, lover boy," Pam said in a drawl.

Jim considered Dennis, then Cindy, then Dennis again. "Yep. I think you two would make a good pair."

Once again, Dennis considered the smaller girl. She was appealing though not as strikingly gorgeous as the other girl. The diminutive smile that had touched her lips, the light ingenuous blush that had graced her cheeks . . .

Dennis felt a warming stir of emotion within him.

James Trenton lit a cigarette he had produced from a pocket. "This is a rather unusual situation, I'll grant you that much," he said, inhaling a few drags. He blew a cloud of smoke and let his eyes flicker to the other group. "By the way, know any foreign languages?"

"I had two years of French. But when it comes to speaking it, I'm afraid I have to step back."

"Too bad. Same here. That means we could have one hell of a time getting this damn group consolidated. Care for a smoke?"

"No, thank you. I don't smoke."

"You're smart. A nasty habit." Jim looked disapprovingly at his cigarette. "Now, about all this. What made you decide to come along? If it's too personal, just tell me and I'll shut up on that subject."

"I came solely for the adventure," Dennis said candidly. "I can't find my type of excitement where I live. Life's been getting to be a real bore, if you know what I mean. How about you?"

"I'd rather not say. Not now," Jim said. "Rest assured it was a pretty damn good reason." He hesitated and a shadow fell across his face. "But that's not important now. We're here and that's that. Now we have to stick together."

Dennis found himself relaxing even more. Jim had a confident loquacity that appealed to him, plus a semi-serious attitude—at times grinning, at times frowning—that made Dennis feel more comfortable in his presence.

Jim said suddenly, "You think this is a trap of some kind?"

"Not really."

"I kind of feel that way myself. But I'm not sure." Jim became discontented with his cigarette, flicked it down with a grimace and stamped it into the ice. "We can't be sure of anything."

"Yeah, we can't be sure of anything anymore," Pam put in, her expression masklike and wry.

Dennis said experimentally, "Are you afraid? Even a little?"

"Me afraid? Huh, that's a new one." Jim moved forward in a confidential manner. "To be perfectly frank,

Dennis, I'm not scared. But I *am* a little uncertain. How about you?"

Dennis shook his head. "Not yet."

"Good. Let's hope it stays that way——" He shot a swift glance beyond Dennis' shoulder. "Hey, cool it for now. That Cynnax character's coming back with some of his cronies. I've the feeling they're going to start breaking us up. . . ."

Dennis turned. Cynnax was approaching, along with two of his associates. He stopped a mere ten feet away and surveyed the gathering, his face set in lines of satisfaction.

"May I have your attention, please. I am speaking through a translator so each of you will hear me in his native tongue. We have little time left, so we are not going to delay. The transfer terminals are over there, at the far end of this chamber." He pointed. "To expedite matters, you shall be transmitted in pairs. You four—" He indicated Dennis' group. "Pair off and follow me."

Jim shrugged and gave Pam a grinningly significant glance. She responded by taking his arm. Together they started after Cynnax.

Dennis looked down at the smaller girl. She smiled, but there was still a great amount of fear in her eyes.

Dennis felt strangely moved. He said, "Don't be afraid," and took her hand. Her fingers, so pale and clammy, tightened around his own.

They turned forward and started after the others.

Chapter 7

The transition was longer than any of the previous, an apparent result of the greater distances involved. The last things Dennis had been aware of were those towering electrodes that had encircled him and the girl, vibrant with the energy that would soon grip their bodies and propel them out of the physical plane. . . . Then a period of disorientation, of physical disintegration and rearrangement . . . a glorious, illusory impression of stars encasing him and the girl in a globe of infinite dimensions . . . and now———

His feet touched solid ground. His vision was returning to normal. He was standing in a large hall, upon a plastic blue floor which blazed under the brilliant five-sided lights in the ceiling.

Directly in front of him a portion of the floor bulged to form an oblong platform on which five aliens, all of them in close-fitting blue garments, were seated behind a curved panel. They might have been humans except for the permanent flush and their coarsened features.

Cynnax, the center man, rose and leaned slightly forward, palms against the panel, his eyes surveying the new arrivals expressionlessly.

"As head of this project, I welcome you to planet Ikonia," he said. His voice seemed very loud, as if amplified. "The transitions have been successful. I trust that in no case was the journey uncomfortable."

Then he became silent. Standing on the plastic floor, Dennis could sense the presence of the others. They were behind him, he knew, and at his sides—teenagers like himself, all here for their own individual reasons. Jim Trenton was at his left. He could smell the perfume with which Pamela had so lavishly sprayed herself. Cindy stood at his right. He could perceive her form most directly, could feel the pulsating coldness of that little hand, still linked securely with his own.

"Our time is short," Cynnax continued. "The menace is building up with ominous speed. Delay could be fatal. Nevertheless, you will require at least a day to rest after the transition. Otherwise the procedure might be seriously handicapped.

"In a few minutes you shall all be given quarters for the night. There you will find everything you need in the way of nutrition and comfort. Tomorrow we begin a series of tests designed to determine the contributive potential of each one of you. Only after that can we successfully calculate the force to combat this menace which threatens our world.

"After this menace has been eliminated, you shall all be returned to your home planet. Are there any questions? Please feel free to speak."

There was a moment of silence. Then Jim Trenton stepped forward. His hands were at his sides, thumbs in pockets. He was considering the aliens with an expression that was a little too presumptuous, a little too cocksure.

"What happens to us if you can't stop this menace?"

Dennis felt the blood draining from his head. *Jim's really pushing them,* he thought with a sinking feeling.

Cynnax was shaking his head with a look of smiling assurance. "Your fears are groundless," he said, leaning farther across the top of the curved panel. "We shall not fail. And even if we were to fail, even if you could not help us, you would be returned to Earth before the menace had a chance to totally devastate our world."

Dennis felt his inner tautness increasing, but not, he realized, as a result of Jim's veiled audacity. Something had changed in the alien's voice—something in his inflection, his intonation . . . or had it been a visual change, a shifting of his expression, his attitude?

Dennis could not be sure. But he realized that there had been some kind of change. Precisely where that change had taken place, he did not know.

Then another thought struck him. Why was he feeling so uneasy all of a sudden? He glanced fleetingly at Cindy's hand, which was still in his own, and grinned ironically to himself. It was almost as if his own hand were some freakish sensory receptor through which the girl's consternation was working its way into his own body.

No, he thought. It's just the novelty of the place. A normal reaction. He cut off the thought. Jim had once again taken the floor.

"———permitted to visit one another," Jim was saying, "in the event that we don't feel like sleeping or get lonely?"

"We have taken all aspects into consideration," Cynnax said assuringly, with no trace of strained patience. "We realize that in a strange environment, the human animals thirsts for the company of one of his own kind, preferably one of the opposite sex. You

shall share your quarters with the person with whom you were transmitted. The same arrangement goes for the rest of you Earthlings."

Dennis stiffened. *Earthlings*. . . . Something in the word as Cynnax had pronounced it struck him like a sledgehammer. A tone of contempt? A flicker of deprecation?

"Have you any further questions, James Trenton?" Cynnax asked.

Jim stepped back briskly. "No further questions."

"Very well. Have any of you other Earthlings questions?"

Dennis looked from left to right. No one spoke.

"Very well," the alien said, his tone unchanged. He gestured to the right. "File through that opening and follow the lights to the transportation duct. I shall be with you presently to direct you to your quarters."

Cynnax turned glances to his associates, who had swung in his direction from both sides of the panel. With one accord they rose, turned around, converged behind the panel and summarily dropped from view, apparently through an unseen opening in the floor of the platform.

Dennis' attention sharpened. Uncertainty seemed to grip the others as pairs of eyes, one by one, were brought upon the exit. Dennis could feel the general irresolution as a tense stillness in the air. He turned slightly, his eyes taking in the small group. Yes, there was fear present, but an incipient kind of fear—a general disquietude that was only in the first stages of development.

He wondered. Regret at having come? And if so, was it focusless, an abstract fear? Or had they perceived, as he had, the subtle change in Cynnax's attitude?

He examined his own feelings. If given the chance, right now, would he return to Earth?

No, he answered. At the moment there were no really tangible signs of danger. Besides, the adventure was just beginning . . .

But a very small tingling uncertainty remained in him.

His eyes settled on Jim Trenton. The boy had a cigarette dangling from his mouth. He was in the process of lighting it.

"Well, what the hell are we waiting for?" he growled, as if to the entire gathering. His voice betrayed no apprehension, and his bodily movements were precise and coordinated. But there was some new quality in his eyes, a luminous transparency that had not been there before. To Dennis he said, "I have to talk sharply. Otherwise they won't get the message. Don't take it personally."

Dennis nodded. Moisture was forming a film over his eyes. He had a sudden impulse to grind them with his knuckles.

Instead he asked, "What do you think of Cynnax now?"

Jim's expression deepened. "I don't like him, personally. But that doesn't necessarily mean he's out to get us. It's just that . . ."

"What?"

"Something's changed in him." Jim shrugged. "I don't know what the hell it is; but I can sense it, somehow."

Dennis felt his stomach muscles tightening. So he *wasn't* alone in his observations after all. . . .

Jim blew a cloud of smoke, glanced sharply to left and right. "Well, if you have no objections, my dear," he said suavely, taking Pamela's hand, "we shall proceed. To the exit. And Dennis, maintain your cool."

Dennis smiled weakly. It was just about all he could do at the moment.

The transition through the passageway was a brief

one, a simple matter of following a line of glowing triangular lights through a sequence of cutoffs.

The place they entered was a gigantic cylindrical channel, perhaps a hundred feet or more in diameter, which seemed to stretch into infinity on both ends. They had emerged in a recess of one side of the tube wall. Its floor, of ivory-plastic composition, projected outward ten feet into the tube and ended in a bulwark. A smiliar arrangement was on the other side of the tube. Both crawled out of view in either direction along the main channel.

A few of the humans remained timidly within the recess, but the majority spread out and were milling around the bulwark, staring at the ponderous object suspended in the center of the tube.

Without deliberation, Dennis tightened his grip on Cindy's hand and joined Jim, who was standing with one foot upon the bulwark, one arm around Pamela's waist. The object was huge and bullet-shaped, perhaps a hundred feet long, with a transparent curvature through which Dennis could perceive a row of seats. A tapered wing, terraced into a stairway, reached out of either side and descended on a slight angle to the platform. The thing simply hung there, without visible means of support, almost as if frozen in the air.

A new sound made him turn. Cynnax had appeared on the platform, along with five of his blue-garbed associates. He gestured to the enormity of the channel.

"This is a standard conveyor unit, such as is put to extensive use in our great underground metropolis. This one will carry you to your quarters. Now, if you will simply step this way . . ."

Then they were inside, seated on the comfortable chairs which formed two rows inside the upper compartment, as the huge vehicle glided smoothly and effortlessly down the channel.

They plunged forward for what seemed like five minutes, through a tube which seemed structurally uniform. Then the conveyor decelerated abruptly, slowed and stopped.

At the front of the compartment, Cynnax stood up and turned around, his eyes consulting a small tablet he held in one hand. He called out two French-sounding names. A boy and a girl rose and followed him down the terraced wing to the extended platform. All three disappeared through a small doorway in the wall of the indentation. A minute later, Cynnax reappeared and started up the stairway. They proceeded.

Dennis sat still. The silence hung around him like a thick blanket. It seemed that none of the others had any desire for conversation. He turned to the right. Cindy sat quite still in her seat, her hands clutching the ends of the armrests, her eyes glassy and unfocused.

Dennis felt an inward twang. Indeed, the poor girl was really putting herself through a hell of anticipation. Would her fears end up unjustified? Dennis prayed that they would.

He whispered, "Cindy?"

The girl's head turned, ever so slightly, like that of a robot.

"Try not to be afraid. I'll protect you. I promise."

A negligible amount of fear drained from the girl's eyes. Her thin smile filled Dennis with an irrational contentment. Then, as if out of nowhere, the question assailed him once again. If given the chance, right *now*, at this very moment, would he turn back to Earth and forget all about this escapade?

No, Dennis decided, he wouldn't. And in the same instant he realized that his resolution was compounded of two factors—his intense longing for adventure, which stood in the immediate foreground, and . . . and something else: Something new and sudden

which he couldn't exactly pinpoint at the moment. . . .

But the impact of his resolution was only half what it had been before.

He felt a bite of panic, but it was gone as quickly as it had emerged.

Chapter 8

During the next half hour the conveyor made further stops at intervals of about three minutes, until all the Earthlings except Dennis and Cindy had been delivered to their quarters.

Now it came to its final stop. Cynnax gestured. Dennis rose, took Cindy's hand and followed him down the platform.

Cynnax went straight to the wall of the indentation, where a small door interrupted the monotonous sameness which stretched away from them on both sides. He opened it and led them down a short, dimly lit corridor. He opened a further door and motioned them inside.

"This will be your quarters for the night," he said behind them.

Concealed lights glowed slowly to life, driving away the darkness. The place was long and low-ceilinged, and far from austere; nowhere did two walls come together in something so simple as a perpendicular joint. Instead, they melted into one another in

a series of pleasing undulations, forming well-proportioned alcoves, or merged in similar esthetic curvatures with the vaguely concave ceiling.

On the ceiling itself, a series of glowing disks recessed in concentric rings provided a gentle, diffuse illumination. The floor was richly matted in some areas and luxuriously tiled in others. The color scheme was one of coolness and serenity, accented in places by overtones of fiery red, purple, violet, and luminous magenta.

Cynnax made a gesture which took in the entire room.

"Your quarters for the night," he said once more. "I trust you will find everything to your satisfaction." He led them over to the left side, where a push-button console seemed to grow naturally out of the wallwork. "This panel will deliver instantly all you desire in the way of food and drink. Our water is chemically pure. Some of our food may taste peculiar, but you should find something which appeals to you. Feel free to utilize this unit at any time."

Dennis nodded. Cynnax went on:

"Over here you will find a lavatory, equipped for the disposal of body waste and also, let me add, for shower or bath. Over here," he indicated the far end of the room, "we have two doors, each of which leads to sleeping quarters. Make use of them if you wish, but bear in mind," he added in a changed tone, "that you are not necessarily required to use *both* rooms."

Dennis' nerves tingled. The implication was clear: He could tell by Cynnax's foxlike grin that he had not been wrong in his interpretation.

Dennis caught a glimpse of the girl. She was small and frail; he could have easily overpowered her if he wanted to. But when he saw the new tautness in her expression, the blinking desperation in her eyes, he knew he could never do such a thing.

Cynnax turned and started for the exit. Before leaving, he turned around and said, "Tomorrow you will be signaled when your time comes. In the meantime, a pleasant night to both of you." And he was gone.

Almost at once, Dennis felt himself relaxing. Now that the alien had left the room, there were only the two of them, he, Dennis Sands, and the girl, Cindy. Both were citizens of a world now many billions of miles away, facing each other in well-furnished quarters on an unknown planet.

The girl was quite scared. Dennis found this evident not only in her expression but also in her movements, the awkwardness of her stance, the way she fingered the blue tassel of her belt. No, he wasn't going to let her feel this way for long.

He said carefully, "We're going to use both bedrooms."

He noticed an instant change for the better in the girl. Some of the disquietude left her expression. She smiled. It was a mere uplifting of the corners of her mouth, the same kind of smile Dennis had seen on her just moments before the transition.

He turned and beckoned toward the nearest alcove. "Let's sit down and get to know each other, shall we?"

Cindy nodded briefly. They seated themselves on the soft plastic cushion that flowed out of the wall. Dennis crossed his legs and cupped his hands around his knees. The girl had seated herself a few inches away from him, her hands folded on her lap, her eyes lowered. A moment later she raised them toward Dennis: blue eyes, large and beautiful, and somehow meaningfully sad.

"Thank you," she breathed.

Dennis frowned, then smiled. "It's okay."

"I was afraid . . ." She buried her face in her hands, sobbing quietly. "I was so afraid. So many things happening all at once, and then all of a sudden—"

Dennis touched the girl's arm. "I understand. Don't cry. I'm a little uncertain and I admit it. I guess we all are."

Cindy raised her head. A few tears glistened on her lower eyelids. One broke free, trickled down her left check.

"I don't know what made me come here. Rather, I know, but—but I keep on thinking to myself, was it worth it? Maybe there could have been a better way. . . ."

"Why did you decide to come?"

Cindy closed her eyes, then opened them and let them drift straight ahead, her expression neutral. "It's a long story. A very long story."

"I like very long stories."

The girl's mouth tensed. "I . . . don't really know where to start. So many things, happening for so long . . . I just couldn't stand it anymore, that's all."

"How old are you?"

"Eighteen. I just turned eighteen."

"You're from New York, you said?"

"Burlington. It's in the southern part. I sometimes wonder, if everything would have turned out differently if I had been born elsewhere. Oh, how I wish I could find the answer!"

Dennis ventured, "You were unhappy?"

Cindy's eyes met his own, and she nodded sadly. "I'm just not like other girls."

"In what way?"

"Other girls have figures, attractive shapes. I have nothing like that at all."

"You've got a nice shape," Dennis said. "I think you're a very attractive young lady."

Cindy shook her head sadly. "No, I'm not attractive. I'm not hideous, but I . . . I just don't look like other girls. Anytime I go anywhere, I can't get over the feeling that people are staring at me, laughing . . . And

then, not being able to find a boyfriend, no matter how hard I try. Boys like girls with nice figures. They won't even look at you if you're—puny." She choked up.

Dennis considered the girl carefully. Unfortunately, her condition was a perfect example of paranoia, the everyone's-out-to-get-me syndrome he recalled from psychology class.

"Is that why you came to this place?"

Cindy nodded, trying to hold back her sobs. "The only reason," she said weakly. "I needed . . . a change. I thought if I helped them, these people would help me in return."

Sympathy touched Dennis' heart. Only an awareness of time and circumstance prevented him from saying what was in his mind. This girl needed psychiatric help, and she needed it badly. But she'd never be able to get it in a place like this.

He shook his head. "Now in your case that's something I just cannot see at all."

Cindy inclined her head. "What do you mean?"

Dennis didn't answer at once. He couldn't keep his eyes off the girl, couldn't help marveling inwardly at the delicate arrangement of her features, the appealing set of her hair, the aura of innocence that radiated out of her entire nature. Pity, perhaps? He wasn't sure. Or——

"I think you're a very attractive girl," he repeated.

The girl smiled and blushed.

"And I think you've got an ideal shape for your size. You're a small girl, it's true. But you're just a little too sensitive about something you have no reason to be sensitive about."

"You really mean that?"

"With God as my witness," Dennis said solemnly.

His eyes met the girl's. There was something very striking about them . . . something very provocative

about the way her body turned closer to him, about the way her eyes closed as her head tilted slightly upward toward his . . .

He kissed her, very gently.

She kissed him in return.

The next thing Dennis realized, his arms were around her. He could feel her fingers on the back of his neck, could feel the warmth of her body, pressed so close to his own. Her lips drifted closer to his.

And then his vision faded out and was gone.

Dennis sat very still, with his arm around the girl. Cindy's head rested on his shoulder. The scent of her hair was refreshing, a distillation of springtime. Her small hand, held tightly in his own, was fragile and warm. It was the first time it had grown warm, Dennis thought absently, since he had first met her, back in that hollowed-out cavern below the South Pole. . . .

"Yes, you're a very attractive girl," he said, meaning it. Even if he hadn't thought so, he would have said it. He had to keep the girl's neurosis from plaguing her right now, when they had more important things to be concerned about.

"You really think so?"

"I wouldn't lie about something like that."

The girl snuggled against him. "Hold me closer."

Dennis tightened his arms around her. "Are you still afraid?"

"I'm afraid. I don't know why. But I'm afraid."

"Even with me here to protect you?"

"I can't . . . help it. I don't want to be afraid." Her fingers took his more fervently. "But I can't help it. I just can't."

The question struck him once again. If given the chance, would he return to Earth right now, right at this minute?

Yes, Dennis thought, he would turn back, so long as he could take this poor, bewildered girl back safely

with him. This was no place for a young woman in such a condition.

He grew more acutely aware of the girl next to him. He said softly, "You're tired. I can tell." He smoothed her hair. "What say we both get some rest? But first of all, are you hungry?"

"No. Just a little thirsty."

Dennis went over to the console. There was a small red button marked *WATER* at the far left. He pressed it and watched a small sealed container roll out of the delivery slot just below it.

He pressed the button again, picked up the second container and returned to the girl. They quenched their thirsts, and then Dennis tossed the cylinders into the disposal unit which yawned open on one section of the wall.

Dennis directed the girl to one of the bedrooms. "Try not to be afraid," he said. "Try to get a good night's rest."

"I'll . . . try," Cindy said. They embraced once more. Cindy's lips were hot and moist, her small body limp and supple. "Good night, Dennis."

A moment later she was gone. Dennis retired to his own room.

Chapter 9

He found himself sitting erect in bed, alert, surrounded by an obsidian gloom.

His heart was hammering, his whole body shivering. Perspiration had erupted on his brow and was forming rivulets down his face.

He tried to compose himself. What had happened to him?

Remembered pieces fell quickly into place. Yes, that was it. The same bleak, desolate plain, the same flash of light and explosion of thunder . . . and then the climax, the rim of that tremendous unknown shape . . .

And then the staggering, mind-distorting sense of *guilt* . . .

Dennis forced himself out of bed. He groped for the small button on the nearby console, pressed it savagely. Light flooded the chamber, revealing the curved unfamiliar walls of polished red and green, the closed door, the oval bed on which he had reposed.

He sat down on the bed and buried his head in his palms for a moment, then looked up and stared unseeingly at the wall. Despite the general pall of apprehension that had fallen on everyone, he was still intensely glad that he had come, for knowledge as well as for adventure.

The aliens had promised him a reward for his services. Dennis thought, perhaps, if I were to ask them to explain this nightmare, or better yet do something so it would no longer bother me . . .

He stood up and turned around. His eyes fell on the oval bed, with its similarly oval pillow, the sheets drawn carelessly to one side. His body yearned for sleep, but he knew that it was impossible in his present frame of mind. Something to do, something to keep himself occupied . . . He snapped his fingers. Why not?

He dressed and went quietly out of the bedroom, made a path for the food dispenser, pushed one of the buttons. Instantly a small cylinder fell out of the slot. He picked it up and removed the cap, squeezed the orange-red composition into his mouth and chewed it hungrily. It was smooth and rich-tasting, like a mixture of pudding and fresh whipped cream. He deposited the container in the disposal unit and went outside, into the channel.

The huge passageway was dim and silent. A sullen, spectral glow from the tube wall, stretching into the distance in both directions, relieved the area from what otherwise would have been total darkness.

Dennis turned left and started down the white plastic floor, keeping well within the recess which paralleled the channel. Jim Trenton had left the conveyor immediately before him. Dennis had no idea how far away he might be. Perhaps a mile, perhaps not; he had no way of being sure.

He doubled his speed, his footsteps echoing with a

strange, unearthly staccato sound from the cryptlike vault above and below him. A new kind of excitement was overtaking him. It was a strange, viscera-stimulating sensation, part uneasiness and part exhilaration, similar to the feeling he had experienced a long time ago, at age thirteen, when he and a friend had explored an abandoned mansion.

Dennis found himself enjoying it immensely. How deep below the surface was he? How many untold levels were above him, mediating between his body and the surface of this alien world?

He tried to fathom that, but failed. The whole place dwarfed him. He felt as if he were shrinking physically down to the level of a speck of dust, a crawling insect to be stepped on and crushed into the ground.

Somehow the thought energized him. He lengthened his stride.

He kept this pace for what seemed nearly an hour, with occasional pauses to catch his breath. When the solitary panel appeared in the otherwise unchanging wall, he felt exhausted. He had the sudden strong impulse to lie down and relax for a few moments.

He resisted it, slowly opened the panel. He went up to the inner door and knocked. When thirty seconds passed and no one answered, he knocked again, a little louder this time.

What if Jim had already turned in and could not hear him?

His fears evaporated when in the next instant the door slid open.

Jim Trenton's eyes widened delightedly. "Well, I'll be damned!" he exclaimed, a grin breaking out over his face. "What in hell are *you* doing here at this time of night?"

"I couldn't sleep. I decided to visit you, if you were awake," Dennis told him. He placed a hand on his

chest, coughed. "I'm out of breath right now. I feel like I just walked five miles."

"Then come on in," Jim welcomed. He backed into the room with an effusive gesture.

Dennis entered. Jim's quarters could have been a carbon copy of his own, right down to the very curvature pattern of the walls and the variegated color scheme. He noticed that the boy himself was in his underwear, without stockings, and that his undershirt was wrinkled, slightly ripped. Jim's slim musculature was all the more evident in his semi-nudity.

Jim lit a cigarette. "How's everything going for you and Cindy?" he asked, letting loose a cloud in the room.

"We're still in one piece," Dennis said. "How about you and Pam?"

"Not bad. Not bad at all," Jim answered, his tone peculiarly significant. He gazed at the ceiling, pleasurably. "She can really put out, that girl can. How about your girl?"

"I wouldn't know," Dennis said discreetly.

Jim brought down his eyes and stared at him. "You mean you haven't even———"

"No," Dennis told him.

"For God's sake, why not? Why do you think they stuck us here in boy-girl combinations?"

"Jim, she's not that kind of girl. She's got enough problems. I don't want to add to them."

"I see." Jim grew curiously introspective. Then he bit his lip and his expression hardened. "Come on, kick me, *hard*. Kick me for sounding so nasty about it."

"Never mind," Dennis said, struck by the sincerity in the other's words. "It's okay."

"No, goddamn it, I insist." Jim about-faced and bent over. He peered over his shoulder, apparently re-

alized that Dennis had no intention of obeying him, turned around again. "No?"

"Don't ask me again," Dennis said stolidly.

"All right, I won't. It's just I'm so mad at myself for jumping to a conclusion like that." His expression grew dark. "Most of the trouble in this damn world comes when people jump to conclusions, make judgments before they have all the facts. Ask me. I should know. I should know plenty well, Dennis. *Plenty* well. You know something?"

Dennis inclined his head.

"I like you. I think you're a pretty damn nice guy. You don't look like the kind of guy who'd jump to conclusions about other persons."

"I try not to."

"Oh, you might occasionally. I guess everyone does, occasionally. I do, too. In fact, I just did. The important thing is you make an effort not to. Most people don't even bother to make that effort." He took a sharp drag on his cigarette. "Look at me, Dennis. Do I look like a machine?"

Dennis let out a short, uncertain laugh. "Of course not."

"What do you see?"

"I see a boy about my age. A human being——"

"That's it, a human being. Only a machine can be predicted. It's got to be like that. It can't change its ways. But I'm human and I can change. Then why won't people believe that?"

Dennis tried to speak but the words failed him.

"I've been on my own since I was seventeen. I needed a job. A fellow gets sick and tired of having to sponge off friends. But they'd look at this scar on my face, they'd think I was a condemned man, some kind of vicious criminal. They'd turn me away. So I get desperate. I make a small steal, about ten bucks. But I

get caught and that ten lousy bucks blacklists me, for life!"

"That was four years ago. I got out of that one. But now I needed more money, but who'd hire a kid with a scar like mine and a police record to boot? I needed more so I stole more. A hell of a lot more; I had no choice. I got caught. If I didn't come here I'd still be in that goddamn lousy jail cell, awaiting trial. And why? Because *they* wouldn't give me a chance. No chance at all. Not even a goddamn *fighting* chance."

Dennis said, "Didn't you ever try to seek help?"

"What good would it do? I'm scarred and I've got a police record. Do you think anyone would want to help *me*? But it's all right now. It's okay. You see, Dennis," he leaned forward confidingly, his eyes growing somehow appealing, "there comes a time when you just can't take it anymore. Some go completely over the hill. They start shooting people from rooftops. Some ship off to deserted isles, become hermits. Some take drugs. They all have their own escapes. Well this, Dennis" he made a wide, all-encompassing gesture—"this is *my* escape. I don't know why *you* came and I won't ask you. You may be returning to Earth when this is all over, and if you are, more power to you. As far as I'm concerned, the Earth can go to hell with all the people on it. I don't care if I ever go back. I don't care if I ever see Earth again."

He looked at the floor, messaging his temples with clawlike fingers. "No chance," he said with an intense wretchedness. "Not even a fighting chance."

Dennis opened his mouth, then shut it. There was really nothing he could say. Another candidate for the psychiatric couch, he thought sadly. How many of the others had come for such diseased reasons?

Jim looked up. "I'd like to make my home here, with the aliens," he said. "A fresh start. I think I could grow to like it. But I'm worried."

"About what?"

"I don't trust that guy Cynnax. I smell something fishy. I can't tell you why I feel like this. All I can tell you is I do."

Dennis felt a gentle constriction in his chest. "I feel the same way, sometimes. What really gets me, though are—these preliminary tests. Correct me if I'm wrong, Jim, but has Cynnax given us any idea what they're going to be like?"

Jim shrugged. "Not that I know of."

"There you have it. Why hasn't he?"

Jim shrugged again. "Maybe he feels it's unimportant. Listen to me. From what we know, we were all given quarters down this one channel, on the same side of the tube. I think they're going to begin the tests with the ones who are closest to the point we arrived at. That means I'll be going before you. Somehow I'll let you know what the damned tests are all about . . . somehow."

"I trust you," Dennis said warmly. "I don't care what others think; I think you're a pretty good kid."

Dennis cut off his words. He was amazed at the level of gratitude he saw in the other's eyes.

"Thanks, Dennis. Thanks a lot. You're just about the only person who's ever said that."

"And I'll say it again. I think you're a pretty damn good kid."

Jim only smiled. He yawned and stretched; the muscles in his arms rippled, then relaxed. He indicated the door.

"I think you better leave now," he said, then added quickly, "Don't get the wrong idea. The trouble is, we don't have any idea when Cynnax and his gang are coming back."

Dennis agreed. He took Jim's outstretched hand in a meaningful handclasp. "Good luck, Jim." He turned to leave.

"One thing, before you go," Jim said abruptly.
Dennis turned back. "Yes?"
"You and Cindy . . . how are you getting along?"
"Okay, I guess."
"Do you think she likes you?"
"You know something? I think she does."
"How about you? Do you like her?"
"I think so."

Jim's expression grew remote and pensive, then hardened into lines of resolution.

"I'll make damn sure they hurt neither of you," he promised. "Damn sure. I swear to God."

"Thanks," Dennis said.

A moment later, he was standing outside in the channel.

Chapter 10

By the time the outer door to his quarters loomed within his field of vision, Dennis felt on the verge of physical collapse. Each leg felt like a heavy lead weight and his chest ached. He could barely keep his eyes open to see.

He trudged up to the inner door and was surprised by the sudden flurry of motion he detected inside, just beyond his view. He stepped quickly into the chamber and came face to face with the girl, Cindy. Her expression was distraught and frantic, but now it settled into a tense relief.

"Oh, Dennis . . ." She advanced and threw her arms around his neck, her head pressed against his shoulder. "You're back . . . I was so afraid—"

"It's all right," Dennis comforted her. "How did you find out I was gone?"

"I woke up thirsty, a little while ago," Cindy told him, disengaging herself slowly. "I came out here to get some water. I noticed that the door to your room

was open. I peered in and couldn't see you. Oh, I was *so* frightened . . ."

"It's all right, I'm back," Dennis said. "I simply took a walk down the channel to Jim Trenton's room."

"Did you?"

Dennis nodded. "I woke up and couldn't get back to sleep. I was too upset. I had another one of my nightmares."

Cindy's interest quickened. "A nightmare?"

"That's right. I've been having the same one ever since I can remember. At least once a month. I thought perhaps, if I came here——"

He cut off his words. Both of Cindy's hands had gone up to her mouth in wide-eyed disbelief.

"No, I don't believe it. It's impossible!"

"What's impossible?"

Cindy went on feverishly, "Dennis, this dream . . . tell me what goes on in it."

Dennis drove right into an explanation. By the time he finished, a blank expression had made its way across Cindy's paling features.

"Dennis," she said slowly, tremulously, "you're not the only one who has that dream."

Dennis felt a period of uncertainty, then a sudden shock that coursed through every nerve in his body. "Cindy," he said incredulously. "Cindy, you don't mean that . . . that *you* . . ."

The girl nodded. Her face was molded in lines of pain and desperation. "I know what you go through, Dennis. Believe me, I have the same dream, *the same exact dream* right down to the very last detail!"

Dennis bit his lip, his sleepiness forsaking him. He took the girl by the shoulders, not gently, not roughly.

"Listen, Cindy," he said in a taut voice. "There's something going on here. Neither of us knows what it is, but both of us play a very important role in it. All this time I had a feeling all of us had something in

common. But I couldn't be sure what it was; I couldn't find it. Now I have. The question is, *Why?*"

"But Dennis," Cindy said, groping for words, "but Dennis . . ."

"What's wrong?"

"Dennis, your friend Jim, that girl Pamela . . . they've never experienced the nightmare."

Dennis felt a new tension in his stomach. "How do you know?"

"I asked them. It was one of the only things I did ask them when I first met them, but I was so bothered I had to make sure. I thought maybe everyone there had the same nightmare, too. When they said they didn't, I concluded I was the only one. Otherwise, I would have asked you, too, long ago."

Dennis sensed a wave of dizziness. It was almost as if the floor had buckled and was swaying under his feet. The fact that Jim and Pamela were *not* victims of the nightmare greatly reduced the possibility that all the others . . .

He said, "Cindy, we may be the only ones who share this torment—the only ones in this whole group."

Cindy's eyes were glazed, her expression panicky. "Oh, Dennis, what does it all *mean*?"

"I don't know yet, but I'm going to find out. Not right now, however," he said, suddenly conscious of his returning physical exhaustion. "We both need sleep. I think the best thing is to hit the sack. I'll leave my door open. If you get up before me, get me up. I'll be able to think more clearly in the morning."

They embraced once more, and Cindy returned to her room. The door closed behind her.

Dennis went into his own room, crawled into bed and shut off the light.

He was out before he could even turn around.

His eyes snapped open in response to a violent awakening.

As his vision cleared, he realized that Cindy's hands were desperately working his shoulders in an effort to revive him. The fully clothed form of Jim Trenton stood in the immediate background; his face was tense and determined, his fists clenched at his sides.

"Dennis, get up, hurry!" Cindy pleaded.

Dennis threw back the covers and sat up. "What's going on?"

"We've got to get out of here," Jim interposed, drawing closer. "Get your clothes on an and follow me. I'll tell you all about it when we're out in the channel."

Still uncomprehending, Dennis slipped into his clothes and quickly replaced his shoes. He followed Cindy and Jim out of the bedroom, across the main room and out into the channel. The section of the tube wall which surrounded them was glowing with a brighter shade of crimson. A conveyor unit, similar to the one they had used earlier, hung silently in the center of the tube.

Dennis turned quickly to the other boy. "Jim . . . what——"

"Questions later," Jim said with a swift gesture. "Get aboard and hurry up. We've no time to lose."

Without another word, Dennis took Cindy's arm and directed her up the stairway of the wing. Jim followed immediately behind him. They entered the transparent compartment of the craft, and Jim beckoned to the front seats.

"Sit down and try to remain calm," he directed, taking a seat before the controls. His hands flew deftly over the console. The conveyor gave a lurch and started deeper into the channel, gaining speed with every second that passed.

Dennis regained his breath. "What's this all about?"

Without turning, Jim said, "The aliens need us, all right, but the truth they gave us was shot through with lies. None of us is getting out of here alive if we let them put us through those tests."

"How do you know?"

"I heard them. And it's a good thing I watched them working this baby as they took me and Pam to the testing room," Jim said, doing something to the controls.

The speed increased dramatically. The velocity caused the glowing rings of the surrounding tube to merge into a solid mass of blazing red.

"They took Pam first and made me wait," Jim went on, "but I overheard them, thank God. There were two aliens, Cynnax and someone else. Cynnax said something like, 'Put these two through the same tests and make sure they cannot fight back. If they fail to yield results, dispose of them the same way as the ones before them....'"

Cindy let out a gasp. Both hands went to her cheeks. "I *knew* it; I just *knew* it!" she wailed. "I knew something like this was going to happen!"

"Calm down!" Dennis said, more harshly than he had intended. He turned back to Jim. "Go on. What happened to Pam?"

"They're putting her through the tests right now. Or perhaps they've knocked her off already, poor broad. There was nothing I could do; she was out of my reach. I had enough trouble belting two of Cynnax's guards and getting my hands on this baby."

He sent his hands over the controls once more, but the velocity didn't increase; apparently the vehicle had reached its limit. With a renewed shock Dennis realized that Cindy had broken into hysterical tears. He put his arm around her and drew her close to him.

"Please don't cry," he said, his voice quavering.

"I'm scared," Cindy whined. "I'm so scared!"

"You're not the only one." Dennis looked up toward Jim. "Where are you taking us?"

"I wish I knew," Jim said grimly. "I only wish to hell I knew. Right now the important thing is to put as much distance between them and us as possible and hope we can get mighty lucky."

Cindy was crying into Dennis' shoulder. "We'll never get out of here," she sobbed. "We'll never get out! I *know* we'll never get out!"

Dennis felt his own inner tension increasing, clamping icy fingers on his stomach, his legs, the back of his head. A tingling mist seemed to descend before his eyes; the perspiration on his forehead and under his arms was frigid, oppressive.

He knew intuitively that Cindy was right. They would never be able to get out of this place. The underground metropolis was too vast, too complex, and too well-organized. It was on an alien world, billions upon billions of miles from their home planet. . . .

Dennis' blood chilled. All that Jim was doing was postponing the inevitable.

Nevertheless, they were going to put up a fight. They were not going to passively give in to the aliens. They were going to go down fighting every inch of the way!

Dennis stirred as the craft gave a sudden jolt, began to slow down.

"Goddamn it!" Jim roared, bringing his fist down upon the controls.

"What's the matter?"

"Take a look," Jim said furiously, gesturing outside. On the tube walls the red glow of power was quickly dying out. "The bastards, they've turned off this section of the channel. "We're slowing down."

And he was right. Ten seconds later the conveyor ceased all movement, came to a dead stop in the center of the tube.

"We're licked," Dennis groaned. He tightened his arm around the girl.

"Not yet we aren't." Jim's words were clipped and precise. They seemed to convey a heightened zeal, an almost insane conviction. "Look over there."

Dennis turned to the right. Within the ever-present indentation along the side of the tube, a series of outgoing passageways had suddenly broken into view.

Jim was on his feet in a second, heading down the wing. "Step on it, you two. We're going to give them a real run for their money."

Dennis snapped erect and took Cindy's hand; it had grown cold and clammy once again, moistened by a nervous sweat. In seconds they had ducked into one of the new passageways. Jim took the lead and they started into it at a rapid, fleeing pace.

"Come on," Jim prompted, shooting a glance over his shoulder. "Faster! *Faster!*"

Gasping for breath, Dennis managed, "You think they'll . . . follow us in here from the channel?"

"You can't tell what the bastards might do. Where they might come from. Behind, straight ahead, these side passages." He beckoned to both sides, where other openings were appearing at regular intervals. "Just keep running, and pray—"

They ran. Dennis' chest was constricted; he felt the sweat from his forehead dripping into his eyes. He could sense that the girl's condition was no better than his own. She kept slipping back, lagging behind him, showing all the signs of cumulative exhaustion.

Dennis' attention quickened. A distinct sound reached his ears: from behind them, far down the passageway they had already traveled, but growing closer every second. . . .

Dennis yelled, "They're following us!" Cindy began to cry.

"Behind us?" Jim's voice filtered back.

"Right behind us. And getting closer—"

Jim pulled to a sudden stop. He flashed glances left and right.

"In here," he said quickly, starting into the opening on the left side. "We'll shake 'em yet."

They continued, through a narrow corridor dimly lit by a series of glowing plates on the ceiling. Their footsteps clattered on the polished plastic floor, echoed from the confining walls.

Dennis felt on the verge of collapse. His lungs wanted to burst to relieve the internal pressure, his head throbbed. His legs felt as if they would fold up at any second.

He kept running. The little creature at his side gave him reason for running. He had to get her out; he had to bring her to safety.

If worst came to worst, he had to take her life before the aliens could get their hands on her. The thought stung him viciously. If only they could get out, if only they had a chance—

They would never get out.

But they would go on trying just the same. The thought invigorated him. He put on a fresh burst of speed. The glowing plates slid by above his head, merging into one continuous column—

"The passage swings to the left," Jim's voice boomed. "Twenty feet up ahead. Don't slow down."

Dennis bit his lip. Fifteen more feet . . . ten . . . five . . .

He felt himself veer sharply. For a moment Cindy's body became a suspended weight, swinging around at his right, away from the intended direction. His heart hammered. His eyes blurred, then strove toward clarity, trying to regain the necessary focus—

Jim let out a cry of alarm.

Dennis' brain froze. Almost in the same instant he

heard Cindy give a shrill exclamation, felt her fall abruptly away from him, their hands disengaging.

Before he could react he had fallen upon his stomach, cheek pressed against the cold floor, his left hand extended beyond him into an unexpected emptiness. Trying to drive the mistiness from his head, he forced himself to his knees and looked around fearfully.

His breath caught in his throat. Directly before him a large, four-sided opening commanded the entire floor.

He crawled closer and peered over the ledge, a lump forming in his throat. The opening went straight down, illuminated by plates on the side facing him; it was almost as if the passageway had taken a ninety-degree turn downward.

Cindy was suspended no more than five feet down, her hands grasping desperately at a narrow projecting bar. Her upturned face bore an expression whose hysterical intensity sent a chill up his spine.

Jim Trenton had disappeared from view entirely.

"Dennis"—the girl said with an effort, her throat muscles working feverishly, straining. "Dennis—stay away! You'll fall in, too!"

Ignoring her, Dennis fell flat on his chest and plunged his arm into the abyss, stretching, trying to reach the girl. Despite all his efforts she still remained at least one foot out of his reach. His mind quailed.

"Can't . . . hold on," Cindy gasped. "Losing my . . . grip . . ."

"No!" Dennis cried. His body was on fire with alarm. "Try to hold on a little longer. I'll get you out."

He jerked to his feet and cast about for something that might offer assistance. He could feel his hands trembling, the veins in his legs freezing solid. If only he could find something: a metal bar, a length of cord . . .

He snapped his fingers. Both hands went quickly to

his belt buckle, unfastened it, drew the belt out of the rings which held it———

He heard Cindy cry out—a long, protracted scream. It dwindled into the distance and was gone. Silence reigned.

Dennis stood where he was, without moving. He let the belt slip between his fingers and settle on the ground.

Behind him the approaching footsteps grew: louder, louder. . . .

His eyes traveled to the other side of the pit. The passageway continued out of view without further interruptions. The opening was at least ten feet across. He knew he'd never make the jump.

Something snapped in his brain. He swung around toward the direction from which he had come, jaw set, both fists clenched. He wasn't going to let them take him. He was going to put up a fight to the finish!

Bastards!" he yelled. "Come and get me!"

Footsteps approached rapidly. A second later one of the blue-clad aliens rounded the corner. He froze on sight of Dennis and tried to raise a formidable-looking weapon.

Dennis didn't give him the opportunity. In an ecstasy of vengeance and hatred he waded into the alien, knocking the weapon clear of him. Strength from nowhere exploded in his veins. His hands flew like twin bolts of lightning, catching the alien in the face, in the neck, in the chest, stomach, groin. With one last effort he swung the demolished shape all the way around, hurled him viciously into the opening.

He swung back to face the corridor. "Come and get me," he roared. "I dare you!"

Another alien rounded the corner. Dennis plowed into him, knocked his weapon clear. But this alien had more command of his body than the previous one. He

clung to Dennis like a leech, taking in the boy's blows as if he did not have a nerve in his body.

Another alien appeared, and another. A group of three emerged and closed in. Dennis could smell the unpleasant odor of their closeness and struggled more furiously, but it was no use. Strong hands were closing in all over him, on his ankles, his calves, his neck, arms, wrists, around the waist.

A buzzer sounded. He had an impression of a huge sphere of vivid bluish light, growing swiftly closer, bearing down upon him with the speed of an express-train . . .

And that was all.

Chapter 11

Painful discomfort wrenched at his elbows and shoulders. Opening his eyes, Dennis found himself completely naked and suspended from a convex circular mechanism, his wrists fastened securely to its underside. Ranks of ominous-looking machinery filled the small chamber; the humming throb in the air was sinister and fear-inspiring.

Looking down, he found a huge glass vat of some swirling, gaseous substance positioned no more than five feet below his bare toes.

He felt himself growing cold all over. A wave of nausea gnawed at his insides.

He forced himself to look straight ahead. Five or six aliens in white lab smocks were in the room, standing ready beside the machines. One of them, Cynnax, stepped forward; he directed his attention to Dennis, arms folded at his chest.

"The moment is at hand, Dennis Sands." His voice had changed; his entire attitude had undergone a

striking transformation. There was no longer any officiousness in his manner, only a calculating ruthlessness, a clear-cut singleness of purpose. "It is in this chamber that you shall serve our purposes."

"What do you want from me?"

Cynnax stepped even closer. "Let me make one point clear. What I initially told you about our operation was true. But it is your *mind* which contains the very potent force we are after. Process of elimination makes you the candidate. We want that force, and right now."

"Then take it," Dennis said bitterly. "If you want it so badly, take it. It's all yours. Just take me down!"

Cynnax shook his head slyly. "You are willing now, but will you be willing when the proper moment comes? We shall see."

His expression hardened to stone. He made a brusque gesture and said, "Lower him!"

There was a whirring above his head, and the convex mechanism began to descend.

Dennis' heart sank. He struggled violently, but it did little good. His hands were immovable and every motion only increased the pain already within them.

His muscles tautened; he could feel the cold perspiration breaking out all over his skin. In a moment he could feel the sliminess of the mist itself, twisting around his ankles, his calves, then around his thighs, his genitals, his abdomen, and lower chest. The eerie wisps rose up, swarming into his field of vision. All that he could make out before him was a mobile luminous green.

With shocking suddenness, the ethereal substance began to harden around him. Dennis felt a stab of hysteria. He tried to cry out; but a second later the substance had congealed to a gelatinous mass around his mouth and jaw, cutting off his words. It continued to thicken until even the slightest motion on his part

was impossible. He stood upright, imprisoned in a solid block, with hardly enough space to allow for the rhythmtic expansion of his chest. He felt a vacuity around his nose, as if a tube had been plunged through for him to breathe.

He was locked in, helpless and alone, fear lashing at him from all sides.

Tiny fingers seemed to breach the top of his skull, probe very gently into his brain.

"Dennis Sands, my voice is being transmitted through direct mental transfer." It was Cynnax's voice. The fact had just come home to Dennis when he felt a growing pressure in his skull, accompanied by a distant buzzing. "Our detectors have confirmed our speculations. It is your brain that contains the forces we are after."

The pressure increased; the buzzing sound grew louder. "In a moment you will be given a direct command to release this force. If you refuse—"

There was silence, and then a hideous wave of pain flooded his body, all the more horrible because it seemed to affect every part of him simultaneously. Dennis clenched his teeth spasmodically and tried to jerk free, but it was no use; he couldn't move so much as half an inch in any direction.

Then the pain receded, as quickly as it had come, making way for a period of awesome relief. Dennis felt his heart throbbing fitfully, his lungs gasping for breath. Deep within his skull, the pressure and the buzzing were mounting steadily.

"That is the first degree," Cynnax said. His voice was a mere echo in the background. "We can inflict pain on you to the tenth degree if we find it necessary. Bear that in mind."

The pressure grew to new proportions, went on growing. Cynnax's voice came through, stern, demanding:

"Feel the potency of the forces within you!"

At once a roaring explosion rocked his skull. Dennis had a vivid, terrifying impression of unknown forces surging within him, breaking to the surface: powers beyond belief and comprehension, yet harnessed both by himself and by the mechanism in which the aliens had embedded him. . . .

"Will us the force," Cynnax demanded. "Will it to us *at once!*"

Dennis' breath quickened. *Take it,* he thought. *Anything you say. Power within me, arise,* he began, and then blanked out the thought.

His repression had been spontaneous, not intentional. All at once a staggering sense of guilt had erupted within his entire body, lancing at him with all the undiluted impact of real physical torture.

"I *command* you! Yield us the forces!" Cynnax ordered, severely.

Dennis felt himself growing limp. *Power within me* . . . he began again. The stabbing of conscience came again in a veritable tidal wave, overwhelming him. Pain shot through his body: the fifth degree, or possibly the sixth! *Power within me* . . . he thought desperately, but his conscience burned in him with an intensity that for the moment overrode the physical pangs of the torture.

"I *command* you!" Cynnax shrieked. "The forces! Yield them at once!"

I'm trying! Dennis thought pleadingly. *I just can't.* Agony tore at his insides. The torture was mounting: the seventh degree . . . the eighth. . . . And yet the seething remorse within him was unlike anything he had ever experienced in his life—a gripping, constricting inner horror, the type he might experience if on the verge of committing———

the unpardonable sin! he thought, horrified. *the uupardonable sin!*

The pain mounted. A part of his brain realized he was on the verge of collapse, very possibly death. *Hold on,* he thought furiously. *Hold on. Dont give in. Don't let them have it! Just a little longer, just a few more seconds . . .*

But the pain was intolerable. He could stand it no longer. His whole existence cried out in agony. Struggling to bring the words together, he thought: *Power within me . . .*

He felt a climax of painful intensity, then a sudden, inexplicable release, followed by a sensation of floating in another world, free from harm. In the near distance, he could hear a rapid interplay of voices, growing quickly nearer, nearer. . . .

Chapter 12

One moment, he was a disembodied spirit suspended in a void between two dimensions. Another moment, and hardness materialized against his back. A sense of orientation began to seep back into his body. His vision was still a blur, but his hearing was beginning to return to normal. Shouts of excitement echoed in his ears.

"Transition successful, Commander. Subject now in DR field."

"Good. Lock and confirm."

Dennis felt a momentary queasiness. It was gone in seconds.

"Subject grounded in physical plane. All instruments say go."

"Good, good. And the transition line?"

"We're having trouble closing it, Commander. The Ikonians may be locking on to the other end. We're giving her all the retroactive power we can manage."

"Then give her more. Turn all retroactors on to ultrapower!"

"But Commander——"

"Do as I say! They must not get through!"

A tense pause, and then, "Commander, it's too late! They're on their way!"

There was a burst of frenzied activity. Dennis had the impression of men dashing in all directions, of distant, shouted commands, of the movement of ponderous pieces of equipment. . . .

"Get that repulsatron over here, quickly! The Ikonians have reached the fifth level and they're coming on strong!"

"Repulsatron on, sir. Power range?"

"Full power! We've got to blast them out of there!"

"But sir, we've never tried——"

"Do as I say, hurry! Seconds count!"

A moment of suspended activity. Then a tremendous droning cut across the air. It built up rapidly until Dennis could feel his eardrums vibrating painfully under the impact. Then the sound dropped abruptly, struggled at the level of a fine hiss, and was gone.

A voice said anxiously, "Was the maneuver successful?"

A longer pause, and then, "Yes, sir! Complete success! The instruments confirm it. Every Ikonian has been disintegrated in transition!"

"Good work. At least that's one worry off our hands. Now about this creature . . ."

"Careful, don't touch him, Commander. He's still in suspended activity, and his bodily structure is quite weak. We wouldn't want to harm him."

"Is he conscious? Can he hear us?"

"I think he can."

"What's his name?"

"Dennis, I believe. At least that's the name we monitored."

"All right. Dennis, if you can hear us, please listen.

Do not be afraid. You're safe now and we have no intentions of harming you. In fact, without you we would be in the worst kind of trouble."

Dennis' nerves tingled.

"Please believe me," the voice went on. It had grown calm and pacifying, with none of the half-concealed dictatorial tones that had characterized Cynnax's speech. "I realize that recently you put your trust in others and were brutally disillusioned. Please rest assured we have no questionable intentions whatever."

Gradually, Dennis found his vision returning. His mind was also growing more alert, casting itself over the events of his immediate past. Yes, the memories were clear and vibrant in his mind: the chase, the capture, the hideous torture inflicted upon him. . . .

"He's coming to," the voice commented. "His eyes . . ."

There was a moment of uncertainty, and then the world clarified itself around him. He was lying on a slab of something like hardened leather, his palms pressed against its cool surface. He was still nude, but his skin was comfortably warm; a sheet cloaked him to his throat. At the moment he was gazing into a disk of concave polished metal directly above his head. And then a face moved into the corner of his vision—not a human face by any standards, but somehow pleasant and reassuring to look at. It was like the short-snouted, erect-eared, large-eyed head of some tranquil, friendly canine.

"Hello, there. Are you feeling all right?"

Dennis managed a nod and tried to rise.

"Wait a minute. Not so fast," the alien said with a smile, pressing Dennis gently back. "Take it easy; we'll take care of everything."

There was a burst of motion. The concave disk slid back beyond his head. That portion of the slab

against his back began to incline slowly, bringing him into a sitting position.

He looked around. He was in a wide, low-ceilinged room crowded with enigmatic pieces of machinery. The air was cool, very faintly antiseptic, as it might be in a hospital ward.

Two aliens were regarding him with intent, concerned expressions on their distinctly unhuman faces. They were short, about five-feet-six, their humanlike physiques attired in close-fitting uniforms of red and gold. Their faces looked remarkably alike, but Dennis could discern a few features which distinguished them.

One of them stepped forward. "Are you feeling any ill-effects?"

Dennis swallowed. "No. I feel all right. I guess . . . I'm okay."

"Good, good," the alien said, with a relieved glance at the other. He turned back to Dennis. "My name is Commander Lahr, chief commandant of our planet, Olarus. My assistant is Lieutenant Orkeign; it was through his knowledge of teleportronics that we were finally able to rescue you. If you like, you may address us as Lahr and Orkeign, respectively. Is there any particular manner in which you wish us to address you?"

"Dennis is fine," he said, feeling his body relax. "May I get up now?"

"No, not yet," Lahr said quickly. "You must relax for a while longer. Now, before we do anything else, are there any questions you would like to ask?"

"Yes, by all means," Dennis said at once, jumping at the opportunity. "In the first place, what happened? One moment I was frozen solid in that contraption, and the next . . ."

"I shall explain." Orkeign moved closer. "You were unfortunate enough to fall into the hands of our

enemy, the Ikonians. After tremendous efforts and much planning—and, let me add, precisely at the crucial moment—we were able to direct a teleportronic beam upon you and transmit you into our dimension."

"Wait a minute," Dennis said. "Into your dimension?"

"Yes, our dimension," Lahr told him. There was something unsettling in his eyes. "At the moment you, Dennis, Orkeign, myself, our whole world, in fact, we're all existing in a state of cosmic estrangement. What I mean is that we're all prisoners in an inferior, closed dimension, one which restricts our travel to the outermost limits of our planet's atmosphere."

Dennis sat still, trying to absorb the information. "What about the other planet, Ikonia?"

"Ikonia shares a fate similar to ours, but with several advantages at the moment. First of all, let me make the situation clear. Both our worlds coexist, occupying the same point; yet we each exist in sub-dimension so that we are separated both from Ikonia and from what we call the normal universe."

"I see," Dennis said, trying to understand. "How long has this been going on?"

"Many years," Lahr said grimly. "Ever since the great cataclysm of the last century, which tore the space-time fabric asunder in such a way that this situation was allowed to develop. Let me make it clear that our world is the original inhabitant of this orbit. Ikonia somehow reached a level of dimensional coexistence with us as result of the cataclysm."

"Your worlds are mutally exclusive, though."

"Yes, they are. And for us passage between them is so far a complete impossibility. We regret our estrangement from the normal universe; we regret the widespread interplanetary commerce and the great exploration programs that the cataclysm placed

beyond our reach. But we have a more serious problem now, Dennis. An infinitely more serious problem."

Dennis inclined his head. "Go on."

"We have predicted that another great cataclysm will occur in the near future. All the telltale signs have been received, analyzed, and computed; there can be no doubt in our minds. This upheaval will obliterate this estranged dimension and the two worlds which it contains."

A tightness gripped Dennis' throat. "And there isn't anything you can do about it?"

"On the contrary," Orkeign interposed, "we have the power to save our world, to project it back into the normal universe where it came from. Or rather"—he gave Dennis a deeply significant look "*you*, Dennis, have that power."

Dennis felt a tension in his head. *The power* . . . yes, he remembered it well. The awesome force locked within his brain, that wellspring of energy that Cynnax had tried so desperately to tap, that force which had sent his conscience on the rampage, and . . . and *Yes!* Dennis thought with sudden realization, *The same power that had been making itself partially known to him once a month for as long as he could remember!*

He felt as if a major impediment to his understanding had been dragged out of the way. He wanted to know more.

"This power," he said quickly. "Tell me about it. Tell me everything! I *have* to know!"

Lahr raised a cautious hand. "Control yourself, Dennis. Nothing would please us more than to be able to give you the whole story. Unfortunately, we have only a fragmentary knowledge ourselves."

Dennis' spirits lowered. "You . . . don't know."

Lahr shook his head sadly. "Unfortunately, we do not. But there is a place on our world that contains

the answer. It is the mechanism by which we shall release this power, if you choose to help us. The full explanation is apparently an integral part of the technique through which the forces will be liberated."

Dennis' mind put two and two together. "Then . . . then this force has its origins on this planet?"

"It appears that way, though we are not sure. The facts are for some reason shrouded in our past history. *We* have no real understanding of the situation, Dennis; but we do have the means of obtaining it for you. We need your help desperately, but please don't get us wrong; coercion is beyond the capabilities of our race. We're a peculiar people. You might say that we have innate inhibitions against deception and cruelty. We're far from perfect. We have criminals, and we will have them in the future. But our people for the most part have ingrained our moral code upon themselves so completely . . ."

"Tell me one thing," Dennis interrupted. "What happens to Ikonia, in the event that you return to the normal universe?"

"It will perish in this dimension," Lahr said. "Unfortunately, there is not enough of this awesome energy for two worlds. It is one world or the other. In such instances the instinct of self-preservation must take precedence. If we could, we would help them leave this dimension along with us, though we suspect that if the tables were reversed they would not be so sympathetic in helping us. The Ikonians are a treacherous race, given to extreme measures to achieve their aims. Witness the way they treated you. All they could build was an inferior mechanism for the taping process, with the result that the burden of the disinterment fell very painfully upon yourself."

"I see," Dennis said meditatively, and then paused. A fragment of memory came to him, and he went on,

"Wait a minute. Am I the only one who has this power?"

"No," Orkeign said. "Two people contain this dynamic force, but in each mind the power is incomplete; the minds are, in effect, mutually complementary. In order to be effective, the forces of both minds must be brought together. You, Dennis, constitute one mind. The other——"

"Who is the other person?"

"The other person," Lahr took up, "is a female. I believe her name is Cindy."

Dennis felt a terrific shock down the back of his neck. "Cindy!" he cried. "But she's—she's . . . she's *dead!*"

Lahr shook his head. "No, Dennis. She's not dead."

Dennis said excitedly, "But . . . but I saw her *fall!*"

"Apparently her fall was arrested by the Ikonians," Orkeign suggested. "They couldn't afford the death of such a vital mind. At the moment she is a prisoner of the Ikonians, on their planet. We must obtain her in some way. You, Dennis, are our only hope."

Dennis said, "She's still alive? You're sure of this?"

"Positive," Orkeign promised.

Dennis felt the birth of a new enthusiasm, a driving determination that would know no obstacles. He rammed a fist decisively into his palm.

"I'm game," he said tensely. "What do you want me to do?"

The two aliens exchanged glances of relief.

"I'll explain," Lahr said. "Your mental complex is structured in such a way that you can be transmitted between our two dimensions, and also into the normal universe, whereas for us this is impossible. The Ikonians, it is true, have discovered a method whereby they can transmit Ikonians to the normal universe individually, but only through a prodigious expenditure

of energy. So far they cannot cross the dimensional gap to our world, unless they grapple onto an interdimensional transition line created by a person such as yourself."

"I'll try to be brief, and try not to confuse you. First of all, our detectors indicated that the girl Cindy is imprisoned in a gigantic complex somewhere in the northern pole of Ikonia. We were unable to rescue her then, and we are unable to now, since the Ikonians have placed her in suspended animation. The place is a gigantic energy transformer through which the Ikonians are attempting to work up enough exterior energy to complement the forces already in the girl's mind. The place is fully automated, from what we gather, with no Ikonian around for thousands of miles. The Ikonians apparently feel that the energy type they're dealing with might endanger their constitutions if they were to expose themselves to it, even for brief periods."

Dennis said, "You want me to rescue her."

"No, not right away. You would never be able to penetrate the complex by yourself. You lack sufficient knowledge, and it would take us a long time to impart that knowledge to you. But we ourselves can't rescue her because we cannot, as yet, move into the other subdimension.

"But there is a solution. We have learned that the Ikonians have incomplete plans for an interdimensional transfer, through which they hope to break in upon our world if something goes wrong with their original plans. We have been working on a similar machine, but they have one essential element we lack: a certain electromagnetic crystal which we have been unable to synthesize in our world. It will be only a matter of time before they can perfect the mechanism. We have already perfected the part they are still working on,

but we need the crystal. Your job is to obtain that crystal for us."

Dennis considered the matter in silence for a moment. Then he said: "And you can project me back to Ikonia?"

Lahr nodded. "It is very difficult, but it can be done."

"Why not project me, then lock on to the fissure I create, the same way the Ikonians did? Then you could transfer yourselves and we could go directly to Cindy."

"No, you're getting the wrong impression. We're on the opposing side. The locking technique does not work in reverse. We even considered transmitting nuclear bombs interdimensionally, but for various technical reasons that does not work, either. We've tried scores of other possibilities, but we've had no luck. The only alternative is for you to go yourself and obtain the crystal for us."

Dennis nodded. "I'll do it, then." As a thought emerged, he added, "But answer me one question first."

"If we can."

"The other boy, James Trenton. What became of him?"

Lahr bowed his head slightly. "Cynnax . . . had him tortured to death."

Dennis felt a stabbing sensation in his breast. He bit his lip savagely, felt the blood oozing upon his tongue.

"The goddamn bastards." He turned to the aliens. "I'm ready," he declared fiercely. "Just tell me what you want me to do, and I'll be on my way."

Chapter 13

He was standing at the beginning of a large, arched corridor which stretched ahead of him to a glowing point of light in the near distance.

The walls and floor were a brilliant, electric blue and seemed to pulsate with an uncertain interior light, as if waves of luminescence were moving in random patterns below the surface. The air was chilled, but not uncomfortable. From deeper within the corridor came the subdued throbbing of alien machines.

Dennis paused. From Olarus to Ikonia, he thought, in a fraction of a second . . . and at the end of this passage, the prize he had been sent to steal. He glanced down at his hands, and finding nothing there was not disturbed; it was as he had expected. The invisibility serum the aliens had given him had taken effect immediately upon transition.

"It is an experimental compound," Lahr had told

him. "It will set up a vision barrier around your body, rendering you and your clothing invisible. We know the serum works, but the only problem is we don't know for how long."

Lahr had continued, "Your job is simple. We have been able to monitor, at brief intervals, the most direct passage to the chamber which houses the crystal. We have set the transfer ray to project you to the closest possible point without allowing the proximity of the crystal to interfere with the interdimensional energies of the transition.

"You are to take the crystal, which you will find at the end of the passage. Since new interdimensional conditions make it impossible to maneuver the retriever ray to spot-retrieve you, you must return to the point at which you emerged. If you experience any difficulty whatsoever we shall await your return to that point indefinitely."

Dennis started forward at a moderate pace. As the seconds edged by, he increased his speed. The undulations within the walls and the floor induced a sort of faintness in his head. He felt as if he were walking into another world, his feet barely touching the cool blue plastic of the floor.

His mind drifted as he walked. For a moment thoughts of his destination seemed to recede to an isolated corner of his mind, as if conscious recognition of them were unnecessary. As if he were an automaton, his destination set and irrevocable, independent of his own desires or volition. The people of Olarus . . . now, there was a strange race. Dennis had not seen too much of them, but what he had seen had left a lasting impression on his mind.

Why did these people appeal to him so greatly? He recalled his first awareness of sexual differentiation: the female of the species, he had noted, had borne as close a bodily resemblance to the human female as

Lahr and Orkeign had borne to the human male. The faces had been a different story, of course. Modeled as they were after Lahr's strikingly canine features, with his erect ears, doggish snout, and wide, expressive eyes, they seemed in a strange way the feminine counterpart to the male features of the Olarusanians.

On Earth, such a cast of features would have provoked attention, as well as comments, both incredulous and derisive. But here on Olarus, in the context of their own civilization, there was no sense of the unusual. Rather it had been he, Dennis, who had been the deformed creature, the alien from another world, a freak to be stared at and humiliated and ridiculed. . . .

But he hadn't felt the slightest detachment. Instead, he had been surprised to find within himself an inexplicable feeling of fraternity toward these people. Why?

Dennis pondered. It was their attitude. Yes, that was it—the general disposition of the people as he saw them. He had found it evident at almost every moment since his arrival. In Lahr's frankly solicitous, reassuring words prior to the transition, in the congenial words exchanged with important officials on the populous avenues, and in the smiling gentleness with which the technicians had handled him as they deftly secured his body within the transfer mechanism.

They actually took me out on the streets, Dennis marveled. *Me, a complete alien to their world!*

And had he attracted attention? Quite naturally he had. He was an alien, different from all the others who scurried along the vast boulevards. But the attention had not been the wide-eyed, gaping, comment-fraught attention an alien such as Lahr would have sparked back on Earth. It had been something else—a kind of congenial interest, almost a delight at having

such a stranger visit their world. And there had been something else that had struck him: an air of unquenchable optimism, a good nature that seemed to be afloat everywhere: in the streets, in the conveyor ducts, out on the vast, sparkling promenades. . . .

He couldn't be wrong. It couldn't have been his imagination. It all seemed to fit in with Lahr's willingness to take Dennis out in public, with his reluctance to thrust the boy into a lead-walled vehicle, surround it with a cordon of armed guards and shuttle him through the obscure parts of the city, completely concealed from the public eye.

The way, Dennis knew, it would have had to be done on Earth.

Why?

Because these people were unified in sentiment. They shared a common ideal and a common disposition. They were a good race. Lahr's words came back to him, ". . . *our people for the most part have ingrained their moral code upon themselves so completely* . . ."

It was a world in which people like Cindy and Jim Trenton would have grown up into well-adjusted adults, with none of the difficulties back on Earth that had impeded their reach toward maturity.

Olarus was the ideal world, the long-sought-for Utopia, the perfect planet.

He would do anything in his power to save it!

He snapped to attention. The arched corridor seemed to solidify out of a cloud. Lahr had told him that the Ikonians had probably set up an alarm system, and that Dennis' invisibility might be able to overcome it. The corridor was quiet; no Ikonian was in sight. Either no alarm had been triggered, or the aliens knew of his presence and were simply biding their time. . . .

His thoughts shifted to the girl, Cindy. He felt a

strange pang of loneliness. Was it pity, he thought—or something else, something infinitely more transcending and significant? He did not know; he could not be sure. And she was far away right now, he knew. Perhaps thousands of miles from him. Was she in pain? No, probably not. Lahr had said that she was in a state of suspended activity. But so long as she was in Ikonian hands, she was not safe and Olarus was in grave danger.

He increased his speed, then stopped. The corridor had ended. A large chamber, glowing with a radiant white light, lay before him.

He made a quick appraisal. Huge, complex machines were distributed throughout the interior; the place was alive with the hum of controlled power. A group of six Ikonians in lab smocks were clustered at the far left, their attention absorbed by a convoluted mechanism in front of them.

Dennis turned his eyes straight ahead. No more than fifty feet away, a green glow emanated from a small niche in the base of one of the machines.

He strained his vision. In seconds he could make out a tiny cubical within the recess, the apparent source of the light.

The crystal!

He glanced at the Ikonians. Their attention was still centered on the other machine. With quick steps he conquered the distance between him and the niche, stopped and considered. The crystal seemed to rest without connection on a black metal pedestal; it was hypnotic to look at, alive with an inner green fire that hurt his eyes.

Dennis debated for a few more seconds, then furiously blanked out all thought, reached in and gently lifted the crystal. It came away easily. The inner radiance went out. He thrust it into the side pocket of

the close-fitting uniform the Olarusanians had given him, and turned around.

The exit was before him, a mere fifty feet away, but Dennis couldn't resist another glance at the Ikonians. They seemed as industriously concerned with their machine as before, until one of them looked up suddenly, as if sensing something was wrong.

Thereupon the others' interest shifted also. There was a moment of speechless uncertainty, of widened eyes and blank, inquiring expressions, followed by a general turning of all eyes in the direction of the niche.

Dennis took off at a run.

The corridor slid by him, a blur of motion. He was painfully aware of his footfalls; the crystal was a hard mass pressing uncomfortably against his side. He ran, trying to gather speed. His eyes shifted from the floor to the ceiling, then straight ahead, then to the floor again.

He felt a cold chill down his spine. Where there had been nothing a moment ago, he could now make out the dim outline of his hands and forearms!

As he watched, breathless, the images began to congeal, passing from mist to dark shadow and then through the lightest hue of flesh.

Down the length of the vast corridor, an alarm sounded.

He felt his chest constricting. His eyes strained ahead of him; he could make out the end of the main corridor, the point at which it branched off into several smaller passages. Two hundred feet ahead . . . now one hundred. . . .

Shouts echoes behind him, growing closer. Fifty feet—he was closing in; he was going to make it——

Suddenly from the three new passages erupted figures. Dennis stopped, paralyzed by fright. There were six of them, and seconds later others began to join the

group. Their expressions were determined and vicious; they started toward him slowly, past the point from which he had emerged, their fists clenched, the muscles of their arms and shoulders bulging through the tight-fitting fabric. . . .

Behind him the voices grew closer, louder. He was surrounded, trapped!

His whole body was on fire with anxiety; he could feel perspiration streaming from every pore. But he forced his mind to work despite the tight circumstances.

They seem to be acting with restraint, he noticed. *They could easily close in and flatten me in two seconds. And yet—I wonder . . .*

It was worth a try. He drew back two steps, thrusting his thumb and forefinger into his pocket. He seized the crystal and brought it out into clear view, raised it significantly above his head.

At once an electric fear sprang into the alien's faces. They stopped short, their mouths dropping open in alarm.

Dennis took a bold step forward, exploiting his advantage. He tensed his raised arm and snarled, watching the aliens cautiously recede.

"Get out of my way!" he roared, with a quick glance in the opposite direction.

The Ikonians behind him had frozen into irresolute statues, their eyes wide and glistening.

"One step closer and I smash this goddamned thing to the floor!"

He took another forward step, closer to the emergence point. The aliens drew back once again, then seemed to separate into two distinct groups, leaving him a passage in their midst.

Dennis could sense the masked derision in their faces. *They're yielding to me for now,* he thought.

They think I can't possibly get out. Well, we'll just see about that.

"Back!" he yelled. "Get farther back! Let me pass!"

The aliens responded instantly; the gap between the two groups widened. Dennis gathered himself and plunged between them. At once he could sense them closing in. But he was through, the emergence point only five feet away. He took a flying leap——

Behind him there came a deafening metallic shriek. Pain exploded behind his neck. He felt himself kneeling backwards, the crystal spinning from his grasp.

Blackness closed in around him like a stifling curtain.

Chapter 14

All at once, it seemed, consciousness came pouring back. He opened his eyes to find himself surrounded by blue-garbed Ikonians. Two of them were at his sides, pinning down his arms with bone-crushing strength.

Every muscle in Dennis' body twisted in horror at the realization. He had come so close to a complete getaway! It had been a matter of feet, perhaps even of inches. But somehow the treacherous Ikonians had managed to capture him.

He grew sick as the knowledge battered itself home to him. Nausea wrenched at his stomach; he felt on the verge of vomiting.

The aliens in front of him drew aside, leaving an open space. Three other Ikonians were approaching. Cynnax was one of them.

He drew closer, his crimson features stretched in a diabolical grin. He held out a hand. The crystal rested safely in his palm.

"I believe you were seeking to possess this," Cynnax said, his voice tauntingly sarcastic. "I believe, also, that you failed."

Dennis gathered himself and tried to lunge forward. The Ikonians tightened their grip on him, forcing his forearms up against his back. Pain lacerated his elbow joints and he desisted immediately.

"We meet again," Cynnax went on superciliously. "And as before, the meeting is on my territory, under my terms."

"Go to hell," Dennis hissed.

Cynnax's lips curled back in a snarl. He extended his free hand and swung it across Dennis' face with a resounding crack. Dennis cringed against the grip of the aliens, prismatic lights exploding before his eyes.

"I warn you, I will tolerate no further insolence," Cynnax said. His manner had grown severe, admonitory. "Furthermore, if you have any intentions of escaping, give them up. Escape for you is out of the question. For you, all avenues of escape have been sealed."

In his mounting distress, Dennis recalled Lahr's reassuring words: *We shall await your return to that point indefinitely.* A quick survey told him the emergence point was somewhere behind him. The entrance to the crystal room lay before him, no more than twenty feet away.

He strained to look behind him and failed. His throat was going dry and his head ached. A feeling of helplessness began to drag him under. If only he could somehow break free, make a blind dash!

"And let me make another point clear," Cynnax went on, gesturing with a rigid finger. "Don't think the worst is over for you. The worst is just beginning."

He drew obnoxiously closer, his flushed face set in lines of open hostility, his eyes gleaming like a zeal-

ous sadist. "Remember your final moments before your friends rescued you? Remember your feeling of total helplessness, the agony, the intense pain? Well, that's all going to happen again. That's right. You're going to go through it a second time. And that isn't all. After we've succeeded in draining your forces, we have a little added attraction." His face twisted in vengeance. "Something that'll make your previous experiences seem like a pleasant dream in comparison!"

Dennis felt his brain contracting. The thought of experiencing his previous tortures all over again threatened to drive him to insanity. Was there a point, he wondered, of hysteria at which the nervous system collapsed and bodily functions ended, producing release in death? In that event the worst would be over in a matter of minutes. . . .

"It will take us some time to prepare the chamber," Cynnax said, folding his arms across his chest. "But rest assured, we shall prepare it. Then it will be only a matter of minutes before we have transferred your powers into our batteries. After that, a matter of hours before we have brought your forces and the girl Cindy's together. And again, only a matter of seconds before our planet is projected safely into the normal universe. Accept the fact of our victory. We have won. And it is you, Dennis Sands, and the girl Cindy who have made our victory possible!"

A thought burned in Dennis' brain. Cindy, subjected to the same tortures to extract the force? A helpless desperation ground at his insides. The thought of Cindy going through the ordeal all but paralyzed his mind.

"In the meantime," Cynnax said tartly, bringing his face even closer, "you shall be tucked safely away where you can do no harm." His expression changed and he turned to the other Ikonians. "To G level," he said crisply.

Dennis found himself dragged across the floor by the aliens. The entrance to the crystal room slid past his vision as they moved into a side corridor. His mind quailed. Every step was taking him further from the emergence point, further from his last and only hope. He cursed his luck and circumstances. If only they had dragged him in the *opposite* direction . . .

Down a long, low-ceilinged corridor they went, one large body of legs moving, arms gesturing, traveling down the avenue like one giant multiplex organism. They veered off into a side corridor, continued at a faster rate, down a dimly lit passage, through several more openings . . . down a spiral stairway . . . through a series of abrupt turnoffs, each even more frugally illuminated than its predecessor . . . They stopped.

Cynnax gestured. "Open it."

One of the Ikonians stepped forward and opened a small panel. He dialed a combination within. At once a larger panel in the sullen wall slid open, revealing another panel similar to the first. The alien dialed a further combination; the panel opened in immediate response, revealing still a further barrier. He dialed yet another sequence and this one moved a panel to one side, revealing a small cubical chamber.

The Okonians at Dennis' sides forced him to the opening and thrust him in. His balance lost, Dennis fell on his side. He collected himself and rose, turning around. The Ikonians had drawn back. Cynnax stood in the foreground.

"This will be your quarters for the duration," he said craftily. "You'll have plenty of opportunity to reflect upon your coming ordeals. You may begin at once, if you desire, or curl up in a corner and weep. The choice is up to you."

He gestured brusquely. There was movement outside, beyond Dennis' field of vision. The closest barrier slid closed with a dull thud. A moment later there

was a further sound, somewhat muted, as the central barrier drew closed, followed by a final sound that was barely audible. Then silence took over, enveloping him.

With a sense of panic, Dennis looked around. The cubicle was small, about ten feet on a side. A series of blue lights had glowed to life, outlining the perimeter of the four walls, the ceiling, and the floor. The illumination was nevertheless very dim; when he extended his arms, his hands were visible only as insubstantial shadows. The silence was oppressive and unbroken, like a thick, heavy liquid filling every corner of the cell. Dennis could hear the beating of his heart, the high-pitched, nerve-tingling whine in his ears.

He looked around dismally, and his panic melted into a weary defeat. He sat down in one corner of the cell, buried his face in his palms.

His mind cast itself over his past. In a way, he had no one to blame for his predicament but himself. Cynnax had left the choice up to him. Cynnax had given him a period of reflection. It had been Dennis himself who had desired an adventure beyond the typical ones of boys his age. And it had been he who'd decided to abandon the safety of Mother Earth in search of this adventure.

He thought about the others who had come. For all he knew, each might have agreed for reasons similar to Cindy's and Jim's: an inability to adjust to the circumstances of life on Earth. But he, Dennis, had had no pressing psychological reasons. He had been well adjusted on Earth. He had been emotionally secure; he hadn't longed to find himself by running off to another world. All he had wanted was excitement. *Excitement!* Such a cheap, degrading word compared to the necessity of finding one's place in life. Their reasons had been personal survival; his had been mere "kicks," a new and more exalted level of thrills. Consi-

dered in this way, hadn't his reasons been considerably more reprehensible than theirs?

He didn't know. He didn't want to make that decision.

He thought about Jim Trenton. What fiendish torture had the Ikonians put him through? How long had it taken him to die? As long as it would take Dennis? Or would it take him infinitely longer?

He thought about Cindy, and his nerves cried out. Such a poor, frightened, innocent, defenseless child! Thank God she was unconscious at the moment. She would have no time for horrid meditation. She would be confronted with pain quickly. Her agony would be short-lived.

He thought about himself, and his viscera quivered with a feeling of chilling helplessness. There was little he could do to improve his own chances. Cynnax would take every conceivable precaution to prevent his escape. And the coming ordeals, with Cynnax hovering over him, laughing at him in his suffering——

"No!" He jerked convulsively to his feet and fell against the triple panel, pounding against it furiously. His fists were stung with the impact. The sound of his barrage thudded away into silence, absorbed by the thickness of the panel.

He whirled all the way around, tensed, as if prepared to combat an unseen enemy. An idea came to him, shining like a beacon of salvation. If only he had a sharp object: a razor blade, a piece of broken glass. The pain at his wrists would be negligible. Unconsciousness would come swiftly as the blood drained in spurts from the severed arteries. . . .

He extinguished the thought. He could feel his body throbbing in horror. No, not that, not suicide. Anything but suicide. He had to go on living. He had to go on hoping—

But there was no hope. He was trapped, helpless, defenseless. And when the full realization of his impotence overcame him, like the dawning of a bleak, lifeless day on a dead planet, he felt his legs dissolving and he fell to the ground, weeping in despair.

Minutes later, or hours, or days, he raised himself to his knees. It took a tremendous effort, one that nearly caused him to collapse a second time. His cheeks and eyes were moist. He could feel the tears collecting on his chin, forming little droplets that grew bigger and bigger until they broke their slender stems and fell.

And then he heard a sound. A gentle, distantly hissing sound, like the hissing of eggs in a broiling pan. It was coming from the floor.

He looked down. Six tiny blisters had sprouted on the dull blue plastic.

He bent closer for a better look. Yes, six of them, six little effervescent blisters. And they were descending, literally sinking into the floor as their composition hissed and crackled and sent thin wisps of vapor spiraling into the air.

A circuit clicked somewhere in his brain. Impulsively, he ran a finger edgewise beneath one eye, collecting the lachrymal fluid that had collected there. He bent over and ran his finger across the floor.

The result was a glistening streak about three inches long. For a moment nothing happened. And then there was a change. Very slowly, an enigmatic redness began to pass throughout the moistened area. The redness darkened gradually until fifteen seconds later it had become a flaming, scintillating crimson.

Dennis watched, fascinated. The thing was beginning to rise, swelling like bread yeast, until it had formed a small, elongated mound. Hissing, churning and throwing off curling tongues of a foul-smelling vapor, it began to sink into the floor.

Dennis felt his excitement growing. Thoughts of his coming ordeals fled his mind. All he had attention for was the unexpected phenomenon unfolding before his eyes.

There was no doubting it. Somehow the composition of the floor was vulnerable to a chemical agent in his tears! He couldn't conceive how this could possibly be so, but the evidence of its reality was right in front of his eyes.

He turned back to the six original blisters. They were out of sight by now, swallowed by the floor, leaving six round little holes which spouted vapors like miniature smokestacks. And the chemical reaction was still in progress, still driving the apertures deeper, deeper.

The vapor trails ceased. At the same instant six tenuous shafts of light shot up from the openings, piercing the obscurity like six miniature beacons.

His mind racing, Dennis rose and glanced around, trying to contain his excitement. Apparently another corridor was directly below him. He dropped to his knees again and peered into one of the openings. About two feet of alien flooring existed between himself and the ceiling of the subterranean avenue.

A feeling of hope took root in him, brightening his spirits, charging him with sufficient energy to go on. Now, if only he could work up enough tears . . .

On the floor his mind's eye traced a circle no bigger than a manhole. He tensed himself and threw all his energies into the act of crying. When physical effort didn't do the trick effectively, he slugged himself several times in the mouth. Pain shot through his head, evoking spontaneous tears. He cried until his face was drenched in moisture. Then he transferred the salty fluid to his finger and proceeded to trace a circle two feet in diameter.

Soon a glowing red circle illuminated the dimness.

Then came the surge of radiant, seething redness, the ebullient ring-shaped mound . . . and very slowly, the smoking circle began to drop into the floor. Dennis described two short parallel lines at the center of the circle, waited for the chemical reaction to eat its way several inches, applied more tears at each side of the block thus formed. The two lines of fluid ate inward on a sharply descending angle, creating an adequate handle grip. He closed his fingers and thumb on it securely and waited.

A minute passed. Then a scattering of light shafts broke out along the circumference, merging to form one solid curvature of narrow illumination. Suddenly the circle assumed its own weight; the separation from the surrounding floor was complete.

Dennis braced himself and lifted it up; it was unexpectedly light. He swung it over and placed it to one side. A thick cylinder of light poured into his cell. The opening was just large enough for him to slip through.

He lowered his head carefully into the opening. The lower corridor wasn't brilliantly lit. The floor was about ten feet below the ceiling, a simple drop. The corridor itself seemed unused, deserted; silence reigned, broken only by the pulsing of his own heart.

Step one completed, Dennis thought. He lowered himself and landed on his feet with a dull thud. He looked around. The passage was empty, illuminated by recessed fixtures in the ceiling; it seemed to stretch indefinitely in both directions.

Uncertainty touched him. Which way was he to go? He shuddered to think that he might have overcome one barrier, only to be confronted with another one, in its own way more indomitable than the previous.

Down one side of the corridor, perhaps fifty feet away, his eyes caught a hint of concentrated shadow.

He drew closer. An opening yawned in the wall. It led to an ascending flight of stairs.

Cautiously, he began his ascent. The passage was more brightly lit than the previous; the stairs ascended on a very gentle angle. In a moment of rapid calculation the truth came home to him. The stairway was going to bring him to the corridor immediately outside his cell.

He paused. Had Cynnax stationed a guard? If he had, if the guard were armed . . .

He continued his ascent.

A minute later the opening loomed before him. Dennis dropped low, trying to reckon his position. If his reasoning was accurate, he would emerge slightly to the side of the cell entrance. He breathed a silent sigh of relief. It would afford him more cover.

He inched his way up, with extreme care, and braced himself. Very slowly, he peered around the corner into the corridor.

A guard stood several feet away. A formidable-looking weapon was poised in his arms. He was facing the opposite direction, looking down the corridor. Looking in the direction, Dennis realized, that led to the emergence point.

Now, he thought. He rounded the sharp corner and plunged at the guard.

Reacting, the Ikonian swung around and tried to raise his weapon. He was a fraction of a second too late. Dennis collided with him full force, knocking the weapon clear. The guard had been caught unaware and Dennis took full advantage of the fact. His fists worked like jet-powered battering rams, catching the befuddled Ikonian in every vulnerable area.

The alien's eyes rolled up and he slumped to the ground, unconscious. Dennis gave him a karate chop to the neck sufficient to topple a giant, then turned to the riflelike weapon and picked it up.

He examined it carefully. What kind of weapon was it? Perhaps a blast ray, but he had no intentions of testing it now. This might be the worst possible time to attract attention. He drew in a sharp breath and started down the corridor.

What was the exact route by which he had come? Dennis was amazed how easily it all came back to him. He retraced his steps—through a series of short, darkened passageways . . . up a spiral stairway . . . back through several more openings, down a low-ceilinged avenue he remembered very distinctly—

He drew to a halt. Fifty feet ahead of him, there appeared a much larger space. It was the large corridor, with its swirling blue floor and vaulted ceiling. He could see the entrance to the crystal room, about seventy feet ahead, at the right.

Had Cynnax returned the crystal to its place within the machine?

He knew he must procure it once again. He paused for thought. So far none of the aliens had come across him and, much to his relief, no alarm had sounded.

But when he stepped out into the larger corridor, it might be a different story. The alarm might sound again. There would be Ikonians. Even now, his ears could pick up voices, a confluence of them, coming from the crystal chamber.

It would be tight. There were risks. But he realized he had one very distinct advantage. He had a weapon and didn't have to hesitate to use it, whereas the Ikonians could not risk injuring him, perhaps the only hope for their planet's salvation.

But this viewpoint, he realized suddenly, was based on the assumption that the weapons used were blasters, at once lethal to their target. What if they were merely stunners? A memory came back to him of a high metallic shriek, followed by the numbness that

had immobilized him and resulted in his previous capture. He shivered.

Enough of this, he decided. He took a series of cautious steps to the beginning of the larger corridor, stopped and peered outside in the direction of the emergence point. That section of the corridor was deserted; not an Ikonian was in sight.

He drew up against the right wall, very slowly edged himself to the crystal-room entrance. Ikonian voices clamored in his ears, very close by. How many were there? Ten? Twenty? Perhaps more?

Weapon poised and ready, he peered around the corner. It was the same group of white-clad technicians he had encountered before. They were still gathered around the convoluted machine at one side of the room.

He shifted his vision. The precious crystal radiated a brilliant green from its place within the machine, exactly where it had been before.

There was no time for consciously formulated moves. Instinct took over. Dennis sprang into the room, swung the weapon to face the technicians and let them have it.

Blue-white tongues of fire erupted from the weapon, sizzled across the intervening space to strike the very center of the group. Before the Ikonians could even react they had been transformed into flashing torches and scattered throughout that section of the room. The machine they had been clustered around had also been struck. It hissed with a crescendo roaring and erupted in a shower of sparks.

Without even thinking, Dennis found himself standing before the crystal machine. He felt his hand thrusting itself forward, seizing the crystal for a second time. Its brilliant radiance winked out, and he stuffed the gem into his pocket, turning around.

Outside in the corridor, the alarm blared.

His eyes focused. He could make out the end of the wide corridor, where it resolved itself into three smaller avenues. And immediately before it, that invisible point in space where the retriever ray waited for him and for him only. . . .

He tensed his body, pulling together all his reserve strength for the final move. The cards were in his favor. He had a weapon to clear his way and the Ikonians, undoubtedly armed with similar weapons, dared not fire for fear of destroying their last hope of survival.

"Clear the way, you bastards!" He clenched his teeth and took off like a sprinter.

The corridor whizzed by him at a dizzying speed. Vertigo tried to assault him; he brushed it aside with an oath. The emergence point grew closer, closer. Two hundred feet . . . a hundred and fifty . . . one hundred———

Ikonians spewed from the three corridors up ahead. Three of them were armed but they just stood there, gripped by irresolution, just as Dennis had foreseen. Running at lightning speed, closer, always closer, he mouthed a savage battlecry and sprayed the whole area with firebolts. A veritable inferno exploded up ahead, swallowing every Ikonian in its fury.

And Dennis went on running, his heart pumping wildly, his adrenal glands working in high gear, giving him all the necessary push, all the necessary endurance.

Voices rang out behind him, getting closer. Ikonians were following him, a whole batallion of them, it seemed. But the emergence point was only twenty feet away! A metallic shriek sliced through the air behind him. Dennis felt himself leaping into the air. Something struck his calves, numbing them. He landed on his feet and felt his body lurching forward. *Ten more feet!* He threw the weapon to one side and tried

to maintain balance, but it was no good; he was going down. *Five more feet!* The ground met him with an impact he barely felt. He didn't have time for that. All he had time for was that last, fierce, uncompromising forward crawl. . . .

He swung his body around. The Ikonians were closing in on him, one mighty crushing wall of legs moving, arms waving, fists clenched, triumphant expressions. . . .

Had he made it?

The next second, as everything dimmed, flickered, and was gone, he realized that he had.

Chapter 15

Once they had emerged from the shadow of the transition line, Orkeign turned in his seat to Cladet, who sat before him, and indicated a small meter on the control panel.

"We came through without any loss of power," Orkeign said, relieved. "Transition successful, thanks to our acquisition of the crystal."

"Will we have sufficient power to make it to the complex?" Cladet asked fretfully, with a gesture out the dome. "You know the unusual conditions we're moving through . . ."

"We should." Orkeign turned the other way. "Norva, Hret, have you gotten the fix yet?"

"Fix established," Hret answered, consulting a large

circular mechanism in the center of the dome. He paused, then read out a series of directional coordinates. "Those should take us right to our objective."

Orkeign smiled complacently. "Good. And the anti-detection unit?"

"No problems," Norva said. He touched a control, set a dial, and stepped briskly back. "They shouldn't be able to spot us, unless they've invented some new manner of detection we've been unable to monitor. In any event, the theft of the crystal is going to start them thinking along new lines. They may realize what we're up to and get ready to send a squadron of fighters up to reinforce security at the polar complex. The sooner we reach our goal . . ."

"How much longer will it take, do you think?" Dennis said, moving in between Orkeign and Cladet at the main controls.

"Not too long. Five to fifteen minutes, if we use maximum power." Orkeign's eyes went to the controls. "Excuse me—" He moved a few levers into new positions. Without even a jolt, the craft tilted very slightly downward. Orkeign went on, "But we have to be careful. This atmosphere we're moving through is rather unusual by any standard."

Dennis let his attention shift to the outer world. The craft, he knew, was saucer-shaped, perhaps fifty feet in diameter; he was standing in the small dome on its upper side. Through the transparent curvature, he could see a wonderland of pure whiteness which stretched into an immaculate dome of infinity far above. It was lit by a diffuse radiance that seemed to originate from within.

The atmosphere directly outside the craft was sparkling and powdery, an ethereal mist. Swarms of glowing points collided periodically with the dome and were deflected, scattering, away from the craft.

"Is that snow outside?" Dennis asked.

"Snow?" Cladet looked up, faintly surprised. "Oh, you mean water in condensation. No, there is no water in the Ikonian polar regions. That substance is a condensed gas found only around these poles. I believe the temperature outside is not far from absolute zero. Contact with those particles for even a fraction of a second would mean instant death."

Orkeign said, "There's our destination."

"Where?" Dennis' breath quickened.

"Down there." Orkeign pointed out the dome. "Somewhere within that space, between those two mountains."

Dennis stared. The mountains far below were nebulous and indistinct of outline, like so many mounds of pure frost. They were devoid of color or texture, except in the abysmal regions between their gigantic masses, where only the faintest shadows scurried in random patterns, barely noticeable.

Dennis singled out the area Orkeign had indicated. It was a prominent chasm, more perceptible than the others, one in which the shadows were more pronounced, distinct, and sinister.

"Confirm coordinates," Orkeign said.

Hret answered without hesitation, "Coordinates confirmed."

"All right, hang on." Orkeign's hands went to work on the controls. "We're going down."

There was no sensation of movement, but all at once it seemed that the great mounds beneath them had doubled in size. The mountains loomed closer, tremendous white giants growing out of a dazzling crystalline environment.

Dennis looked on in hypnotic fascination as those glittering shapes spread out, as the chasm drew closer and became more evident, its shadows deeper, more forbidding. Cindy, he knew, was somewhere in those

depths, imprisoned miles beneath the surface of that cold white oblivion.

We're coming, he thought pensively. Don't be afraid. We're coming to rescue you.

The craft descended. The mountains swelled in around them like some monstrous white tide. Dennis held his breath instinctively as it mounted over their heads. The atmosphere thickened until visibility reached zero; all Dennis could make out was a perpetual glowing blankness outside the dome.

They were within the abyss now, swallowed by its concentrated gases. And still the craft went on dropping.

Minutes passed: two, three, four . . . Dennis felt his heartbeat quickening. Nothingness on all sides. The place was fascinating in a way that hurt his mind. It was nowhere, a limbo . . . . that was it. A region out of space, a point without coordinates; a haven for lost souls——

"Commander Orkeign!" Hret said suddenly. "Over there!"

All eyes went in the direction of Hret's finger. Straight ahead the vision of a dome flickered uncertainly in the swirling crystal mists.

Orkeign said tensely, "There's our destination."

He touched the controls. The ghostly shape drifted nearer, taking on more definite outlines. In moments it was clearly visible, a small blue dome with a circular panel at its base. And then it slid out of view again, concealed by the rim of their craft.

Orkeign turned to Cladet. "Get the passage linked up." He sent quick hands over the panel, watched the lights wink out, nodded and swung around in his seat. "Norva, Hret, get those penetration rigs. Dennis, you take the release helmet. Step on it; we don't have much time."

Then they were all standing beneath the craft, en-

veloped in a makeshift plastic column which linked them with the dome-shaped entrance to the Ikonian complex. Through the transparency of the protective shell, Dennis could make out the three black legs which supported the craft. They showed up sharply one second, fell into obscurity the next, as the capricious mists surged in and receded.

Up at the panel, Orkeign and Norva had already set up the penetration rig and managed to pry open the entrance. Shooting glances in all directions, Orkeign unhooked the apparatus and said, "All right, one problem out of the way. Norva, you return to the ship and make preparations for a quick getaway. Hret, you stand post here at the entrance and make sure this antidetection unit maintains its present functional quotient. Also make sure this shell doesn't leak, or we could be in real trouble. Cladet and I will carry these pieces of the penetration rig. Dennis, you keep the helmet and take this thing."

Dennis obeyed. The small, oblong unit was unexpectedly heavy for its size, but its handle made it easier to carry. The helmet itself was lightweight, containing numerous projections that could be easily grasped by one hand. Orkeign and Cladet gathered up the heavier apparatus, holding the elongated mechanisms in both arms at chest height. They ducked through the entrance and were soon standing inside the dome.

The passages of the complex had a dreamlike quality for Dennis. He found himself moving through them as if in another world, grounded in a level of existence beyond that in which Orkeign and Cladet moved with such determined steps and resolute expressions. The atmosphere of the place . . . could that be responsible for his lightheadedness?

Maybe, but he could not be sure. How about the passages themselves: the unique structure of each one

they penetrated, the multicolored lights that blazed at him from every section of the walls, the distant throbbings that sent eerie vibrations through the gleaming blue floors?

Or was it the knowledge that the object of his quest was so close to him, moving closer every second? The girl, Cindy . . . could she possibly know he was coming to get her?

Would she be alive?

Would they be able to escape? Would the Olarusanians be able to use him and the girl in saving their world?

The force locked within their two human minds . . . *What was its secret?*

Dennis felt as if his brain were about to split open. Ever since they had embarked on this mission he had felt this inexorable tension growing within him. So many things happening in so short a time. So many kinds of emotion twisting savagely at his insides!

How much longer could he stand it? Already the world seemed to be fading before his eyes. The events of the preceding minutes had receded to the status of dream fragments, illusions having no bearing on reality: entering the dome, descending the spiraling stairways into the heart of the complex, standing by while the two Olarusanians set up their machines and deftly removed all the barriers thrown up against their progress. . . . And now . . .

His eyes burned. His legs felt rubbery, insubstantial. He didn't think he would have the power to go on . . .

Cladet's words came through to him. "The indicator's going wild. She must be over there, right around the corner."

Dennis felt himself seized by reality. His vision cleared. No more than twenty feet ahead, the corridor made an abrupt left turn.

Dennis surged on ahead, leaving the aliens behind. On the right wall of the new passage there was an open doorway, and beyond the doorway there was a small room.

Dennis took three steps into it and stopped. A solitary object lay in the center of the floor, its presence highlighted by the surrounding four-walled emptiness.

He drew closer, feeling the pressure of anticipation grow within him. The object was metallic and oblong, coffinlike, with an upper surface of curved, transparent plastic.

Cindy lay quietly within the sepulchre. She was clad in a white tunic that reached to mid-thighs, her feet bare, her little hands folded motionless at her waist. A glowing blue aura surrounded her head, accenting every delicate feature of her face—the quiet slit of her mouth, the graceful slenderness of her nose, the lids drawn over eyes that would be large and bright and alive with meaning . . .

He sensed the aliens' presence beside him. He turned without taking his eyes off the girl.

"Get her out of that thing."

"Easy," Cladet cautioned. "The procedure will have to be careful, lest we hurt her or set off an alarm." He laid down the machine he had been carrying, drew several thin wires out of a small opening on its surface. "Orkeign, I'll need your help with this."

Orkeign dropped to one knee, placed his mechanism to one side, took several of the wires in his own hands. Together the two aliens carefully affixed the wires to projections on the side of the metal sepulchre, tightening them; they gave them a quick, assiduous check. Orkeign turned a few dials and said, "Dennis, the helmet."

Dennis handed it over. Orkeign linked it to the sep-

ulchre by three short cables and handed it back to the boy.

"Place it on your head. That's all. The power within your mind will do the rest."

Dennis did as instructed. The helmet felt heavy and burdensome, and he had a momentary vision of the helmet Dr. Reynolds had used, back there at Berkeley, on Earth, a long time ago . . .

A buzzing sensation arose in his skull, dispelling the illusion. It arose quickly to a small intensity, then was gone. Within the sepulchre, the glowing blue aura surrounding the girl's head had disappeared.

"All right," Orkeign said.

Dennis removed the helmet, placed it on the ground. Orkeign placed both hands on the side of the curvature, gave a tentative push, nodded and slowly opened the top of the sepulchre.

"Cindy," Dennis said softly. "Cindy, can you hear me?"

He waited tensely. For several seconds nothing happened. The girl's face remained frozen, her features a mask of impassivity. But then there was a change. The lines in her forehead deepened, and her eyelids tightened and then opened. Her vision refocused, and her mouth struggled to form the word: "Dennis . . ."

He picked her up and held her in his arms. She seemed lighter than before, as if she had lost some weight. Her fingertips, where they touched the side of his neck, were cold, but the rest of her body was warm. She clung to him without uttering a further word, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"It's all right," Dennis said soothingly. "Don't cry. Don't cry ever again."

From somewhere within the complex, a shrill whine cut across the perpetual humming of distant machines.

"The alarm . . ." Cladet said, reacting.

Orkeign's teeth clenched. "It knows we're here. Something must have gone wrong."

"Oh, look!" Cindy cried suddenly.

All eyes went to the entrance. A thick panel was sliding out of the left wall, sealing their only avenue of escape.

Orkeign bit down on his lip. "No need for secrecy now," he said. "Solonars out."

With swift movements, he and Cladet unholstered two thin metal pistols. They aimed them at the barrier, which had closed with a thud.

"Fire," Orkeign said crisply.

There was no indication they had done so. Dennis couldn't even hear the click of the triggers. But a moment later a tremendous white-hot flare germinated in the center of the barrier and spread out, covering it completely. The radiance died out, contracted to a glowing point and was gone. The barrier had disappeared completely.

"Not many metals can stand up against that kind of power," Orkeign said. He beckoned. "Leave all the equipment here and let's get going."

Outside, fifty feet down the corridor, two panels crept out of opposite sides of the wall. They met with an unnerving crunch.

"Get it out of there," Orkeign said, lifting his pistol.

Solonars were brought to play and moments later the passage was open again.

They headed back the way they had come, confronting new barriers at every turn. Each fell before the onslaught of the mighty solonars, and the group continued. Since they had been detected, there was no longer the necessity of removing the obstructions by secretive electronic measures. Their exit was considerably swifter than had been their entry.

Suddenly, Hret rounded a sharp corner ahead of them and approached at a frantic run.

"Lieutenant . . ." he addressed Orkeign. "The Ikonians . . . five ships . . ."

"Oh, no," Orkeign said in a hushed voice. "Norva, our craft——"

"Destroyed," Hret said. "Utterly destroyed!"

Dennis felt his stomach tighten. Cindy tightened her arm around him, trembling, her lips bloodless.

"Come on," Orkeign said darkly.

They rounded the corner, ascended a spiral stairway into the outer dome. At the opened bulkhead leading outside, they stopped. The antidetection unit was to one side, hissing softly—its inability to preserve their secrecy had blown out every circuit in its housing. Directly before them, they could discern their craft through the swirling mists. It had been blasted thoroughly and thrust over, pulling the protective plastic column sharply to one side without breaking it.

In the region above them, barely visible amidst the dancing ethereal wisps, five unfamiliar craft hovered patiently.

The Ikonians!

Chapter 16

"We're trapped," Cladet said breathlessly. "Trapped. . . ."

A voice came as if out of nowhere. "Olarusanians, hear me well! You are surrounded and your ship is destroyed. There is no possible way you can escape. If you value your lives, you will listen to and heed my every instruction."

Hret turned to Orkeign. "Isn't there anything we can do?"

Orkeign shook his head. "There is nothing we can do. They have us surrounded and far outnumber us."

But Dennis caught a peculiar gleam in his eyes, the glitter of intensive mental work, of feverish calculation.

"In a moment we shall destroy the plastic tubing which shields you," the imperative voice went on. "If you value your lives, you will return to the dome and shut the door securely. Shortly we shall erect a magnetic field to keep out this lethal atmosphere and per-

mit ourselves to land and disembark. We warn you, do not attempt to hide within the complex. Should you disobey, it will take us but minutes to seek you out and destroy you."

"What'll we do?" Cladet said.

Orkeign said, "We must obey them. We have no choice."

"A fight. . . ." Cladet raised his solonar.

Orkeign gave him a severe look. "No. We must do as they say."

A helpless look came over the other's face, but he dropped his solonar obediently into his holster. The five of them turned and went back into the dome. Orkeign stepped forward and drew the bulkhead closed.

A tightness came over him. He reached deep into a side pocket and withdrew two tiny black phials. He turned to Dennis and the girl.

"Take these." He thrust them into Dennis' hand. "Invisibility serum. All we've been able to synthesize in such a short time. Use them at your discretion. You must escape; you must return to Olarus at all costs!"

"But how?" Dennis asked. "Our ship . . . destroyed. We have no way . . ."

Orkeign considered him. There was a new kind of solemnity in his eyes.

"You yourself must find a way. So long as you can reach the upper atmosphere of this world, Lahr can spot-retrieve you with our improved teleportronic unit. You must succeed in climbing into the upper atmosphere. I cannot tell you how; you yourself must examine the circumstances around you and devise a way. The invisibility serum may be able to help you."

An explosive rumbling came from outside. The floor trembled slightly, then settled once again. Silence took over, broken only by a subdued whining from the outer world.

A minute passed. Then two. The whining ceased

abruptly and the bulkhead was drawn open. Two blue-garbed Ikonians, armed with blaster rifles, stood in the opening.

"Outside, all five of you," one of them barked. "Surrender your weapons at once."

With no alternative, the party left the dome and Orkeign and Cladet handed over their solonars. Outside, a large space had somehow been cleared of the swirling mists. Dennis saw that a prismatic, unreal-looking dome, about three hundred feet high, surrounded the whole area like a monstrous, shimmering soap bubble. Five squat saucer-shaped vehicles had landed to form a square, with a craft at each corner and one in the center. Their own craft lay directly before them, a battered mass of collapsed rubble.

Dennis turned. More aliens were approaching them, about twenty in number, and all armed except one. The weaponless alien gestured for the guards to stop. The armed Ikonians formed a solid line, their blasters poised and ready. The weaponless alien approached Dennis' group, his walk purposeful, his expression hard, triumphant.

It was Cynnax.

He drew closer and stopped, perhaps twenty feet from the boy. Dennis felt his vitals going cold. He could feel Cindy tensing in his arms.

"Once again, we meet," Cynnax said contemptuously, his face breaking out into a complacent smirk. "That makes three times, Dennis Sands. It seems that the hand of fate is very definitely not on your side."

Dennis kept silent only with immense difficulty.

Cynnax seemed to notice this. "You seem to have much to say, Dennis Sands," he taunted. "You seem to have much to say, indeed. I can sense your hatred for me. You're trying to find an excuse to open up, tell me what you think of me."

His eyes flickered to the Olarusanians, who stood at

Dennis' side, bodies erect, in a proud resignation. "Let me see if I can provide you with that excuse. Set her down and come forward, both of you."

"Do as he says," Orkeign cautioned.

Dennis set the girl on the surface and felt her hand slipping into his. He tightened his fingers and stepped forward.

"To one side," Cynnax snapped.

With a feeling of premonition, Dennis obeyed. Cynnax gestured for him to stop. Dennis cast a quick glance over his shoulder. The three Olarusanians, unflinching, stood isolated thirty feet behind him.

Cynnax headed back to the line of Ikonians. He approached one, reached for his blaster, took it, turned around. He examined it as if it were a new toy, his expression one wide grin, his head inclined, almost curiously.

Suddenly his expression turned to stone. He swung the weapon up before him, directly upon the waiting Olarusanians. He fired.

Cindy cried, a long, drawn-out shriek, and threw herself against Dennis' chest, sobbing hysterically. Dennis' bowels turned to jelly, and he averted his eyes. He didn't want to grow any sicker than he actually was.

Cynnax returned the weapon to the guard. He turned to Dennis, regarded him disdainfully, turned to where the Olarusanian had stood. His hands fell to his narrow hips and he began to laugh. It was a fierce, malicious animal howl, with a distinct, high-pitched treble of mania in it.

Dennis set his jaw furiously. Cindy still clung to him, crying bitterly, her arms encircling him in abject horror.

Cynnax stopped laughing and considered them once more. Sobriety came into his expression. He

stabbed a rigid finger in their direction and turned to his guards.

"Get them. Bring them aboard my vessel, now!"

Then they were inside. The control room was small, an oblong transparent blister atop the craft. Three chairs formed a small arc before the master console. An Ikonian, one of the guards, was seated in the center one, his hands on the controls, and guided the craft up into the crystalline polar atmosphere. Cynnax stood behind him, his eyes on the pilot's skillful movements. Cindy was in the seat at his right, Dennis in the one at his left. They had been strapped in so securely that neither could move.

Outside, hordes of rocklike white crystals collided with the cockpit blister at irregular intervals.

Dennis craned his neck. The effort was a painful one, since the aliens had secured him at every vital point: his legs, his arms, his torso, his chest, even his neck. Indeed, they were taking no chances; and, Dennis had to admit privately to himself, they had every reason not to. But for some reason the aliens had neglected to search them, and for this oversight Dennis was intensely thankful.

He could feel the slight pressure exerted by the two phials in his side pocket. He struggled to bring the controls into his vision. They were surprisingly simple. Aside from a complex of dials, there seemed to be one switch for activating the engines, a pedal for regulating velocity, and a widely maneuverable throttle for determining the direction. If only he could somehow free himself . . .

But he had been completely immobilized. He settled down wearily, his mind alive with ideas, developing schemes, promising courses of action. But under it all ran a thick continuum of fear. There were only two of them, he, Dennis, and the girl, against how many Ikonians? Any number of things could go wrong. Any

number of adverse circumstances could effectively wreck everything!

He tried not to think about the possibilities.

Time passed. Gradually the frosty polar mists began to thin out as they traveled farther south. They were moving into the night side of the planet. Dennis could perceive the two adjacent moons against their backdrop of unfamiliar stars; the dimensional estrangement of the world didn't impede vision into the heavens. It was the same stellar pattern he had seen from the surface of Olarus, since both planets occupied an identical point in space.

For what seemed like hours they moved on through an inky blackness relieved only by the reflected glare of the twin moons and the tenuous glitter of the distant stars. The surface of the planet, for the most part, was empty and shadowed; the major Ikonian cities were underground. It was Dennis' theory that before the cataclysm, Ikonia had been a torrid planet or an extremely frigid one, existing either too close to or too far from its former sun. This could account for the abandonment of the surface world, but of course he could not be sure.

More time passed. Then Dennis saw a looming shape in the distance, just before the horizon. As they drew closer, the thing emerged in sharper outlines: a gigantic edifice, reaching high into the sky and spangled by beacon lights of every conceivable hue.

The direction of movement changed imperceptibly. The craft remained upright but was now moving down on a shallow tangent. The great edifice grew closer, looming large and imperious before them, one mighty confluence of glowing towers, mammoth domes, perpetually shifting bars of light.

The craft changed direction again, moving parallel to the surface once again, and continued at a somewhat slower pace, heading for a huge opening which

yawned in one of the larger domes. The gulf reached out suddenly, swallowing them. They were now inside.

The craft touched down without a jolt. Straining his head, Dennis saw the other four craft settling down all around them, in the same square-formation they had assumed previously.

He heard a series of clicks. The restraining belts fell away from his body.

"Get up," Cynnax said brusquely.

Dennis rose and stretched. His muscles ached and his head spun. The pilot had left the controls and was covering him with one of the guns. Cynnax was fingering the back of Cindy's chair. The straps fell away and he seized her by the shoulders, lifted her and thrust her body against Dennis. She threw her arms around him and held tightly, whimpering inaudibly. In her thin white garment she seemed frailer than ever; her skin was deathly cold.

Dennis stared at Cynnax and felt intense hatred growing in his stomach.

Cynnax gestured. The pilot moved behind Dennis and the girl; he nudged both of them with the gun.

"Follow," Cynnax said. He turned and climbed down through the port.

A minute later they were outside, walking across a vast concourse. Their footsteps echoed hollowly; lights shone in brilliant crisscross shafts from the gigantic concave ceiling. Cynnax was in the lead, striding ahead like a triumphant leader home from battle. His guards had fanned out behind him and the two prisoners, covering them from behind and from the sides.

Dennis moved along with them, his arm around the girl, hers around him. The place was chilled and the girl, barefoot and in her loose tunic, was shivering. He held her closely, trying to warm her. Panic was trying

desperately to take a hold on him, but he fought valiantly to remain levelheaded. His mind was lucid and alive, his eyes darting to and fro, registering his environment, while his thought processes raced in high gear, trying to synthesize a workable plan.

They were approaching one side of the place, where a huge arched corridor led downward on a slight angle, apparently into the metropolis below. His eyes caught a series of small, featureless corridors angling out of view beside it. The air was colder here than he had ever known it on this world. He wondered. The huge entrance through which they had come . . . was it a permanent opening?

He glanced at the smaller corridors again, felt the two small bumps in his pocket. Everything seemed to come together at once, like metal pieces attracted inexorably to a magnet.

He reached across his stomach as if to caress the girl. Instead he fingered his way into his pocket, carefully withdrew the two phials.

"Take one," he whispered. "Easy does it."

The girl's hand came over, made an affectionate show of taking his. Dennis felt one of the phials leaving his hand. His pulse quickened.

"Now play along with me," he said under his breath. "It's our last and only hope."

He dropped his one-armed embrace and took the girl's free hand. With a sharp nod he broke into a run, hurried past the startled Cynnax and swung around, facing him.

"Stay where you are," he warned.

Cynnax's eyes blazed fire. "Seize them!"

"I wouldn't act unless I knew what I was getting myself into," Dennis said tautly. "Tell your men to back off."

"Why?" Cynnax rasped. His men were still advancing.

Dennis held out the phial. "This is sufficient reason," he said. "I'm holding in my hand an Olarusanian self-destruct unit. The girl has one, too. All we have to do is activate these units and we'll disintegrate within three seconds."

"You're lying." Cynnax gestured his men on.

Dennis drew back with the girl. "Can you take the risk? Once we're gone you'll never be able to save your world."

He could sense the dilemma in Cynnax's face. Impulsively, the alien raised his arms. His guards broke their decisive forward stride and drew back, clustering behind him.

"What is it that you wish?" Cynnax said pacifyingly, stepping forward. "Your freedom? Very well. It shall be granted when we have finished with you."

Dennis shook his head. "That," he said, "and the right to confer with the girl. Right now. In private."

"For what purpose? What will it avail you?"

"That is our business," Dennis barked. He tightened his fist around the phial. "We can't escape. The most we can do is destroy ourselves, and we will not hesitate."

Cynnax's lips pulled back from his teeth. His brow was tight. Even from his position, Dennis could see the beads of sweat standing out on it.

"You have five minutes," he said at last. "As of now."

"We desire privacy." Dennis turned around. "We will go into one of those passages."

Cynnax nodded concession. "Five minutes," he admonished.

"We shall need no more." Dennis took the girl's hand and headed into the small corridor.

He paced down it twenty feet, until he came to a turn. He let go of Cindy's hand and motioned her

around it. The girl's expression was one of confusion.

"Dennis, what . . ."

"No time for explanations." Dennis broke the pastic end of the phial to expose a hypodermic needle. "Let me see your arm, quickly."

Cindy lifted it and Dennis plunged the needle under the skin of her forearm, immediately below the bicep. He took the girl's phial, broke the tip, gave himself the same treatment.

"Dennis . . ." The girl gasped. "You . . . you're disappearing!"

Dennis glanced at his hands. They were dimming out, the flesh becoming glasslike, transparent, as the serum worked itself into his body. He looked at the girl and beheld the same phenomenon. Very slowly, her body was becoming a shimmering transparency, until a minute later all that remained visible was her thin white tunic, suspended in the air. Then even it began to dim out, become ghostly, unreal looking. It was gone.

"Take my hand," Dennis said. He felt the cold little fingers interlacing with his own, and tightened his grip on them. "Now we're going to walk out of here right under Cynnax's nose. Don't make a sound. We can't be detected. We're going to walk right up to the saucer that brought us here and climb on board. Are you with me?"

"Yes, Dennis," Cindy said breathlessly. "All the way."

Hand in hand, they moved slowly out onto the vast, glittering concourse. Cynnax was standing, his arms crossed; there was a marked impatience in his expression. His guards were behind him, their weapons ready; but Dennis could tell, from the irresolution in their eyes, that they would never be able to fire.

They left the Ikonians behind them, skirting the tremendous place. Minutes passed. Dennis imagined

that their time was almost up. He concentrated on the space before him. The square-formation of the alien craft loomed before his eyes, growing nearer, nearer still. . . .

And they stood there, beneath the convex underside of the central craft. The circular port was still open; the metal-frame ladder remained, leading straight as an arrow to the ground.

"Up you go," Dennis said. "Slowly, now. No noise."

Dennis climbed after her. He had a vivid mental image of Cynnax signaling the end of the five-minute period, then signaling them again, more impatiently this time; and then raging, his temper flaring, sending his men in to get them. . . .

They were in the cockpit.

Dennis slid into the central seat and indicated for Cindy to take the one at his right. In a moment he could sense her presence beside him. He turned to the controls, reached for the throttle. With no visual feedback, getting his hand on it was difficult; but in a few seconds it nestled securely in his grip.

He fumbled for the starter switch, pressed it, heard the engines beneath them roaring to life. Directly in front of them, outside, the huge orifice was still wide open, with freedom lying beyond it. The star-studded heavens shone clear and wide, beckoning them.

Boy, are they ever going to be pissed off, he thought.

Imitating the motions of Cynnax's pilot, he depressed the pedal and manipulated the throttle.

Outside, the huge opening began to loom closer, closer. And all at once the floor dropped. They were airborne.

Outside, a siren wailed plaintively.

"They know!" Cindy cried.

"Knowing won't help them now," Dennis said stolidly, pressing the pedal down further. The opening

drew even closer, considerably more quickly than before . . . nearer now, only several hundred more feet . . .

They were outside!

"Brace yourself," Dennis said.

He jerked the throttle full backward. Imperceptibly tilting, the craft changed direction. Remaining level, it began to ascend, slowly at first but with rapidly gathering momentum, up into the star-spangled heavens that wheeled majestically above them.

And the craft continued to accelerate. There was no sensation or pressure; Ikonian technology had done wonders to eliminate such nuisances. They continued upward, like a rocket, forever climbing, leaving the face of the planet far below.

"Are they following us?" Cindy asked.

"No doubt they are. No doubt they've got their whole fleet after us. But the only way they're going to stop us is by shooting us down. Of course that's one thing they'll never do."

He tilted his head upward. The stars were rushing down to greet him. What was it Orkeign had said? *So long as you can reach the upper atmosphere . . .*

"And we shall!" he cried.

"What?"

"Nothing," Dennis said.

They went on climbing, higher and higher, forever into the heavens, forever away from the surface of Ikonia, while the sky closed in around them, one mighty swirling spectacle of luminescent stars, growing closer and closer, always so infinitely closer, so close they could almost reach up and touch them . . . and still they ascended, unendingly, as if the sole purpose of their existence was to move upward without pause, without hesitation, always into the firmament, always away from the planet Ikonia. Higher and higher, while the stars exploded all around like a

mighty cosmic kaleidoscope, forever spinning, or like an outpouring of diamonds from some mighty celestial cauldron. *Still* they climbed higher, higher, higher....

Darkness closed in around them, blotting out the rampaging stars, blotting out the sky, blotting out their consciousness....

Blotting out everything.

Chapter 17

He was a ghost, a spirit, a disembodied entity suspended between two regions of reality. He did not know how long he had been that way: a few moments, a few hours, days, weeks. He could not tell. All around him a multitude of vortices swirled, dizzyingly, as if contesting to entice him. But he remained stationary, a fixed point in space, neither drawing closer to them nor moving away.

And then there was a voice that was not exactly a voice. He couldn't hear it, for he had no ears; but he could sense it with every element that constituted himself, with every electrical impulse that was his being.

"Many years ago, a gigantic cosmic cataclysm raged through this section of our galaxy, ripping Olarus out of the space-time fabric and thrusting it into an inferior dimension, where it became a cosmic prisoner, estranged from the normal universe which had spawned it."

Shafts of brilliant light . . . the thunder of a thousand exploding worlds . . . a vivid impression of a spherical body being torn out of its orbit, bandied about through space and plunged into an enormous hell-black opening amidst the stars, disappearing. . . .

"At the instant of estrangement, a group of Olarusanian scientists managed to extract a powerful force from the colossal energies being generated by the cataclysm. By reversing the polarity of this acquired force, they hoped to combat the ravening energies from which it had been derived."

Huge machines, reaching their multiplex tentacles to the sky, their glittering zeniths scintillating with power. Down below a multitude of white-clad scientists, their expressions tense, hopeful. . . .

"Unfortunately, the first attempt to return our world did not work. The cataclysm was still in progress. During that time, while at the height of its potency, its dire effects could not be revoked. However, our scientists calculated that once the cataclysm had settled down, this power they had acquired could be used to shift our planet back into the normal universe. They channeled this force into mighty retention cells and waited for the energies of the cataclysm to fully expend themselves."

A series of prodigious four-sided cells, perforated by billions of energy retaining nodules—all of them glowing fiercely—radiating an indication of power held carefully in readiness, waiting. . . .

"It was then that we discovered Ikonia's coexistence with ourselves. Apparently the cataclysm, in its inscrutable way, had forced this world from its orbit in another solar system and imprisoned it along with us. We discovered that passage between our two worlds, at the moment, was not possible. The most we could do was monitor their world, but not very extensively; we concluded that they were also monitoring ours.

But cause for alarm arose when our scientists found evidence that the Ikonians were attempting to construct an interdimensional transfer. Ikonia had not been so fortunate in tapping the tremendous forces generated by the cataclysm. It was logical to conclude, therefore, that they had monitored our success and planned to take command of the forces we ourselves had procured.

"Our scientists were very alarmed. They jumped to the conclusion that the Ikonians had already perfected their transfer. They expected a breakthrough to our world and an Ikonian takeover, which would not have been difficult since Ikonia is a warrior planet with a military force nearly five times ours. But our scientists could not draw the power out of storage and project Olarus into the normal universe because the cataclysm had not yet subsided. Neither could they use this unique force in direct attack against the Ikonians since the polar reversal stripped it of its destructive nature.

"So they decided upon an alternative plan. Already our science had developed teleportronics. The only trouble was that, in our closed dimension, they could project entities beyond our world but could not return them. There was not much time left, our scientists believed, so they decided to go through with their plan in the hope that succeeding generations could develop a technique to retrieve this power, when the time came, despite our cosmic estrangement.

"They searched the cosmos for thousands of light-years around, and even the neighboring galaxies, trying to find the best receptacle for this tremendous force. At last they found a race of beings whose *minds* were capable of retaining this force. But the scientists could not project the full powers into any one mind. This would result in a dangerous overcharge and result in a rapid dissipation. Neither could they project

these forces into just any two minds. They realized that when the time came, the forces and the person could not be divorced from such an immense distance. The person would have to be teleported to our world physically. Therefore, it was imperative that our scientists find two persons whose psychic characteristics would permit them to undergo such a spatial transition."

"Our scientists found twenty-four such persons on the planet which is called Earth. Each one possessed a mind capable of engaging in a teleportronic transition line. Our scientists focused upon two minds and infused this power into them so that it would be passed down from generation to generation, if need be, until we could devise a way to retrieve it. In the event that the Ikonians should ever find them first, our scientists would infuse a safety mechanism which would prevent the person from consciously yielding the force. Furthermore, in the event that one of the persons should die, the power would automatically transfer itself to the mind of one of the other twenty-four, within the terrestrial limits, or one of their descendants, since this mental characteristic is highly hereditary.

"Our scientists had great hopes in their plan. Even if the Ikonians were to dominate our planet, the power would remain safe. The Ikonians would have great difficulty locating the world on which we had concealed it. In the meantime, our scientists would be hard at work upon a machine to overcome the handicaps of our estrangement and return the two people when the time presented itself for direct action."

The detached voice stopped. All at once the vortices closed in around his being, surrounding him, drawing him in. He felt his essence broken from its point of fixation, felt it tumbling in a million different

directions at once, into a million unknown yawning chasms, falling, falling. . . . And then, suddenly——

He was all alone on a vast, open plain. . .

It seemed to stretch forever in all directions, but in front of him he could make out a clearly marked horizon. Everything was shrouded in gloom, a vast, all-encompassing darkness.

There was no tension present, rather a vast, pervasive, calm.

A shaft of brilliant light described an arc from one end of the horizon to the other, forming a tremendous yellow halo to cast aside the darkness. It disappeared and a resounding burst of thunder shook the plain. A mystical luminescence grew up out of the horizon, in front of him. And then—and then—this *thing*, this tremendous *shape*. . . .

He was not afraid! He had no reason to be afraid now.

The shape continued to emerge, to a greater extent than ever before, growing larger, more distinct. A glowing cauldron of pure, blue-white energy spilled over the horizon, higher, higher, like the birth of a new star. It loomed vast, enormous, spectacular, its brilliant rays eating away at the enveloping gloom, to bring light to the plain. It was the dawning of a vast, new, incredibly beautiful day. . . .

A voice thundered, "Do you hereby divest your being of this force?"

Dennis' being answered, "Yes! Oh, yes! I *yield!*"

He felt a tremendous pressure within his essence, followed by an equally tremendous release. Then a sensation of wondrous emptiness, of peace and tranquility, drifted serenely within him as his existence floated upward toward concrete reality—higher, higher, until finally it broke to the surface and materialized.

"So you see," Lahr said afterward, walking with Cindy and Dennis down the great corridor away from the machines, "the only complications in the plan were the Ikonians finding you before we could, and, the time factor imposed by the approaching second cataclysm, which our scientists had not predicted. But once we had rescued you, the rest was simple. How do you feel?"

"Different, somehow," Dennis said.

And he was right. As he walked with Lahr, Cindy's hand in his own, he was conscious of an extraordinary change within his own body. He felt as if a tremendous weight had been lifted from his skull, as if a tension that had always been there had been drawn off and dissipated, never to be felt again.

"The protective device," Lahr went on, "that was what resulted in your pangs of conscience when the Ikonians tried to drain you. And the nightmare you've been experiencing . . . merely an indication of the presence of the force. Rest assured it will trouble neither of you again."

"And believe me, that's a relief," Dennis said. All questions had been answered, all the mystery cleared away. And now that the barriers to his understanding had been removed, the truth seemed so self-evident, so obvious—an utterly and completely unified whole.

They paused on a large platform overlooking Elackros, the capital city of Olarus. Night still cloaked the terrain, but all across the vast concourses below, floodlights glared and banners swung in the air, as Olarusanians by the thousands crowded the boulevards, celebrating the end of their dimensional estrangement. Skyrockets streaked into the firmament in groups of ten, twenty, thirty or more, exploding high above and sending opalescent streamers to compete with the distant, twinkling of the stars.

And the stars themselves. . . . Dennis considered

them closely. It seemed that they stood out bolder, more brilliantly than they had before, as if a tinted gossamer veil had been drawn out of the way, revealing them in all their true splendor.

Lahr was gazing into the heavens. "No longer shall we be bound to our planet," he said. "No longer shall we be prisoners in our own world. Now we can reach out, extend the lines of our culture, pursue our former interplanetary commerce."

He turned to Dennis and the girl. "You, Dennis, and you, gentle Cindy, have made this all possible. I thank you. My world thanks you. The departed spirits of Orkeign, Norva, Hret, and Cladet thank you. And if your friend James Trenton were alive, I am sure he also would be very proud of you. Our people will exalt your memory for centuries to come. Wish that there were some way we could reward you. But all the wealth of our planet would be insufficient to requite you fittingly."

"You don't have to shower us in riches," Dennis said. "Just send us back to Earth, where we belong."

Lahr seemed a trifle disappointed. "Then you do not wish to remain here with us on Olarus?"

Dennis said, "Your world is a paradise, Lahr. It'll take Earth thousands of years before it can even rival the goodness and integrity of your people. But we're Earth people, Lahr, a different race, and our proper home is Earth. We've talked it over and decided that is where we belong. That is where the Great Creator placed us. It's better that way."

Yes, it would be better, he thought. In the first place, Cindy would be able to receive the psychiatric guidance she needed. And he, Dennis . . . well, final exams were not very far in the future, and he certainly didn't want to miss *those*. . . .

"This is your decision, then?" Lahr asked.

"Yes," Dennis said. "It is our decision."

Lahr paused for a moment. "And a wise one, I realize now. We'll take care of it right now. Let's see, since you're both going to different locations, we'll have to send you out from two different terminals, at opposite ends of our metropolis."

He pressed something on his belt. Five uniformed guards appeared; one of them smiled and placed a gentle hand on the girl's shoulder.

"My guards will escort Cindy to her terminal. You, Dennis, I'll take care of personally."

Cindy looked at Dennis. "Good-bye," she said softly.

Dennis tightened his hand on hers and stooped over, planting a kiss on her forehead, then on her lips. They parted and Cindy turned and left, escorted by Lahr's guards.

Something struck Dennis. He called after the girl, "Cindy!"

She turned. "Yes, Dennis?"

"Almost forgot. Your last name . . ."

Cindy smiled softly. "Peters," she said. "Twenty-Seven Steele Street, Burlington, New York."

And she was gone.

A voice filtered through to him. "Hey, stupid. Get up!"

Dennis opened his eyes. Craig Michaels was hovering over him, shaking his shoulder roughly.

"Craig—" He brushed his arm aside and snapped to his feet, looking around. He was back in his Berkeley apartment; he had been lying on the comfortable couch in his living room.

"You've one hell of a lot of explaining to do," Craig was saying. "You've been gone for over a week. I just get back from shopping, and here you are, slipping in an additional forty winks."

Dennis' brain unclogged. "What's the date?"

"Monday, May 21," Craig said. "As if you didn't know. Finals begin in *three days!* You lunkhead, you just got back in time to start hitting the books."

"A little over a week," Dennis muttered. It had seemed like a much, much longer time. . . .

Craig was staring at him in wonder. "Hey, where on earth did you get that crazy outfit?"

"Crazy outfit?" Dennis looked at his arms, then let his eyes sweep over the rest of his body. He was still attired in the red-and-gold uniform the Olarusanians had given him.

Craig eyed him suspiciously. "You've been to some psychedelic hippie camp, haven't you. Hittin' the grass again, after two years——"

"No, not exactly," Dennis said. "But I've been away."

"Where?"

Dennis hesitated. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Let me guess." Craig made a wry expression of thought. "By the looks of you, you've been to Mars and back."

Dennis tried to hold back a chuckle. "Not exactly."

Craig confronted him threateningly. "Goddamn it, tell me where you've been or I'll twist it out of you in three different directions. . . ."

"I'll tell you what." Dennis made a pacifying gesture. "Finals are three days away. Are you ready for them, big boy?"

"Course I'm not, idiot. You know Craig Michaels is the cram-king of Berkeley."

"Then we'll hit those books together, take our exams," Dennis proposed, "and when it's all over, when *nothing* can throw up a barrier between us and keep us from studying efficiently—*then* I'll tell you everything."

Craig's mouth twisted to one side. "I," he said slow-

ly, "have the very distinct feeling I'm going to call for the little men in white when I hear your story."

"I just might beat you to it," Dennis quipped. "But promise me one thing, though."

"What's that?"

"That you won't insist we go to Malibu this summer."

Craig inclined his head. "Why not? You got some better place?"

Dennis nodded. "New York State."

Craig almost hit the ceiling. "Are you *nuts*? That's clear across the country! Two thousand miles!"

"I'll pay all expenses," Dennis said. "Somehow I'll scrounge up every last cent. But right after finals I've just got to get to New York, somehow."

"The City, maybe?"

"No. A little town in the southern part," Dennis told him. "It's called Burlington. There's a certain young lady there. Cindy Peters, I think her name is. . . ."

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Psychic Nightmare

Dennis Sands was just another college junior. Then, he learned that he had strange psychic powers valuable and needed on another planet. He agreed to travel to Ikonia, even though he didn't trust Cynnax, disguised as a professor, who revealed his true identity as a being from a world in a distant solar system, a world that was on the brink of extinction. When Dennis got there, he realized why his psychic powers were treasured. And that the evil Cynnax and his perverted band planned to rob him of his brain.

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