

The Dark Mind / The Transfinite Man

Colin Kapp, 1965

ONE

Failway Terminal cut across the old sector of the city like an ugly red house-brick thrown by a vandal on to a Lilliputian town. Almost a square mile of the old town had been obliterated to make room for the monstrous hundred-storied hulk of architectural impotence which was the Terminal building. Streets and parks alike ended with a plaintive suddenness short of this monumental reminder that money can buy anything. Its shadow secured a shroud of almost permanent gloom across the tenements still cringing between it and the river. Failway Terminal, thought Ivan Dalroi, was a headache from any point of view.

A ground-cab set him down at the main entrance, and he lingered for a while watching the faces of the trippers and the sensation seekers who flocked to the Terminal in search of the pleasures only Failway could provide. The sight made him slightly sick. Failway was strictly impartial: the customers got what they paid for — pleasures simple, exciting, exotic or erotic according to their wishes. The trouble was that people tended to graduate ...

The girl at the reception desk took his card and scanned it with disfavour.

"You have an appointment?"

"No," said Dalroi. "Only people who expect to live a long time make appointments. I want to speak to Peter Madden."

"Would you care to state the nature of your business?"

"Right now it hasn't got a name, but unless I get a few good answers I shall probably call it murder."

The girl dialled a number and spoke briefly into an acoustic chamber. Then she turned back to Dalroi.

"Mr. Madden was expecting you to call. He will see you immediately."

Dalroi scowled. Only a selected few knew he was planning a visit to Failway Terminal. Only one other person knew his purpose. Somebody was guessing, or ... A sudden stab of panic clawed at his vitals and he rejected it savagely.

Peter Madden was a mild-seeming man with a careful, suave calm born more of rigid self-discipline than inner content. The man's balance and control was almost perfect, thought Dalroi, but the tell-tale top line frown betrayed the power and the conflict locked within the skull. Peter Madden was not a man to be crossed lightly.

"Failway Public Relations at your disposal, Mr. Dalroi. We aim to serve you."

"I doubt it!" said Dalroi. "I'm not exactly increasing the good-will of the establishment."

Madden looked him firmly in the eyes, a slight smile on his lips, and motioned him into a chair. "Knowing your reputation for trouble, I take it this isn't a social visit?"

"If you were expecting me, you know damn well it isn't. For the record I'll pretend you don't know who I am or why I'm here." He searched carefully around the room for the concealed microphones he knew were recording every word he spoke. "I'm a private investigator working on behalf of Baron Cronstadt

and the Cronstadt committee. Four weeks ago three members of the committee visited Failway on a fact-finding tour. I know they went in because I watched them. They never came out again."

"That's a sweeping statement," said Madden gently. "You don't suppose we lose people in Failway, do you?"

"I do mean just that."

"It's scarcely policy, Mr. Dalroi. Failway is devoted to offering patrons whatever they choose to seek. If they came looking for facts, I have no doubt they found them."

"And if they came looking for trouble?" asked Dalroi. "Let's stop fencing, Mr. Madden. The Cronstadt committee is out to break the Failway monopoly. The fact that three members don't return after a Failway visit is highly suggestive of a little foul play. I'd be interested to hear your explanation."

Madden laughed quietly. "My dear Dalroi, we're not afraid of the Cronstadt committee, and we've nothing to hide. There've always been cranks against Failway and there always will be — it's part of the cross we bear for being in advance of the times. Why should we trouble ourselves with the maunderings of three old men?"

Dalroi looked up. "Who said they were old?"

Peter Madden spread his hands. "Prohibition is an old man's occupation. Do you mind if I offer you a little advice, Mr. Dalroi?"

"Call me Ivan," said Dalroi insolently. "It sounds less formal."

Madden controlled himself. "Very well — Ivan. I advise you to drop this case. You've a big reputation as an investigator. I suggest you wouldn't want to ruin it by starting something you have no hope of finishing."

"Is that a threat?"

"No, simply a prediction."

"Then your crystal ball is tuned in to the wrong channel. I've never yet walked out on a case."

"Not even when the price was right?" Madden watched him closely.

"No," said Dalroi, "not even then. First of all a man has to live with himself. Besides which, I have a personal score to settle with Failway."

Madden fingered a file of papers on his desk then pushed it aside with a hint of impatience. "I was afraid of that," he said. "I don't suppose it does any good to repeat that you have no chance at all of succeeding?"

"No," said Dalroi. "Win or lose, there isn't enough room for Dalroi and Failway to live together. One of us is going to have to go."

"At least we reach a point of complete agreement," said Madden quietly.

He stood up to signify that the interview was at an end. Dalroi rose also, puzzled by a curious undercurrent in the P.R.O.'s manner. Madden showed him out with the usual courtesies and a final handshake. As their hands clutched, Dalroi became aware that a piece of folded paper was being pressed into his palm. A glance at Madden's eyes cautioned him to silence. He trapped the paper deftly beneath his thumb, and set off down the corridor without once looking back.

He was deep in the heart of the old town before he slipped the note carefully into his pocket. Glancing round to make sure he was not being followed, he entered Mortimer's café-bar and went straight to the telephone. This was a tactical move. Mortimer saw him enter and nodded to the boy to watch the door. Dalroi and Mortimer had a mutual pact to protect each other's right to privacy, a remnant of the old gang-fights of their youth.

The note read:

FAILWAY G2. 12:00 MUST SPEAK. MADDEN.

Dalroi frowned. Failway G.2, was the heavy goods entrance on the river side of the Terminal. It was situated in the wharfing area in the toughest and most vicious district of the old town. Dalroi knew. He had spent his youth in the shadows of the brothels and bars around the mouldering wharves. That scar on his forehead was no accident.

He dropped some coins into the meter and dialled his office. Zdenka, his secretary, answered the phone.

"Dalroi here, Zen. Anything new come in for me?"

"Nothing — unless you count the gas bill."

"File it," said Dalroi. "Under miscellaneous. Look, I want you to get on to our police contacts and see if you can get information on any unidentified bodies found in this area in the last four weeks. I'm specifically interested in three, male, in the fifty to sixty-five age group."

"That sounds ominously like the members of the fact-finding party who went into Failway."

"Precisely," said Dalroi. "I'm tempted to wonder if I've been looking for them in the wrong place. Something's very curious about this whole affair. There's a hell of an undercurrent behind everything."

"Speaking of undercurrents," Zdenka said, "somebody named Dutt was on the phone."

"How long ago?"

"Thirty seconds, perhaps."

"Right!" said Dalroi. "You can go home if you want to. I shall probably be late."

He broke the connection hastily. He knew nobody named Dutt. The message was a prearranged code. DUTT ... Don't Use The Telephone. It meant that the personal-privacy meter in the office had detected a wire-tap on the line. His interest in Failway had somebody worried, and that somebody was going to a great deal of trouble to keep informed of his movements. Things were beginning to warm up.

He left the phone, nodded to Mortimer, then changed his mind about going out of the front entrance and went through the kitchens at the back. Turning uptown he ignored two ground-cabs and selected a third. Thus it was he was just re-passing Mortimer's bar in time to see the front blown out by a bomb which exploded within.

He halted the cab, half inclined to plough into the wreckage to look for Mortimer and the boy, but the angle of the beams told him the floor had collapsed into the cellar. That made it a job for the fire-service rescue squad and the police — especially the police. Mortimer's hobby was printing, and the presses lived in the cellar — so did the plates which produced such highly accurate counterfeit banknotes.

With a sick heart he ordered the cab to drive on. He had no doubt that the bomb had been intended for

himself. Obviously he had been followed from Failway by someone who was not only a master of his trade but was also prepared to kill and was not particular as to how he did it. That triple qualification narrowed the field quite a bit. He could not recall more than half a dozen men in the country who could fit the post — and they were all very expensive.

He began to sense the power and complexity of the web stretched out across the city. Somebody at Failway was displeased or frightened or both, and Failway never stopped at niceties to remove a thorn beneath the flesh. It had always been the same — the vast concentration of power scaled down to the fine operating edge of the professional killer; the knife in the dark, the body in the river — nice inconspicuous deaths with no witnesses, no convictions and nothing to connect them with Failway save the tenuous threads of suspicion.

Failway tolerated no opposition. It was ruthless, thorough and invariably fatal to its opponents. Why not, when it was prepared to spend a million pounds to ensure a man was dead?

Cronstadt himself had chosen Dalroi for the job; 'Iron-fist' Cronstadt, the Steel and Paper Baron, a man of fierce ambitions and bitter, uncompromising drives. Around him he had drawn a committee of helpers as bizarre and unorthodox as himself: Presley, head of the United Churches Militant Action Group; Hildebrand, psychologist and intellectual; and the fantastic Doctor Gormalu, whose scientific genius had first made Failway possible. Also backing Cronstadt was the government-appointed fact-finding group whose disappearance had given Dalroi his first operating part in the game.

Three streets from the office Dalroi dismissed the cab on a swift impulse. It occurred to him that the bomb in Mortimer's bar had left him with an unsought advantage. For a few hours at least Failway would be unable to tell if their murder bid had been successful. That gave him a few hours to locate the killer who had followed him, and to extract a little vengeance.

He dived into the nearest hotel, went straight through into the cloakroom and locked himself in. Then he pulled out his utility-wallet and did a hasty make-up job on himself. Under the brush and powder his hair turned darker and streaked with grey. His face tanned chestnut with the lotion and the supple skin tautened as the resins dried and contracted. Contact lenses masked the colour of his eyes, and within twenty minutes the face of Ivan Dalroi aged by thirty years.

He now turned his attention to his clothes. The trousers and shoes were nondescript but his jacket was obtrusively his own. Not far from the hotel was a third-rate tailor who made his fortune out of the sartorial necessities of underpaid office workers. Dalroi left his own jacket in a hotel locker, and by the time he stepped on to the bus he was certain that no one could have recognised the peevish, frustrated clerk as the grim-eyed private investigator who had so narrowly escaped death at Mortimer's.

He chose the bus-stop before the ruined bar, and walked on to where the knot of spectators pressed the police cordon. He pushed his way forward until he was jammed against the arm of a policeman attempting to control the crowd.

"Keep back behind there!"

"What happened?" said Dalroi.

"Explosion," said the policeman. "Now keep moving along there."

"Any survivors?" Dalroi asked.

"No, not a hope. They've got stretchers in there now but the ambulance is a waste of time. Now move along, if you please!"

Dalroi worked his way slowly through the crowd. There were the usual groups of people who assembled on such occasions: the housewives complete with shopping, shift workers homing for a late lunch, the elderly and retired who had no more congenial occupation than to pronounce judgement at an accident or a hole in the road. Mentally he catalogued the assembly one by one, looking for someone who did not quite fit. He was certain in his own mind that the bomb-thrower was still on the scene waiting for confirmation that Dalroi was dead. Finding no positive suspects he moved back to the beginning of the crowd.

"They say there's three dead bodies in there," Dalroi confided to a fellow onlooker.

"That so? Still, there might have been a lot more in a bar at this time of day."

Dalroi moved on. "They say there's three heads in there," he said to another, "but only two bodies."

"Three?" The man looked up sharply. "How do you know?"

"I was speaking to the fire-chief. He said two waiters and a big blond fellow."

"I wonder why they don't fetch them out?"

"Can't," said Dalroi. "The floor dropped in."

He moved on, spreading an occasional lie, and reckoning on inference and hearsay to spread the false rumour of his own demise. Then he saw his man. The face was disguised and unfamiliar, but the set of the shoulders and the soft cat-tread walk struck a chord in his memory. The assassin had turned from the crowd and was leaving, as though bored with the inactivity of the scene.

Dalroi followed him silently. They turned off the high-street, through the arcade, then right and on to the Black-water bridge. Halfway across the bridge the assassin paused to light a cigarette. Dalroi paused also to slip the catch on his automatic pistol. Then the two fell into step.

"Nice try, Michael Neasden," said Dalroi casually.

The other was startled. "What the hell?"

"Keep walking," said Dalroi. "I've got a gun on your spine. This is one funeral you aren't going to miss."

The other considered this in silence for a moment. "What makes you think I'm Michael Neasden?"

"Simple," said Dalroi. "I followed your backside for two years, exercising round a bloody prison yard."

Despite the gun the other faltered in his stride. "Dalroi! But I thought ... "

"... I was dead. And you thought that because you were just on your way to Failway to collect the fee for having murdered me. That's one mistake more than you're allowed."

Neasden shot him an agonised glance, then lunged. His fist took Dalroi in the stomach as he sprang for the parapet, then he vaulted the concrete rail and dived for the river below. A barge passing beneath saved Dalroi having to fire at a target moving in the water. It saved Dalroi having to fire at all.

TWO

Dalroi had no doubt his office was being watched. Any of a hundred windows in the area could be used to overlook the door to the office block. Fortunately the doorway was common to thirty offices, and he

was confident his disguise would stand up to all but the most prolonged scrutiny.

He entered the building and went straight up the stairs, suddenly aware that the light in his office was still burning although the hour was late. Through the reeded-glass panel in the corridor he could see the outline of Zdenka sitting at her desk. A darker figure stood near the door. The atmosphere held the sweet smell of trouble. He ignored his key and fingered the office doorbell. A moment's hesitation, then the door was opened by a tall stranger in a black tunic shirt.

"Mr. Dalroi?" asked Dalroi, playing again the frustrated clerk.

"At this time of night? Try again tomorrow."

"But I must see him. You see, my wife has ... "

"Good luck!" said the man. "You're probably better off without her."

But Dalroi pressed into the office, fussily insistent. One look at the half-formed hope on Zdenka's face told him all he needed to know. The stranger found his revolver, only to watch it spin from his fingers as a deft blow from Dalroi paralysed his arm. Before the amazement could register Dalroi hit him again and he fell as though pole-axed.

"I thought you were never going to come," Zdenka said.

"I was delayed. A friend of mine was killed by a bomb and I felt obliged to find out who threw it. When did this character turn up?"

"Right after you called. I think he was connected with the line-tap on the phone."

"That makes sense," said Dalroi disgustedly. "But they might have had the decency to send a professional. I wouldn't be surprised if he even carries his identity on him."

He searched the stranger's pockets rapidly. "I thought as much: Failway Internal Security Force. Probably sent to clean-up the office as soon as they were sure that I was permanently out of the way."

"What are you going to do with him?"

"Call Inspector Quentain and tell him I wish to make a charge of armed assault and illegal entry. With the sort of pressure Quentain's under he won't dare do a thing, but it may give us a few loose ends we can hook on to Failway."

"You hate Failway, don't you?" Zdenka watched him curiously.

"Hate," said Dalroi bitterly, "doesn't begin to describe the emotion. I was brought up in the shadow of Failway. If ever a girl went missing we all knew where she'd gone. The building blocked the sunlight from the streets, their refuse polluted the river, and their methods twisted the life and hope out of the people. They set a price on every form of human degradation; if you couldn't stand living in a slum you could always sell yourself to Failway."

"Sounds grim."

"It was not only grim, it was murder. Failway owned most of the property and most of the people down by the river, and they knew how to put on the pressure. If you had a talent Failway could use, you either joined them or they broke you."

"They didn't break you."

"No," said Dalroi. "I was one of the few who didn't break. That doesn't mean they didn't try."

"I hadn't realised such a situation could exist."

"Why should you? Nobody's proud of degradation and nobody's going to speak out against it when it means a certain bullet in the back as a price for indiscretion. But that's not alone among the things that Failway hushes up. Did you know that once you get on the Failway system proper you quite legally cease to exist. The Failway process breaks through into what is called an inferior energy level. What that is I wouldn't pretend to know, but it's not on Earth as we know it, and it's legally, morally and actually outside of every protection we normally enjoy. Once you're in Failway you belong to them. The fact that they normally give you a good time and then fetch you back to the Terminal is simply because it pays them to do it that way."

"But millions of people go there every year. I was there myself for the holidays."

"I know," said Dalroi. "But did you ever see the police files on the people who didn't come back?"

"But they can't just kidnap people."

"Don't be naïve. Failway is a police-state and a law unto itself. It's also big business, and big businesses have a way of being ruthless with things affecting their interest."

"There's another reason for having your knife in Failway, isn't there?"

Dalroi looked away strangely, only half seeing. Then he nodded dully.

"A girl?"

"Perhaps." Dalroi cleansed the resins from his skin carefully.

"Don't you want to talk about her?"

"I'd sooner not." The sweet spirit drew the colour from his hair.

Zdenka caught sight of his face in the mirror. She had never seen Ivan Dalroi with quite that expression before.

"Sorry!" said Zdenka. "I didn't mean to pry."

"Don't worry," Dalroi said. "Things like that don't hurt any more. They just leave you numb right through. It's a kind of emotional anaesthesia. The world's never the same place afterward. Somebody takes the flowers away. Poetry dies."

"You must love her very much."

"She has golden hair and the artless charm of a child. When she smiles it's like a shaft of sunlight breaking through a winter's sky."

"Doesn't she love you?"

"No," said Dalroi. "Berina loves Berina, and there's an end to it. That alone I could learn to live with, but Failway's offered her big money to go as a hostess on Failway Two level I don't think they need her, but they do have a few old scores to settle with me. They're specialists at hitting where it hurts the most."

"Can't you stop her from going?"

"You can't stop Berina from doing anything. You can only follow and pick up the pieces. For this particular piece of vandalism I intend to break Failway even if I have to use my bare hands."

"Suppose Failway breaks you instead?"

"I can afford to take the risk," said Dalroi. "If Berina goes, I don't have very much to lose. For me it's part crusade and part revenge, but for you there's nothing in it but the salary. That's why I don't want you mixed up in what's to come. There's no point in your getting involved in something which doesn't concern you."

"But it does concern me since I've got to live in the same world as Failway too. That makes it my fight just as much as yours. Now tell me what we're going to do."

"You're making a big mistake," said Dalroi. "Our role is making trouble for Failway — fifth column, sabotage, any sort of random mischief, and the more destructive the better. This is to divert attention while Cronstadt applies some other measures."

Zdenka scowled. "It's not exactly legal!"

"Not very," said Dalroi, "but legalities aren't going to bother Failway either. I've already had proof of that. The fact is that Failway's already above the law, so we can't be compromised by having scruples ourselves. Frankly our only assets are speed and mobility, and if we get caught we can't expect any mercy from Failway or the police."

"All right, where do I start?"

"This whole business has a bad smell. Do you remember Harry Dever? He was a good journalist before he took to drink. In the morning I want you to find him and take him down to Passfields, you know the spot"

Zdenka nodded. "You think he might know something useful about Failway?"

"No," said Dalroi. "I think he might know something vital about the members of the Cronstadt committee."

"What makes you think that?"

"My dear Zen, tackling Failway is about the only form of legalised suicide still available in this country. Anybody who declares war on Failway and lives longer than twenty-four hours is either extremely clever, extremely lucky or just plain immortal. Half of the committee are still living. It might be interesting to find out why. For the sake of our own lives we can't do that too fast. You'd better call Inspector Quentain now and ask him to pick up this Failway idiot before he stains the carpet."

Quentain's eyes moved from Dalroi to the prostrate figure and back again. The police inspector's sardonic smile was almost his only engaging feature.

"Suppose you start explaining," he said slowly, "and make it sound like nothing but the truth."

"So help me!" said Dalroi. "Don't I always? He forced his way into my office, prevented my secretary from leaving, and when I arrived he pulled a gun on me."

Quentain pulled out a notebook, and rolled the dormant figure over with his foot. "A client of yours?"

"Hell no! He's from Failway Security."

Quentain was suddenly interested. "Then I have no doubt he had a very good reason for doing what he did. I don't see there is any charge I can bring against him."

"Do me a favour Quent!" said Dalroi. "Aren't I entitled to protection like any other ratepayer?"

The inspector closed the notebook with a snap and replaced it in his pocket.

"Sorry, Dalroi! You'd scarcely expect me to risk my pension trying to make out a case for you versus Failway. You know which way the world turns."

"Yes," said Dalroi bitterly. "I know. I'd merely hoped that somewhere in the dim, dark recesses of the local constabulary there was someone with a nostalgia for a quaint old custom called justice."

"Justice? For you? My God, don't make me laugh! I've enough suspicions about you to put you inside for about five hundred years — only I don't quite have the proof. And you scream for justice! What I don't see is how you became crazy enough to think you could fight Failway."

"Call it conscience," said Dalroi. "Even policemen get infected with it sometimes."

"Not on my squad they don't."

"Don't tell me," said Dalroi. "I know most of your boys better than I knew my father. There isn't one who doesn't shed a silent tear before proceeding to beat the hell out of an innocent suspect. I know. I received the best part of my education in that little room at the back of the local station."

"It's a pity you never saw fit to heed the lesson."

"I learnt the Eleventh Commandment," said Dalroi. "*Thou shalt not be caught, regardless.* You had nothing else to teach."

"Maybe, but being in my hair is one thing, and taking up arms against Failway is another. I shall miss you when you're dead and gone."

"How much is Failway paying you, Quent?"

"You know me better than that, Dalroi."

"Yes, but I wondered how you came by such up-to-date information. My declared row with Failway is yet only a few hours old."

"I read the signs," said Quentain, "and I keep an ear to the ground. Somebody's not very pleased with you, Dalroi."

"And they're not offering you enough to tempt you, eh?"

"I'm a masochist," Quentain said. "In a curious way I've got used to having you under my skin. Also I intend that when you go down for the last time I'm the one who'll be responsible."

"Thanks, Quent. It's good to know that there are still a few human beings in the Force."

"It's being so human that keeps me a humble inspector. Look, Dalroi, I'll tell you what I'll do for you. I'll take this Failway character of yours away and lose him somewhere if you'll promise that when Failway catches up with you, you won't leave too much blood in my manor. Too much gore in the gutter doesn't look too well in the records."

"Thanks for nothing," said Dalroi. "And if I want to know the time I'll ask a policeman."

"Anything we can do to get you time will receive our wholehearted attention," said Quentain, reaching for his hat.

"Oh, and Dalroi ... I don't know what you've got yourself into this time, but I wish you luck. I've a slight feeling you're going to need it."

Berina's flat was on the far side of the city. Dalroi went there, not sure of what purpose it might serve since they had both already said all they had to say on the subject of her entering Failway, but influenced by something of that human irrationality which makes a condemned man react to a more imminent threat of death. Hope was not to be abandoned before the finite end.

She opened the door to him, dressed in a soft and immaculately white dressing gown, and her hair fell more gently and more golden on her shoulders than he ever before remembered. Her upturned face held all the warmth and innocence of a child, yet her lips were possessed of such a measure of thirsting after life that every expression, every fleeting movement, twisted his soul with longing. If characters have depths then Berina had a whole world of unknown fascination hidden deep within her.

For Dalroi, the unfelt aching in his arms became the ache to hold her body against his, to pluck up this young life and blend it with his own agonised passions, to squeeze for himself a little balm to ease the bitterness in his heart. He put out his arm to draw her to him, but she neither moved nor tried to turn away. He bent down and kissed the upturned lips, wishing they were hungry, but she neither responded to nor resented his attempts. He fondled her, but she stood as though unaware, neither consenting nor objecting to his hands. He would have welcomed even an angry slap in preference to this warm nothingness. Rejection he could have tolerated, but indifference to this degree he could neither comprehend nor surmount. Anger with her changed to loathing for himself, and he pushed her away and felt hot with humiliation.

"So you're really determined to go into Failway?"

"Yes!" She smiled delightedly, and the inflection of her voice made the answer at once a statement of fact and a mocking taunt. Berina was enjoying her mastery.

"And there's nothing I can say which will make you change your mind?"

"No!" She knew his desiring and his misery, and with a wanton coquettishness she was twisting the knife in the wound. Had she been obliged to enter Hell for it she could not have thrown away this moment of triumph.

This Dalroi knew, as surely as he knew that retreat was the only way to maintain his self respect. He had not courted Berina for six frustrating, tempestuous, heart-rending months without becoming fully familiar with her malicious, naïve delight in emotional torment. This practise had opened new chapters in his understanding of himself and of humanity in general, and had given him a feeling for poesy far deeper than any formal education could bestow. He had set her up as a goddess and worshipped at her feet, but she had descended of her own volition and as from tomorrow would join the ranks of the professional courtesans in Failway, for any man to take who merely had the price. The idea cut Dalroi into pieces, and his hands trembled uncontrollably as his mood alternated between self-pity and hopeless frustration.

For a moment he contemplated forcing her to yield to him, but antipathy at the idea of the warm, unresponding doll he had just encountered rendered the impulse stillborn; sooner the remembered image of vibrant, unobtainable life than experience of a dummy made in the likeness of his love and mocking him by its complete indifference to his actions. To maintain the last strands of his shredding dignity he turned

on his heel and forced himself to go without a further word.

Objectively he could not blame Berina for being Berina: she was one of Nature's own emotional vandals, an inconstant and incomparable nymph, and it was precisely this quality and its challenge which had attracted him to her in the first place. The diabolical facet was the way in which Failway was using this very fact to strike one more deep hurt at Dalroi. Berina, for all her worldliness and sleight, could have no notion of the subtleness of the forces which had manipulated her decision. Dalroi knew, and the anger was a slab of pain across his chest, a bright bank of fury which clawed under his eyelids. For this above all he was determined to revenge himself on Failway.

THREE

The clocks were striking half-past eleven as Dalroi parked his car on a waste-lot near the river. The dank, warm and rotten smell of the mighty wash flowing between dark banks quickened his pulse and brought back memories of a youth of hopelessness. This was home ground to Dalroi; a crazy, complex, decaying world where the sleek atomic merchantmen jostled the dirty, ancient steam-tramps for right of way on the great road to the sea; where the sprawling fingers of dockland spread ships, warehouses and tenements in such inextricable confusion that it was a puzzle to tell which was water-borne and which on land.

Dalroi slipped quietly along familiar pathways, not unmindful that his rendezvous with Madden might prove to be a trap. Reconnoitring the roadways leading to the Failway G.2 entrance, he watched especially for parked cars and trucks, and sounded the night life of the district carefully for anything which might strike a discord.

The huge bulk of Failway loomed like an ominous mountain high into the night sky, shading even the wan starlight from the crippled streets below. The wail around the Terminal was broken by a series of iron gates at the entrance to the G.2 loading bays. Failway Security men populated the gatehouses and any attempt to enter by the gates would have been futile if not fatal. Dalroi therefore turned back to the wall. It was twelve feet of unrelenting brick, capped with the sordid spite of broken bottles trapped in cement. He weighed the position carefully. A minute later he dropped lightly inside. A small door in a roller shutter gave him access to the building.

The loading bays were accommodated in one vast hall which dwarfed even the largest trucks therein. At this time of night the place appeared deserted; lit by a few sullen lamps in the high roof and overcast with the air of potential treachery. Huge bales and crates around the loading ramps shadowed space enough for an army to lie concealed; but this fact had a double edge, affording ample shelter for Dalroi as he moved carefully around the bay constantly alert for watchmen or the possible path of an infra-red alarm beam. Of Madden there was no sign.

For fifteen minutes he sweated quietly, working from shadow to shadow until he had covered every obvious angle. Cursing Madden for a pointless mission, he was about to retrace his steps when he noticed a dark alcove on his right. He had passed it a few minutes previously and found it empty. A glass-panelled door led from the alcove to somewhere in the interior. Now, he realised with an electrifying shock, something had altered. A cigarette end smouldered dimly on the floor. Within the alcove stood a dark shadow, waiting.

"Madden?" asked Dalroi softly.

In the alcove something stirred. Too quickly. Dalroi's hand flew to his gun. Then the world about him flooded into light. Abruptly he was running for his life, dodging and twisting though the scattered bales with a hail of shots screaming from either side. It was a marvellous ambush. Most of the available exits

sprouted their own particular bands of guardians, and those not plainly guarded had doubtless been provided with their own less-obvious executioners.

Dalroi dropped off the staging and ran into the trucking line. Here the metal monsters offered a more complex target, and he was lost from the sight of his hunters. He swung under a truck and hugged himself up under the girders of the chassis. His leg gained purchase on the transmission shaft and despite the grease and filth he managed to force his aching sinews to hold his body up until he thought he would scream with the agony of fatigue.

The search came nearer, and passed. A cursory spotlight swept beneath the truck but failed to find his back. Soon they would return more warily and search more thoroughly. If escape was possible it was now or never.

He dropped to the ground cautiously, the fall of his feet cushioned by the thick, dried oil-patch underneath. Swiftly crossing between one line of trucks and then another, he worked his way towards a large express truck. As he reached the cab a shout went ringing from the further side of the hall and feet came running. He prayed silently as he felt the little key beneath his fingers. For a second the engine failed to start, then coughed twice and broke into life with the noise of vibrant thunder.

Dalroi urged the vehicle into lumbering life and charged it across the intervening space straight at the steel-shuttered doors. With the engine warming rapidly he felt his luck returning. Then impact! The truck was doing fifty when it hit the shutters, and the slam and the scream of tortured metal would have made a fitting prelude to the last days of the universe. The bumper grid took most of the force, but the cab ripped open at the top and the safety-glass dissolved around him in a hail of patterned diamonds.

Then he was out of the building, the shutter torn and twisted like a cardboard mock-up. Only the gates now stood between him and the road. The gatekeeper stood square in the approach, dutiful anger passing to screaming hysteria as he realised Dalroi's intention. Instinctively Dalroi swerved slightly to avoid the creature in his path. The manoeuvre stripped the glass canopy off the front of the gatehouse and centred the truck on a brick column between two gates. Too late to brake or change direction, Dalroi gritted his teeth and charged the vehicle forward.

The brick column went down like straw before a scythe, and the heavy gates disintegrated in a hail of fractured castings. The rear wheel bucked frenziedly over the debris, and the battered dreadnought churned a crazy corner and hurtled into the sleeping street.

Abruptly he realised his mistake. A vehicle the size of his could never pass except by the regular trucking route. The way down which he was moving was flanked by warehouses, with low interconnecting bridges across the street. He passed under two granary conveyors without mishap before his frenzied braking fetched the truck up short with its load jammed under a narrow tunnel. With difficulty he forced open the door and dropped to the ground. He was greeted by the heated richness of leaking fuel from a fractured pipe. A car was shrieking up behind, the bullets whined and ricocheted off the tunnel walls. He had scarcely started running when the truck burst into sheets of flame, effectively sealing the route behind him.

He cleared out of the district fast. The flame-watch circuits lacing the town had fire-tenders sounding in the distance within seconds. But no matter how swift the wheels of officialdom, the local population would always beat them to it, eager for the morbid excitement of a fire and perhaps a little looting on the side.

Dalroi stuck to the shadows and fly-paths, for his face was well known in the river district and he had no intention of being picked up on a relatively minor charge of arson and illegal entry. His car was still where

he had left it, but he wandered watchfully about the area for many minutes before he was satisfied that no one was watching. Then he swung out fast.

A quarter of a mile away a group of cowed figures in an instrumented trailer bent over the displays which told the tale of his leaving, and nodded in dark unison. Dalroi was shaping neatly — in fact, very neatly indeed. There was nobody in the world quite like Ivan Dalroi.

The hills around Passfields were bright after the morning showers. In the cutting the damp shadows clung heavily under the trees and the air was heavy-scented with fern and the blue wood-smoke from the cabin fire.

The apron in front of the cabin was occupied with Zdenka's car, so Dalroi turned his own car at the foot of the slope to a point where years of usage had worn a partial track amidst the silver birch. As he alighted he stopped in sudden dismay, for the track never used except by himself, was marked with fresh tyre tracks in the damp forest loam. He stooped to the ground for a careful examination. A medium-heavy vehicle had come and gone again, and footprints trailed up the hill in the direction of the cabin. Again the sweet smell of trouble.

He turned away into the trees and made a broad circuit to the rear of the cabin. Against the cabin wall he listened, hoping for some slight sound to confirm or reject his fears, but he heard nothing save for the wildlife in the brush beyond.

The blue wood-smoke rising gave him an idea. Silently he climbed the outhouse wall. A piece of flashing, left from an old repair, enabled him to stop the flue completely. Then he dropped to the ground and waited, gun in hand, for the opening of the door.

Nothing happened. In twenty minutes he knew the hut was untenable. Smoke issued thickly from the gaps under the eaves and round the windows. Finally he kicked open the door, gun raised, and peered into the smoky dimness of the room.

Harry Dever's body was on the bed, a wide wound where his forehead ought to be. Dalroi entered cautiously, fearful for Zdenka, but the rest of the cabin was empty and disordered. Of Zdenka there was no sign at all. The smoke, salty and acrid, drove him out again with smarting eyes and nostrils.

He broke some windows to clear the air and went back to Dever. The man was a rat and had been one all his life, but he had also been a mine of off-beat information. Dalroi felt the body, not yet cold. Perhaps two hours ago the murderers had struck. That was the last piece of information that Dever had to give. No clues as to who or why.

Dalroi swore and kicked the sullen stove from its moorings, toppling it to the floor and scattering the hot embers. Paper rekindled the flame and the fire had gained irrevocable hold of timbers as he paid his last respects. Only as he turned did he notice on the door, scratched hastily in the paint, a single word: *Gormalu*. But this was the mystery rather than the answer, for Gormalu was blind and no more capable of committing this atrocity than of flying.

He was about to leave when he remembered the recorder in Zdenka's car. It was standard practice to record the transportation of clients and informers, and sometimes provided that little extra information which was forgotten at an interview. He reached in and pocketed the recorder then drove out of the woods as fast as he could.

A mile away he drew into a side track and started the recorder.

"Hell of a time to call a fellow out," said Dever's voice complainingly. "The streets aren't dry till after

eleven."

"Don't fret," Zdenka said. "All we need is a little cooperation. This is an information job and we pay well. What do you know about the Cronstadt committee?"

"Are you mixed up with them?"

"No comment. Suppose you tell me about Cronstadt?"

"Ah! A pointed question. Cronstadt is a warrior of the old school, pig-headed and utterly ruthless. He made a bid for the Failway monopoly when it was first formed. Rumour has it that he's trying to stage a comeback."

"That sounds relevant. What about Presley?"

"A nut of the first order. Preached hell-fire to his wife until she killed herself, then got even with her by refusing to sanction her burial in a churchyard. To hell with your body, it's your soul he's after."

"Hildebrand?"

"A bit of an unknown quantity. Some queer rumours about the mental asylum he runs."

"And our old friend Gormalu?"

"Are you sure he's on your side?"

"I'm asking the questions. What do you know about Gormalu?"

"Enough to know how dangerous such information is. If you really want to know you'll have to make it worth the risk."

"You can discuss that with Dalroi. He should be following fairly soon. If the information's any good, he'll pay."

"And that's another thing," said Dever. "I never could understand how you could go on working for Dalroi. Too damned unhealthy. He's a professional trouble-man. If ever there's trouble you can bet your life he's in it somewhere — usually underneath. Even the government agents were asking questions about him a little while ago, and anyone who attracts that sort of attention from the Black Knights is usually on the short list for ... "

The tape came to an end and flapped uselessly around the spool. Dalroi cursed. The Black Knights were the top-level government security agents. They only handled assignments from high-treason upward. Then what had they wanted with Dalroi?

The scream of a police siren roused him from this line of speculation and vaguely through the bushes he saw the patrol cars jet past. It did not take much to work out the odds. Whoever had killed Dever had also tipped off the police. With a dead body in his burning cabin Dalroi would have a lot of explaining to do. Sufficient to keep him out of the way for a reasonable period — say fifteen or twenty years. The heat was really on.

He absorbed this information quietly, trying to restrain the burning fury which welled up inside him. He was trying to fit the pieces of the puzzle together. From the scrawled word on the cabin door and from the fragment of taped conversation there was a reasonable supposition that Gormalu was the weak link in the Cronstadt committee. The Black Knights' interest was a little difficult to see. Dever must have given

more information than was recorded, for Zdenka would not have allowed a lead like that to die. He had to find Zdenka.

On his way through town Dalroi parked his car in an alley near the central station and hastened into a public telephone kiosk. He dialled his own number and coded the auto-sec which stored incoming messages. The message store was empty and a polite taped voice invited him to leave a short message. Dalroi cut the connection swiftly. A low-pitched blurr from the auto-sec warned him that a line-tap was operating. It would take about five seconds for the call to be traced. Zdenka had not phoned in and that was a sure sign that she was not a free agent. Then he called Brian Regis.

"Dalroi? You're certainly in the news tonight."

"Don't rub it in," Dalroi said. "I'm in trouble up to my ears right now. Look, I want you to do something for me. Zdenka's missing, and I don't think she went of her own free will. It's my guess she's been kidnapped and I need to know by whom. I'll pay well for the information."

"It's a deal! If she's within fifty miles of the city I'll know by the morning. Where can I call you?"

"Don't try," said Dalroi. "My phone is being tapped. I'll call you."

"Right! If you want some advice, don't stay in one place too long. There's a whole lot of people looking for you."

The distant wail of a siren sent Dalroi running back to the car. It was obviously the police who had tapped his phone. Within seconds he was out of the alley and speeding precariously through the maze of turnings which constituted the downtown suburb. He lost the sound of sirens early and began to relax when he was confident that he had avoided the patrol. Two clues pointed to Gormalu. It was an unlikely lead but one which could not be ignored. Steadfastly he headed out of town.

FOUR

Gormalu was blind, but the fact was not immediately apparent. The bat-call radar boxes on his shoulders guided his feet and hands with a precision which had unnerved many who had misjudged the disability. No, it was not the blindness but the sheer ugliness of the man which left the undying impression: the hawk face with the taut yellowing skin, the sightless eyes peering through dark glasses, the slight, gaunt, skeleton frame. To those who knew him further, the more hideous facet was the terrifying hoard of hatred which festered behind the blinding genius. To Dalroi he was the anathema of all that lived and breathed. There was no love lost in any encounter between them.

This night especially, Dalroi was in no mood for charity. Gormalu, as a member of the Cronstadt committee, was the pivot of his whole plan of operation. He had the information which Dalroi needed to make an effective move against Failway, and he was somehow involved with the strange affair at Passfields. Dalroi cursed. He who would trade with the Devil needs watch out for his own soul.

From previous visits Dalroi knew all he needed about the layout. He left his car nearly a mile from his destination and walked the rest of the way through the dark, sullen trees. Gormalu's henchmen would be wary and it was too easy to set a radar alarm on the approach road, but working in the shelter of the giant boles, nothing short of direct observation could detect his coming. Finally he circled the house, planning the best method of entry. The skylight gave rustily to the force of his fingers and seconds later he was standing in the dark laboratory. Nothing stirred. Silently he made his way to the dim inner-sanctum where Gormalu habitually held court.

The door opened quietly at his touch. Gormalu was there, his sightless eyes watching the door from the

shadows of one small lamp.

"Don't move," said Dalroi. "Call for help and I'll kill you."

"Don't be theatrical, Dalroi. I've been expecting you. You should have known better than to try to take me by surprise."

"I have reasons for not advertising my visits in advance."

"Just so! The police are rather interested in you now."

"Don't let it give you ideas," said Dalroi. "I cut the phone wires before I entered. I don't exactly have a trusting nature. Kindly keep your hands where I can see them."

"As you wish." Gormalu leaned back into the shadows until only the thin, clawlike hands remained visible, resting on the table. "Now tell me what you want."

"I want information on Failway: what it is in a physical sense, where are the extra-spatial extensions, and what are its most vulnerable mechanisms?"

Gormalu was amused. "If you had a degree in about eight subjects and an I.Q. of about one hundred and eighty you could probably understand the answer in about five years."

"Perhaps!" said Dalroi. "But you know exactly what I need."

"Very well! I shall confine myself to words of one syllable. That you will still be ignorant when I have finished is entirely your affair."

"I'll take the risk."

"Do you know anything about the nP energy values for atomic nuclei? Perhaps not. Advanced neutrino study is not exactly popular science. Suffice it to say that all the atomic nP values for a given space-time lattice fall within a certain spectrum of energy levels. Can you comprehend that?"

"No," said Dalroi, "but don't let that stop you."

"Well, it is the coincidence of the nP value in a given atom with respect to another which places the two in the same space-time lattice. This correspondence is called actuality. If the values are too far apart the coincidence breaks down, and, viewed from the standpoint of one atom, the other can be proven not to exist."

"Yet it does still exist?"

"Certainly, in its own lattice or continuum. And as for atoms so for compounds and aggregates. The nP values are bunched in period steps, one step of the series being held by the atoms of this universe in which we now stand. Failway is based on the principle that atoms and thus matter, may be transposed from one energy level to another."

Dalroi nodded. "You mean from one universe to the next."

"No! Universe is too limited a term to apply to the status of an energy level. Some are simply theoretical planes. Two that we know of are five-dimensional abstractions, one is a straight line, and one is a small sphere containing nothing within and the inverse of nothing outside it, or vice-versa according to your mathematical standpoint."

"All right," he said. "Let's concentrate on the levels that Failway use."

"Of an infinite series of levels," Gormalu said, "technology limits us to thirty-eight, of which the Failway apparatus can reach about twenty. Of this twenty they can populate only six, all rational planes or the internal surfaces of major spheres."

"Six," said Dalroi musingly. "I had always heard it was five — five places of pleasure starting with the prissy and descending in conscience as they increase in viciousness. I wonder what hells the sixth one contains."

"What terrible depths inhabit the human mind?" asked Gormalu. "Are you so afraid of shadows?"

"No," said Dalroi. "I was born in the shadows. I knew more about vice and viciousness at seven than most men comprehend at seventy. That sort of childhood leaves some rather ugly scars. I just don't want it to become a national characteristic"

"It never occurred to me that you were a humanitarian."

Dalroi ignored the sarcasm and moved the solitary lamp until the tired illumination fell full on the doctor's face, wishing the man had eyes to betray his moods. The dark glasses, forever turned precisely in his direction, radiated something more than sightlessness; something malignant — as if his very soul itself were dark, unfeeling glass.

"You give me the creeps," said Dalroi.

Gormalu's chin jutted forward with a hint of amusement. "What else did you wish to know about Failway?"

"Critical points for sabotage."

"Of course! The application of brute strength to problems of technical delicacy."

"I didn't ask you to approve my methods."

"But I like your methods. They have a crude simplicity which is rather refreshing in this complicated world. It's just that the destruction of any form of technology is repugnant to me."

"I feel the same way about the destruction of men," said Dalroi sourly.

"Very well, discounting ancillary equipment, most of which is duplicated, the key to Failway is the field matrix tuner. That is the device which controls the destination of the capsule when it leaves the potential gradient. Smash it, and nobody can enter or leave the outworld levels until it's repaired and re-calibrated; alter the settings and a capsule in transit would get lost somewhere between here and infinity."

"If I smash the tuner what would happen to people already on an outworld level?"

"They'd die." Gormalu pushed his chair back into the shadows as though the dim light burning pained his sightless eyes. "The levels are entirely dependent on supplies from Failway Terminal. Considering that it takes sixteen weeks to calibrate a new matrix tuner and there might be a visiting population of four million, you can sense the scale of the catastrophe that your interference would invoke. Let's face it, Dalroi, you're out of your class when it comes to immobilising Failway. It's a task calling for a finesse you are never likely to acquire. Stick to murder and petty larceny."

"One more question," said Dalroi slowly. "What unholy gifts do Failway offer you in return for such

poisonous allegiance?"

For the first time the death's-head was overtaken by the white cast of fear.

"Blast you, Dalroi! That's one question more than you're allowed."

"Is that why you had Dever killed?"

"I didn't. It was — somebody else."

"Who? Do I have to shake it out of you?"

He reached across the desk and caught the thin, dry throat between his fingers, forcing Gormalu back into the chair. Gormalu fought and tried to rise but Dalroi threw him back again savagely and increased the pressure. In a paroxysm of frenzy Gormalu threw up his hands. Dalroi released him as he felt the body slacken. A small object clattered on to the desk and Dalroi stooped to pick it up.

A small black knight.

"That was very foolish, Dalroi. There are some things it's better not to know. You're caught up in a tide of affairs more complex than you can imagine."

"I want answers, not double-talk. Was it the Black Knights who killed Dever?"

"I warn you," said Gormalu, "you're treading on unholy ground."

"Hell, I was born on unholy ground! Now talk — for I'm quite prepared to kill you if you don't."

"I don't think you will," said Gormalu quietly.

Dalroi sensed the pay-off and dived for his gun. Not fast enough. A blow on the neck from behind dazed him momentarily, and before he could react his arms were pinioned and forced up behind his back until he knew the bones must break at any second.

Unashamedly he screamed and the hold relaxed very, very slightly. He knew Gormalu's henchmen, Timoshu and Matshee, and he knew they would not hesitate to cripple him at the slightest provocation. A blind tide of anger rose within him and leaked impotently away with the realisation that he was completely powerless.

"Let me give you a little advice," Gormalu said, fingering his throat. "The Black Knights have something big lined up for you. Something big and brutal — something to do with Failway. Don't try to fight it. Just accept whatever comes."

"One day," said Dalroi, "I shall probably kill you. Human failings, the lust, the greed and the cowardice, I understand, but you are a scowling enigma. I don't know what black principles motivate you, nor what ghastly solace your twisted longings crave. Knowing you is like the kiss of death!"

"You're a man of many talents." Gormalu's voice was a mere hiss between his teeth. "You're a fool, a prophet and a poet all in the same breath. The only reason I don't have you killed now is because somebody is waiting for the privilege who will make an immeasurably better job of it."

"I don't suppose," said Dalroi, "you've ever seen a shaft of sunlight breaking through a winter's sky?"

Gormalu nodded to his henchmen. "You know what to do."

Dalroi tensed his muscles, waiting for his antagonists to move, ready to take advantage of any opportunity. He never stood a chance. He only dimly felt the deft blow as darkness flooded over him.

When he awoke it was only a tenuous return to consciousness. He was in a ditch, his face propped on one arm, clear of the filthy waters. He was soaked to the skin, and above him rain lashed from a pitiless, muddy sky. Survival demanded that he move, but only the force of survival had the power to override the pain that racked his body. Gormalu's henchmen had done a thorough job.

Despite the numbing of the bitter cold, every movement produced a pain too cruel for fortitude. In a state of near delirium he attacked the slimy bank not caring or knowing what it cost him in pain or energy, nor how many times he fainted before he made the crest. After a time his mind withdrew from the struggle and pure, blind instinct forced him on, then deserted, leaving him helpless and exhausted on a bank of yellow clay.

The next time he woke the sun was high and warm and his clothes were steaming as they dried on his body. Painfully he rolled over, drinking in the warmth hungrily, dimly recognising that his life might depend on it. An eternity seemed to pass while he lay thus, then, feeling stronger, he attempted to rise to his feet. The pain flooded back, but he fought it grimly. His back was a thousand aching segments and each rib was a band of agony cramping his breathing. His limbs responded as though the joints had been carefully misplaced. He lay still for a moment longer summoning his will to overcome the thousand crashing signals from his splintered nerves. Then he stood up and walked, his body burning with fire and his mind as cold as ice.

As he walked something elemental stirred within him, something which transcended pain and the bitterness of his plight. It was hatred, sheer, unbounded, naked hate, coupled with an endless determination to survive. It was part of the raw energy of the universe, the terrible will which ordained creation, the naïve spring of the life force common to all things animate. Yet it was more than this, for it channelled and charged through a mind of more than ordinary awareness and cunning; a mind shaped in the corrosive shadows of Failway, already bitter and familiar with the darker things which men do to each other. It was a shaft of black forked lightning which played terribly through a brain already inflamed with dreadful resolution, and it spat like an angry arc in the tense no-man's-land between consciousness and the dark side of the mind.

FIVE

The surge of blood was strong in his ears and a blinding headache lanced through his skull like the forced insertion of a blunt penknife. And something else ... a whisper, a ghost, a flash of memory or delusion ... of a long corridor with doors of surgical whiteness; the macabre chink of instruments on a tray out of sight; an oscilloscope trace like a green eye burning into eyes too hypnotised even to blink; the insane knowledge that one was undergoing something too terrible to be admitted to conscious recognition. And it was gone ...

He groped frantically through his mind, trying to recapture the fragments and to correlate them with experience. No success. Whatever nightmare he had recaptured had withdrawn again into the dark whirlpool of the forbidden. Even the headache trailed to a dull, nagging pulse.

He staggered at length into the bar of a fifth-class motel. The bartender noted his appearance without undue alarm, poured unordered cognac into a tumbler and pushed it forward.

"Smashed my car," said Dalroi by way of explanation. "Been unconscious in a ditch. I need a washroom and a phone."

The bartender nodded. The world was full of nuts and anyone who arrived under his own steam in as bad a state as Dalroi had a right to invent his own lies.

"You'll find the bathroom through there."

Dalroi cleansed the blood from his face and arms and examined the bruises and abrasions. They were painful but not particularly dangerous. Gormalu's thugs had exercised a morbidly scientific restraint in their brutality. He was still wondering what to do about his bloodstained shirt when the door opened behind him. The bartender put his head in.

"Looks as though you could do with a change of clothes?"

Dalroi nodded. "Got anything handy?"

"At a price."

"I'll pay it. This stuff of mine needs burning."

The bartender shortly reappeared with a suit of cheap cloth and a woollen shirt. He looked quizzically at Dalroi's battered face.

"Boy!" he said. "That car must have hated you."

Dalroi ignored him and made for the phone, obscuring the index as he dialled.

"Dalroi. Any news of Zdenka?"

"Not a hope," said Brian Regis. "The boys are fighting shy. Rumour has it that you killed Harry Dever."

"I didn't," said Dalroi. "He was dead for hours before I got to him. Anyway, how does it happen that everybody's suddenly developed consciences?"

"I know how you feel," said Regis. "You're having a rough time. But you can't blame the boys for keeping their noses clean while the Black Knights are poking around."

"The Black Knights don't want me," said Dalroi. "I don't fool with stuff on that level."

"No? Seen the television lately. There's an appeal out for you and I don't think it's just to help the police with their enquiries. Sorry, Dalroi, but unless things cool off a bit you're strictly on your own. It seems as though you're a stranger in town."

"That was all I needed," said Dalroi bitterly. "God! If ever I catch up with the joker who set this up for me I'll start with the catalogue of Offences Against the Person and work right through the whole bloody list!"

"Can you let me have a room for the night?"

The bartender nodded. "You in trouble? I know a good lawyer who ... "

"Do me a favour!" said Dalroi. "The way my luck runs I'd need a whole ruddy army."

"I only thought ... "

"Don't," said Dalroi. "Thinking's a thankless occupation. It's bad for the brain and makes you a bad risk for life insurance."

"I see your point, Mister. I've a room out at the back. It has a good view of the best ways to get out in emergencies."

"You're a bright lad!" said Dalroi. "Anything else about it?"

"Only that you have to pay in advance."

On principle he objected to paying luxury hotel prices for a paintless, fly-spotted sweat-box, but the need for rest was imperative. There was the very possible risk that the bartender might turn him over to the police, but if he had the feel of the place correctly the bartender had every reason not to attract the police to the motel. The laughing couples who assembled in the evening had certainly not been man and wife, and the bitter smell of cepi narcotics lingered mustily in airless corners of the rooms. Even so, Dalroi was taking no chances.

He checked the lock and laid a twisted hairpin in the keyhole, a simple device to prevent the door being opened during the night. Then he cleaned and primed his gun, laid it within inches of his fingers, and settled down to sleep.

About dawn he was awakened by a sound he was half expecting. There was a slight scratch and rattle as somebody attempted to manipulate the lock. Gun in hand Dalroi stole to the door and gently pulled the hairpin from the keyhole. Moments later the door swung quietly open. Dalroi let the intruder enter, then struck once. A dull thud and the man slumped quietly into his arms. Dalroi dragged him to the bed and went expertly through his pockets.

Obviously a professional. Nothing in his pockets, no identity — not even a weapon. The latter fact intrigued Dalroi. An armed assassin he was ready for, but an unarmed man was something of a novelty. Despite an imperative instinct to get out fast Dalroi stayed, splashing water from a jug on the unconscious head until the man revived.

"Who the hell are you?" he asked dangerously.

The dark eyes opened in momentary terror as they focused on the gun, then his face twisted in a wry grin. Fine white teeth gleamed against dark skin.

"I am called Malmud the Strangler. Lord! But they warned me!"

Dalroi nudged the gun into the side of his temple. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to kill you."

"How did you know I was here?"

"The Black Knights always know where you are. You're something — special. They take good care of you."

"I hadn't noticed," said Dalroi cynically. "Why should they want to kill me?"

"They don't. They said you were indestructible. I thought I knew better."

Dalroi threw the gun on the bed. "Get up!"

The dark eyes regarded him curiously. "Why?"

"If you still fancy your luck, I'm giving you another chance. There's something I need to know."

"There's nothing personal in this," said Malmud warily. "Murder is my profession. Your demise was of purely academic interest."

"Not to me," said Dalroi.

Malmud sprang like a beast of prey, his hands transformed into snapping jaws of steel seeking Dalroi's neck. Dalroi stood stock-still until the last instant, then, with the closing of the stranglehold, he struck. It was a wild blow at an improbable angle, but as his arm moved something burst within his mind, a little gateway into hell, blinding his eyes with radiance. Then it was gone. He didn't need to look to know the damage he had done. Malmud was far across the room nursing his injured ribs and regarding his tormentor with more than ordinary fear.

"Would you like another demonstration?" asked Dalroi.

Painfully Malmud rose, backing warily against the wall.

Dalroi indicated the door. "Now get out! I don't know what sort of bloody run-around you're giving me, but if anyone thinks it'll stop me having a crack at Failway then they'll have to learn the hard way."

Malmud went, hugging his ribs and coughing spasmodically, leaving Dalroi staring at his own hands and trying to trace an image that lingered in his mind. For a moment he brought it into focus and the reaction made him sweat and tremble. Then he picked up his gun and went out into the early light.

His car was still in the woods where he had left it. Turning away from town, he headed for the open country. He needed time to think. There had been more violence and murder packed into the last few days than a man had a right to expect in a lifetime. The vicious circle of death and misfortune which had surrounded him was far too pat to be coincidence. Clearly his persecutors, whoever they might be, were keeping him on the run, allowing him no time even to breathe. The question was why — what was so special about Dalroi?

The strain was beginning to tell. He felt like a man trying to do a jigsaw puzzle on which his life depended and which was being broken up as fast as he fitted the pieces into place. Failway, Cronstadt, the police and the Black Knights were all mixed up in it somewhere. Idly he wondered if his mind was beginning to crack. Once, when he had woken in the ditch and again when he had struck at Malmud, unexpected and atrocious facets of his mind had opened up to reveal a hint of something so malicious and diabolical that his mind balked even at the memory.

He kept to the main highway at first, solely because speed permitted a separation of those cars which might be trailing him, from the rest of the traffic. A black Mercury stuck discreetly on his tail for fifty miles, to be replaced by a red Forrole which executed a neat changeover. The lack of finesse about this mode of surveillance was laughable. Dalroi hit the Salang Hairpin bends at closing to one hundred miles an hour with the sure knowledge that anybody who had not misspent precious juvenile years with a super-fast car on those very slopes would be unlikely to survive at only half the speed.

He was right. He swooped down the perilous cutting like a jet, knowing the precise angle for a skid-turn at speed. The Forrole tried to follow. Only the massive granite blocks of the parapet saved the wreckage from a three-hundred-foot no-return trip. Thereafter Dalroi had the fall-away to himself.

At the bottom he took the river road which hugged the cliff walls out of sight from the roads above. Scorching back over the dusty tracks he drew out on to the heath and stopped.

His car was black with a gloss which hinted of a recent spray. With the attack of his sharp knife the black layer stripped in a thin, continuous film which had only nominal adhesion to the base. In less than five

minutes the car stood clad only in the bright blue of the enamel underneath. He kicked the black film into a pile and watched it burn with a brief burst of fire.

The white walls from the tyres followed swiftly. The number plates reversed and the bumper overrides unclipped and were shot into the boot. A few more modifications and the car was not easily recognisable as the one which ten minutes before had driven on to the heath.

The suit and shirt he had obtained at the motel fitted his purpose well. He settled into the car and used the driving mirror to effect his disguise. Blond hair turned auburn and heavy grease slicked the untidy locks back against his skull. He found earrings such as the smart-set wore, and a gaudy tie which tied to the largest of all possible knots. His face tanned tomato-red as though from unwise exposure to the sun and he added freckles with a deft touch.

Now he was typical of a thousand such young men: the fading clique who gatecrashed teenage parties, those who refused to accept that adolescence was over and that the age of responsibility had begun. To complete the atmosphere he turned on the radio, seeking raw jazz to blast away at the empty silence.

Then he frowned, and the sweat on his brow nearly ruined the undry pigments. The harmonic ghost of a radio squealer insinuated itself into part of the broadcast band. So discreet was its placing that it would have passed unnoticed had he not himself been a master of the technique. Somebody had set a radio-marker on his car, and even now detectors would be plotting his position on an auto-map. Whoever was after him was sparing no expense.

The receiver was a powerful set, illegally modified to monitor the police and civil service transmissions as well as the normal broadcast bands. He started at one end of the tuning scales and worked right through systematically, tracing the harmonics back to the fundamental frequency. Soon he found it, the unmistakable self-resonance of a micro-wave capsule at close range.

It took him ten minutes to locate the transmitter. So cunningly was it contrived that without knowing of its existence he would not have known the mechanism for what it was. A small cylinder, no thicker than a pencil and not more than an inch in length, had been lodged in a cavity under the turbine feed-pump. He examined it curiously, damping the oscillations with a loop of wire. The pattern was new to him and he mentally saluted the unknown technicians for a fine technical achievement. Undoubtedly the transmissions had a range of several miles and the device had a useful life of perhaps a year. Magnetic clamps were provided to attach the tube quickly to a suitable metal surface.

Since the capsule signalled his immediate position it was imperative that he lose it fast. To have cracked open the tube would have betrayed its discovery; to have left it on the heath would have served no useful purpose.

He drove back to the highway, pulling up near the crossing where the great trucking routes joined the express road to the coast. A near collision resulted in the capsule being attached to the side of an express truck en route for distant places. He wondered idly just how long his persecutors would waste on that particular deception. For the first time in several days he began to chuckle. Somebody was going to pay heavily for putting him on the murder roundabout.

He spent the rest of the day piecing facts together in his mind, trying to trace the underlying pattern. The conclusions he reached were as chaotic as the chain of events on which they were based. Whichever way he analysed it the Black Knights had no place in the equation and there was more dirt attached to the Cronstadt committee than its tyrannical author would care to admit. In fact, the committee emerged as a decidedly suspect unit. This was a charge which only Cronstadt himself could answer fully.

SIX

In the commercial quarter, on the edge of the old town, the streets were quiet and overshadowed with the tall, deserted offices. At the marble portals of the Cronstadt Steel Corporation, Dalroi hesitated for a few seconds, then tried the doors silently. One swung open with spring loaded reluctance. A night-guard making tea in an alcove beneath the stairs received no hint that Dalroi had passed.

Rumour had it that Cronstadt never slept. Certainly Dalroi had never found an hour when the tyrannical man of steel was not in his office nursing some white fury at the stupidity of the world. Dalroi knocked quietly and pushed open the door. He entered to find a heavy Service radiation pistol centred on his chest.

"Who the devil are you?" asked Cronstadt from behind the pistol.

Dalroi moved further into the light. "Remember me?"

The baron studied the disguise for a long second. "Dalroi, yes, I didn't recognise you." The pistol returned to the niche in the desk. "I was not expecting you just now."

"Being expected," said Dalroi sourly, "is a luxury I can do without. I appear to have been elected target practice for every murderous thug for a pretty fair radius."

"You knew it was dangerous when you took on the job."

"I'm not speaking of natural chances. I speak in the capacity of a full fledged sitting duck. I am anticipated whichever way I turn."

"You spoke to Madden?" asked Cronstadt impatiently. "How did he react?"

"Twisted," said Dalroi. "Like everything else about this affair. He tried to bribe me and then set an assassin to follow me. I lost two good friends in that episode. Somebody's going to pay for that mistake."

"Curious," said Cronstadt. "I thought Madden was the one Failway contact who might be persuaded to reason."

"That's the way I saw it too."

Dalroi got up and paced the office thoughtfully. The walls were shimmering with tri-di murals of the great north forests, lending the impression that the room was an isolated island in a world of cold and conifer. Symbolically the woods mirrored Cronstadt the man: frigid, inaccessible, demanding. Then the tri-di shimmered and dissolved with the inscrutable complexity of the art, and suddenly Dalroi was staring into the blinding white-heat of a blast furnace, mentally reeling in the face of the streaming fury of boiling steel cascading into some unnoticed ladle. Instinctively he stepped back as if to escape the jaws of hell.

"Effective, isn't it?" asked Cronstadt, his finger still on the button.

Dalroi nodded. The symbolism was not wasted on him. "For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory ... !"

"What's that?"

"Skip it!" said Dalroi. "It seems you don't know me very well. I'm a lone wolf in all things and whereas I can stand a little cooperation I don't take kindly to being thrown to the wolves. Try it once more and I'll hit you so hard they'll have to fetch you out of orbit to bury you."

Cronstadt recovered his composure. "For a nobody, Dalroi, you have remarkably big ideas."

"And for a rich man, Cronstadt, you have a remarkable tendency to confuse yourself with God."

Cronstadt inhaled sharply, then his face broadened into a slight, slow smile. "It seems we begin to understand each other. I see how you gained your reputation."

"And I, how you lost yours."

"Touché! You choose your associates with care."

"I have to," said Dalroi sourly. "They all carry knives and I've a very broad back. Now I want to know what the hell is going on. I joined you in good faith for a fight with Failway. Since then I've tangled with nearly everyone who has a gun or a brickbat and a general grudge against humanity. You're giving me the bloody run-around and I want to know why. Start talking."

Cronstadt inspected his nails closely. "You think I'm responsible?"

"I know you are. I was baptised under the shadow of the mighty double-cross. Ask your friend Gormalu about our last interview. What was your purpose in hiring me for a twisted, two-faced assignment like this?"

"Some people hire technicians and advisers: we hire fanatics — they have a single-mindedness which begets results. You were picked because you have the disruptive and demoralising talents which we need."

"Who is 'we'? Your bogus committee?"

Cronstadt opened a desk drawer, withdrew a chess-piece and stood it on the table. "Does that answer your question?"

"Not quite," said Dalroi. "I've got the wrong shaped head to make a convincing Trojan-horse. I'm getting the hell out to fight a private war on my own."

"You're too late," said Cronstadt gently. "Too late and much too valuable. We couldn't let you go now if we wanted to. Anyway, it doesn't matter. The die is already cast. We've big things planned for you."

"Such as a marble slab?"

"If necessary, but I don't think we shall need it. You seem to possess a high degree of immunity against ordinary murder and an innate capacity for violent destruction. Those are most useful assets for someone who is intended to take on Failway almost single handed."

"Do me a favour!" said Dalroi. "All this power-play has addled your brain. Sure I'm tough. You have to be tough to stay self-respecting down in the river area, but there's another hundred thousand just as tough playing the rackets or doing time on the Moor."

"I wonder," said Cronstadt quietly. He twisted round suddenly. Something flashed from his hand, glinting in the dim light — a sharp knife, curving.

Dalroi moved sideways with instant reaction, scarcely aware of how he moved or why. One instant he was leaning on the desk, the next he was standing bewildered with the knife he had caught still trembling in his fingers, the blade buried in his sleeve. But for his action the blade would have been buried in his heart. The wrath surged upon him like a runaway train-load of white-hot coals. With an uncontrollable

madness he sprang towards Cronstadt intent on wreaking terrible vengeance.

The baron offered no resistance. He stood perfectly still, smiling very slightly, looking Dalroi straight in the eyes. Had he done otherwise he would have been torn limb from limb. The unexpectedness of his composure robbed Dalroi of the blind anger, robbed him even of words.

Dalroi swayed uncertainly, peering once again into the blazing chasm which had opened momentarily in his mind. As the angry gulf closed down he found he was trembling from head to foot, his stomach knotted with the fearful implications.

"Lord!" he said. "Don't you ever try a trick like that again if you want to stay alive."

"That was by way of demonstration." Sweat stood out on Cronstadt's brow. "How many of your hundred thousand could catch an unexpected knife in mid-flight? Have you any idea of the reaction speed needed to do just that?"

"You knew I'd stop it," said Dalroi accusingly. "How?"

"Because we looked a long time for somebody with just that sort of talent. If you look long enough you can find somebody with a flair for anything. Your speciality appears to be staying violently alive. I would go so far as to say you're something of a genius at it."

"I manage to get by," said Dalroi sourly. "But let's get this straight. I contracted into this as one of a team. What's this single-handed idea?"

"Think what we're trying to do with Failway. It's as big as the government and it isn't limited by the same niceties of means and morality. If the government declared war on Failway there wouldn't be any government by morning. Yet somebody's got to chop Failway back to size, somebody more terrible than the most ruthless opposition."

"We should have done it years ago," said Dalroi.

"Years ago, yes, but we didn't see the danger until too late. Now there is no civilised course of action left to take. Failway maintains a staff of around five hundred thousand souls, most of whom are virtually slaves, and the visitors average about four million. With that many potential hostages not even the Black Knights dare make an overt move of war. Failway is a dictatorship which wouldn't hesitate at mass murder if it helped to maintain its hold. It's the most savage and bloody-minded piece of blackmail in the history of the human race."

"You don't have to tell me," said Dalroi. "Failway grows like a malignant cancer, feeding on the very filth and degradation which it breeds. You can't remove such barbarous poisons with good intentions and prayers; you have to take up a knife and hack out the rotting flesh, losing the limb if necessary, cauterising the wound with red-hot iron and cooling the iron with tears of pain. Barbarity must match barbarity, cruelty match cruelty; a dozen eyes for an eye and a hundred lives for a limb."

"Very true," said Cronstadt, "but do you appreciate the strategy needed for such a task? To send an army or even a team into Failway would result in the most unholy slaughter of thousands if not millions of innocent people. If Failway can be broken it can only be by one man who can't be touched by force or guile, fear or pity; one man whose frenzy is such that he could bear a million murders on his conscience without snapping; a man whose terrible thirst for vengeance would lead him on where even dedicated madmen fear to tread."

"And I take it that I've been elected?"

"Just so. It had to be. somebody tough and somebody who was not afraid to kill; it had to be somebody with a passionate and relentless hatred of Failway and with a mind strong enough not to burn out under the strain: and primarily it had to be somebody whose innate capacity and ruthless determination to survive transcended all other emotions. We needed an indestructible and highly intelligent gutter-rat. It turned out to be you."

"Suppose I don't choose to be a bloody martyr?"

"You have no choice. We aren't fools, Dalroi. Either Failway goes under or we do, taking the remnants of our type of civilisation with us. Nobody ever supposed you'd choose to take on the job. I merely put it to you that you don't have any alternative. Failway's already after your guts, we've made sure of that. We've told them just how dangerous you are. Now you either fight Failway with our support or you fight them without."

"Fiends in Hell!" said Dalroi. "What kind of proposition do you call that?"

"Unanswerable. You have no option but to tackle Failway. You don't know it, Dalroi, but right now you're the most dangerous man in the world."

"My God!" said Dalroi, his voice tinged with immeasurable bitterness. "My God, I'll give you cause to regret this hour!"

Cronstadt studied him intently, a frown of puzzlement on his brow. "What do you mean by that?"

"Only this," said Dalroi. "I don't know what you've got set up for me, but if I survive I'll make you a promise — that each of you concerned with this act will die by my own hand. And God forgive the bitterness that lies within me."

Merely words, yet words impregnated with such intensity and hatred that the fiery murals suddenly seemed grossly opaque and sterile in the face of such crushing emotion.

Dalroi, with a face of terrible thunder, turned slowly on his heel and left the room, and the sound of the door as it slammed behind him shook the silence of the great building like the firing of a cannon.

SEVEN

Alone again, Cronstadt punched a button on the communicator.

"Central Security. I want the Monitor of the Black Knights."

"You're already connected. We had a tap on your communicator. This is the Monitor speaking."

"Thank God! Did you hear that conversation?"

"Every word. Frankly you're lucky to be alive. I'd no idea Dalroi had managed to get through to you. That boy's dynamite!"

"More than dynamite," said Cronstadt. "He's one of the Devil's own. We may have contrived a great deal more trouble than we're capable of handling."

"If it'll make you rest easier," said the Monitor, "it was only a matter of time before Dalroi and Failway came to grips anyway. We're merely catalysing the process by pushing Dalroi to the limits of endurance. At some point, in order to survive, he will have to tap the energies of the deep brain. At that moment he will cease to be strictly human and become ... something else. If he goes through that point still rational

then I think we shall achieve our object. After that we shall have to salvage anything we can or kill anything we can't."

"It's a frightful thing," said Cronstadt, "to use a man as a weapon — especially this sort of a weapon. How much untapped power is there in his mind?"

"We don't know, but it's plenty. The dark side of Dalroi's mind is a region of activity such as we have never met before. His breakthrough will be a mental Hiroshima. No one can say what the ultimate consequences may be — for him or for us."

"I'm afraid," said Cronstadt, "in case even we've underestimated him. He's the greatest potential source of death and destruction that PsychoStat has ever seen. He's got a mind like a blast furnace and he belongs to that order of evolution in which the instinct for survival is paramount and undiluted. We're opening a new sort of Pandora's box. I wonder if any of us is big enough to get it closed again."

Dalroi walked. The night streets were deserted and the noise of the craft on the river blended loud and clear with the rattle of couplings from the railway yards. Very, very slowly the white heat of anger faded to a grim determination coupled with genuine bewilderment. In a few frantic days his world had collapsed about his head. He was a marked man, and his thousands of friends and contacts were suddenly strangers or enemies. In the whole of the grey, raw town which had been his home there was not one sanctuary where he could turn for refuge, nor one person he could trust.

But this realisation, though appalling, was not the factor which generated the deepest, most penetrating bitterness. He appreciated the complexity of the trap, but why was the whole world gunning for Dalroi? How does a man become so special that you set him up alone against any army and shadow him with another army to ensure that he does not default? Dalroi looked up at the patchy, patient stars and thought of the immeasurable wastes of the cosmos. A profound emptiness clawed within him. Hell! How does a man become the most dangerous man in the world and how does he prove it with nothing but two hands and a heart full of vengeance?

The tension was rising in the city. He could feel it plainly now. The canny burghers, ears to the ground, knew it also. The streets were strangely deserted. Since leaving Cronstadt the shadows had been following him, invisible except to the sixth-sense of the hunted. This was undoubtedly the work of a highly trained group of agents and suggested the refinements of the Black Knights rather than the cruder tactics of Failway Security. Whoever the shadows, they had radio control, for the ring was closing round him even as he walked. He could almost catch the whispered orders in the air.

As he came to a crossing a police patrol car came out of a turning opposite. The car drew rapidly to a halt and the searchlight swung back and locked on him. Dalroi knew better than to attempt to run in such a situation. His disguise would have to suffice.

"Attention, please! You are advised to return home or hurry to your nearest place of shelter. This area is liable to become the centre of violent civil disorder."

"What's the matter?" said Dalroi. "Don't tell me tonight's the night the teddy-bears have their picnic?"

There was a brief commotion within the car and Inspector Quentain hurled himself out on to the pavement.

"Dalroi! One day that sense of humour's going to hang you!"

"Good guessing, Quent," said Dalroi. "But how does it happen that you're riding around in patrol cars? Don't tell me you've run out of traffic jams?"

"This is no joke, Dalroi. I've been looking for you since God knows when. We've got to get you out of here. There's a bloody war about to start and you're right at dead centre."

Dalroi glanced back at the apparently deserted streets behind. Only the faintest chink of metal on metal somewhere in the darkness betrayed the phantom army at his heels.

"You could be right at that," he said. "Thanks for trying, Quent, but if I was to enter your car I doubt if any of us would get to the next corner alive. Heaven knows I'm no bloody hero, but I'm going to sweat this one out because there has to be some sense in it somewhere and I need to know what it is."

"Look, Dalroi, I haven't got time to explain, but you're in something diabolical and you're in it deep. For pity's sake climb into that car and we'll take it out through hell if necessary."

"It would be necessary," said Dalroi quietly. "Thanks, Quent, but if you really want to do me a favour find out what happened to Zdenka and see she's in no danger. Where I'm going I may be a long time coming back."

He stood well back from the car so that the unseen watchers might not mistake his intention. Quentain paused as if to make a last appeal, then changed his mind. The car took off like a bat escaped from Hades.

It had scarcely cleared the corner before Dalroi was flat on his face, hugging the ground as a hail of bullets erupted from somewhere in front of him. Then all hell broke loose. Shots crashed from all sides and for a period the street was almost continuously alight with the flashes from heavy-calibre automatics. A light machine gun opened up and sprayed mercilessly around the surrounding buildings. Dalroi bit his lip and played possum.

There was an intensity and bitterness about the fray which was quite unlike the gang-wars of his youth. This was battle for high stakes, with no quarter asked or given. Desperation was driven home with heated lead and errors of judgement were paid for with living blood. The air grew thick with acrid fumes and Dalroi was just considering his next move when the angry crossfire lessened. He never stood a chance. Something like a rifle butt stove down on his unprotected neck and the blaze of lights in his brain eclipsed the erratic flashes of the waning battle.

He awoke in Peter Madden's office with a head which threatened to explode and a predisposition to murder which was restrained only by the tightness of his bonds. Madden was awaiting his recovery with interest.

"Allow me to introduce myself," he said. "The name you already know. The position is Chief of Failway Security."

"Bit of a change from Public Relations," said Dalroi critically.

Madden smiled. "Not when you consider the attitude of some of our public. I must apologise if we bungled your entrance, Dalroi, but we hadn't anticipated so formidable a bodyguard. The Black Knights guard you well. Confidentially, you've caused us a whole lot of trouble. You're a sight too clever by half."

"As a professional trouble-maker I have to be. I live by taking advantage of what other people overlook."

"A tenuous existence," said Madden, fingering a radiation pistol on the desk. "What happens when your adversary has all the angles covered?"

"I get almighty mad," said Dalroi. "Why is the whole world gunning for me?"

Madden looked at him curiously. "I really think you don't know! Briefly, Failway has more to fear from you than from all the rest of our enemies put together. That's why you must be disposed of without undue delay, and this time I do have all the angles covered. If it's any consolation I'd like to say I wish it didn't have to be you."

"Don't bother," said Dalroi. "I hate platitudes."

The telephone rang and Madden listened impatiently. Then he slammed down the receiver, cast a critical eye over Dalroi's bonds and left the office by a rear door.

Minutes later the lights went out. Dalroi wondered about this but could attach no significance to the fact, nor did it offer him any advantage. The plastic thonging about his limbs gripped like bands of steel, leaving him helpless and immobile. Soon he thought he heard a sound in the darkness, as of a door opening and closing. He strained his eyes in the dim moonlight filtering through closed Venetian blinds and his flesh began to crawl as he made out a shadowy figure advancing across the room, something metallic glittering in his hand.

"Who are you?" asked Dalroi, quelling the fear which rose in his voice.

Abruptly a hand clamped over his mouth. "Malmud," hissed a voice in his ear. "Make no sound, Dalroi. You're in a tight spot."

The steel instrument snickered in the darkness and he felt the pressure of the bonds relax. In a few seconds he was free and able to stand.

"Thanks!" breathed Dalroi. "Perhaps I can do the same for you one day."

"I'm counting on it," said Malmud softly. "Have you got a gun?"

"No, Madden took mine."

"Then take this." The broad butt of a radiation pistol was thrust into his palm. "From now on you're on your own. Don't try to follow."

Then he was gone. With a slight click the door opened and closed. Dalroi checked the safety trip and thrust the radiation pistol into his pocket, counted ten, and then he too left the office.

From memory he knew he was in the broad corridor, one end of which led down to the reception area. The corridor itself was dark, but where it joined the stairs an atomic safety-lamp gave forth a patch of dim blue fluorescence sufficient to give him orientation. Dalroi turned away from the light and headed into the unknown darkness, touching the walls and doors soundlessly with his fingertips to maintain direction. At fifty yards or so another corridor ran at right-angles to the first, and this he also traversed, attracted by the deep power-hum conducted through the walls.

He guessed the direction in which he was heading was taking him deeper into Failway, and, at this level, he should soon strike the vast hall from which the transfinite shuttles started. His fingers contacted a heavy, insulated door which he reasoned must lead into the great hall. Then the lights came on and an alarm bell began ringing in the corridor behind him. Men were running up the corridor he had recently left. Soon they would be at the corner ... He opened the insulated door quietly and slipped into the loud warmth beyond.

He found himself not at floor level as he had supposed, but on the great balcony surrounding the hall. Huge lamps overhead flooded the whole area with a light as bright as day and the hall, nearly a mile in length and a quarter of a mile across, lost its far end in the blue mistiness of a light, smoky haze.

Directly below, on the floor of the hall, was the network of narrow-gauge railway lines which guided the rapid bogies of the Failway shuttle capsules from the assembly bays into the gigantic polarising matrix-field assembly and then on down the gradient chute where the capsules left their bogies and passed into transfinite space. There were no passengers at this hour, but a heavy traffic of service shuttles rocketed down the fine carrying stores and liquefied gases. Equally busy was the inspace route where the returning capsules leaped into existence above the slide and were synchronised deftly with electro-magnetic bogies and brought to a frantic halt to discharge the unwanted debris of six pleasure-hungry outworld levels. Above and behind him was the control room where the matrix programmers balanced the transfinite fields which deftly plucked a capsule out of one actuality and centred it on another.

At the balcony's edge, a flight of stairs led down the hundred-odd yards to the floor of the hall. Dalroi moved along the wall until he was in line with the stair head, then sauntered unconcernedly across the balcony ignoring any eyes watching his back. He was halfway down the seemingly interminable flights of stairs before he noticed the TV pickups on the under-side of every flight watching every move he made.

Somewhere a whistle shrilled, and a knot of men drew out from a further bay and ran towards his point of descent. Dalroi estimated speeds and positions silently, vaulted the rail and dropped the last twenty-two feet straight down the centre wall. He landed like a coiled spring and immediately made towards the rail-tracks, leaping the narrow-gauge lines and synchronising his movements to avoid the capsules speeding towards outspace. Then turning between the sets of lines and heedless of the hurtling traffic passing close to either shoulder, he sped down the hall towards the matrix polariser and the chute.

EIGHT

He began to doubt the wisdom of the action even as he started to run. The outspace capsules reached two hundred miles an hour on a carefully determined path through the matrix polariser. What would happen to a man who passed through the polariser at a stumbling run? Nothing perhaps, or perhaps twisting electrocution? The gradient chute lay beyond, where the giant electrodes drained the potential out of the speeding capsules and dropped them into lower energy universes. Would a man burn-out without the shielding of a capsule or would he be fired unprotected into some airless, theoretical void?

The matrix polariser was a wide tunnel, the walls of which were composed of the counterpoised coils and edgewise laminations which induced the polarising fields to affect the molecular orientation of the capsules and their contents before they hit the potential gradient. Without pausing in his pace he threw himself into the tunnel and was mildly surprised to feel no difference in thought or activity. It struck him that the fields might not be activated unless programmed for the passage of a capsule. If he could clear the tunnel before the next capsule came through he had a miniscule chance of staying alive.

A glance over his shoulder charged him with frenzied activity. Two capsules, borne by frantic, accelerating bogies, were speeding up behind him, one on either side. With the best of superhuman effort it was doubtful if he could clear the polarising coils before one capsule, at least, activated the field. He sprang wildly, almost snatching at the air to help his progress. Five steps more ... now two ...

Foimp! Something caught him by the heels and hurled him into the air like a rag doll tossed by a puppy. *Foimp!* A second twisting bolt of energy knocked the breath from his body and threw him outward over the chute. Then he was falling, tumbling and bumping down a concrete gradient of one in three, brushing monstrous high-voltage insulator stacks and avoiding E.H.T. lines by a burst of blind, inspired hopelessness. He clutched at a metal stanchion to break his fall, missed a handhold by a fraction of an inch and fell sideways across the track. As he did so the speeding blur of a capsule topped the chute and began to descend upon him.

He had no chance to move. Like some gigantic super-bullet the capsule fell, projected by its own inertia as the bogies checked magnetically on the slope. The fantastic projectile, travelling on unseen wings, weighed down to crush him where he sprawled. Then it was gone, snatched into the realms of transfinity a few scant yards from his body. The implosion was the air rushing in to fill the void left by the disappearing capsule. It sucked the air from his lungs and threw him down again to sprawl among springs and buffers at the bottom of the chute. The bogies checked to a halt only half a yard behind him.

He lay for a full half minute exploring the bumps and abrasions on his body. Surprisingly, nothing seemed to be broken and he limped painfully to his feet and explored his position. He was at the foot of the Failway gradient chute, in a concrete pit perhaps fifty feet below the level of the hall. The rear wall was a sheer height of concrete and in one corner a small, greasy service-door gave access to the space beyond.

The door was locked, but this was no time for finesse. The radiation pistol was still in his pocket. He narrowed the beam to a hairline shaft and applied it round the lock, wincing as the moisture in the wood turned to superheated steam and threw out a blast of burning fibrous wood streamers into his face and eyes.

A savage kick and the door gave way. Above and behind him two more capsules burst into transfinity, but the pace was slowing as they cleared the hall for the security men to come in and get him. The little room he entered was full of lubricating equipment, pressure-greasing guns and tanks of hydraulic oil. He paused to open as many oil taps as he could find, and the room was filling with a light oil-fog from the sprays when he fired the radiation pistol and departed through the further door.

The result was more nearly an explosion than a fire. The burning oil gushed out into the corridor behind him, unhampered by the effects of the carbon-dioxide injection system which quickly smothered the fire at its original source. The free oil burning in the passage was an unexpected bonus to his original intention to seal the route behind him.

Ahead a bell was ringing as a flame detector sensed the fire and prepared to close a fire-shutter across the corridor. Dalroi jammed the shutter with a fire axe and leaped clear of the advancing tide of fire which followed hungrily at his heels into the crowded emptiness of a sleeping toolroom.

Chaos is a weapon seldom employed to full advantage: to a professional trouble-maker like Dalroi it was a technique worthy of the fullest exploitation. The wings of panic could carry him out of his present predicament whereas an air of pervading calm would see him set in concrete at the bed of the river, one of the inverse statues of the men who didn't quite make out.

On the wall he found a telephone and dialled the emergency number, warily watching the flames spreading towards him through the machine-tool jungle. "Fire!" he screamed. "The whole damn place is burning!"

"Don't panic!" said the operator. "Give me your location."

He left the receiver dangling on its cord and headed down the shop. A bolt from his radiation pistol cut another fire-alarm into action. In the welding section he opened the cock of an oxygen bottle and savagely rolled the shrieking cylinder back into the advancing sea of fire.

Another door and he was out into one of the broad intersecting gangways which laced the Failway terminus. He propped the door open to encourage the inferno at his heels.

"Fire!" he shouted. "Fire!" and began to run like a madman. Somebody looked hastily out of a doorway ahead.

"Fire!" shouted Dalroi. "Get the hell out of here but for Gossake don't panic!"

The man, who had no intention of panicking, was caught off balance by Dalroi's petulant semblance of fear. He shouted something to some others in the room and then rushed madly in Dalroi's wake. Others joined him, needing only the evidence of their noses to convince them of the wisest course of action. As if to verify their fears, a speaker cut in with directions for the assembly of a fire-fighting crew.

Dalroi let the others gain on him, deliberately inciting panic with a frenzied insistence to calm. Once, he stopped dead and caused a collision. Nothing disarms a frightened man like heavy physical contact. A violent scuffle ensued in which the fear rose to fever pitch and survival reactions reared an ugly head. Then the fear-laden carnival met the fire crew doubling in the opposite direction.

"Too late!" screamed Dalroi. "Get the hell out! Nobody's paying you to burn!"

If the fire crew were unconvinced, the hysterical mass of humanity which hit them at running speed did much to affect the issue. The only man who stayed did so because the stampede had trampled him underfoot. Herd instinct replaced individual judgement and Dalroi was now riding a tide of terror which nothing could stop.

The mob snowballed. In a frenzy of screaming hysteria, the wild stampede swept down the gangway, crashed the unyielding panic-bolts and splintered the doors to fragments as it spilled out into the night.

"Don't move!" The command, urgent and imperative, was blasted across the intervening space from a battery of hailers at the gate. At the same moment the floodlights came on, flooding the walls with light and blinding the bewildered men who fought their way out of the door.

The area between the building and the outer fence was swarming with cars deploying the black-uniformed men of Failway Security. Dalroi's heart sank. The enemy had divined his intention and ranged their forces across his path. This was battle.

"Don't move!" ordered the speaker again. "There is a murderer among you. Spread out along the wall with your hands on your heads. Security ... "

The hailers erupted fire as Dalroi cut into them with the radiation pistol and two flood-lamps spewed hot debris into the road. He dodged back into the doorway, seeking a way of escape. His luck faded. Six bodies hit him simultaneously before he could turn. The radiation pistol went flying and he staggered backward as somebody took his feet from under him. As he crashed to the ground the others piled on top, battling furiously to pinion him while he was down. Frenziedly he kicked two of them off, fighting with the skill and strength of a demon. He might even have won free, but the holds relaxed suddenly and he climbed up to stare into the warm, blued muzzle of a radiation pistol.

"Now let's go back to the beginning and start again," said Peter Madden grimly. "This is getting to be a little wearing."

Dalroi spat. "One day I shall probably turn you inside out."

"I don't think so," said Madden. "Not where you're going. Now move!"

Dalroi went reluctantly in the direction indicated and Madden followed at a cautious distance with his pistol covering Dalroi's spine. They worked up to the floor of the main hall to where the shuttles started on the outspace route. A bogie was signalled to the ramp.

"Get on!" said Madden. "You're going on a trip."

"Without a shuttle capsule. You're crazy!"

Madden shrugged. "Either you go that way or I'll burn you where you stand. And don't think I wouldn't." His finger tightened on the pistol meaningfully.

Dalroi looked at the vehicle: a bare chassis straddled with girders overhanging the four wickedly-powerful motors of the drive. A man could stay on that providing the acceleration was not too great and that he had rubber bones. He stood stock-still, his brain racing to find a way out of the situation. "Where to?" he asked at last.

Madden laughed shortly. "What the hell do you want, an itinerary? We've scrambled the field-tuners and unbalanced the matrix coils. I can promise you a destination somewhere between here and infinity. More than that I don't care to think about. One thing's for certain: you're never going to return. Now do you ride or fry?"

This time Dalroi had no way out. Every trick in his repertoire was nullified by the pistol on his spine. He stepped on to the bogie, laid himself across the girders and secured a firm handhold.

"I'll see you in hell," he said.

It wasn't only motion, it was murder. Cushioned in deep foam plastic, the passengers in the capsules scarcely felt the raw acceleration. Dalroi felt it threaten to dislocate his arms as his body slid backward over the awkward steel. The minimal damping of the chassis transmitted a bruising vibration to every point of contact and the hypnotic effect of sweeping down the mile-long track at close to two hundred miles an hour, and a low angle of view, brought cold sweat to his brow.

But those were the least of his troubles. The nickel-copper laminated hulls of the passenger capsules had a very precise function — that of protecting the occupants against the physical and mental hostilities of the transfinite field. They were virtually spaceships in miniature, with self-contained atmosphere, light and heat, and designed to withstand all of the multi-million changes of super-physical environment which transfinite travel involved. The twisting disproportionality of the area beyond physics was normally minimised to a vague nausea by the squirrel-cage electrodes in the hull and the careful use of anti-hallucinogen drugs. Dalroi had neither of these. He was heading unprotected into regions antagonistic to both body and sanity, to arrive, perhaps, at some unguessable destination from which he had no possible means of return.

Like a crude, iron arrow, the bogie hurtled down the track heading for the matrix polarising tunnel. In a fragmentary burst of anguish he considered throwing himself from the bogie, but that meant certain injury, if not death. Outspace there was one chance in infinity squared that he would not die. Then he hit the polarising field and the shattered circuits which once were nerves twisted his body into knots in the milliseconds before he was flung over the gradient chute. The bogie checked on the rim and dropped down the falling rails, but Dalroi, projected by his own momentum, flew like a wounded sparrow in a hideous, tortured arc between the grim electrodes. Despite his iron nerve a scream rose in his throat. It was still on his lips when he passed in to the realms of transfinite space.

NINE

He was disintegrated, disunited, yet functioning, curiously, as a whole. He fell from level to level of the unendurable cosmos of transfinite space, finding a brief cohesion of his individual molecules only to experience his own re-dissolution with an instantaneous pulse. Around him the hellish suns and unbelievable vortexes of transfinity shifted and phased in a terrible kaleidoscope of new geometries and unknown colours.

His dissembled senses were unequal to the task of handling the phenomena; they blocked, substituted and mis-registered in an insane attempt to reduce the welter of unhandleable data to resolvable terms. The effect was chaotic. The vacuum and pressure, tearing at his flesh, tasted of pure, sweet lemon, and excited, vibrant peals of sound burned like shafts of heated steel in his nostrils. Colours never known in the spectrum compressed their weird emotions into fantastic words throbbing with a new approach to rhythm.

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ori-ori-FUM

The taste of his cheek on his tongue was a couch of nettles and barbed talons of light raked his flesh with blunt, impressionless styli.

SIC orIFUM Nooore caminorieFUM ! ! dit dit dit

He screamed, and the sound reverberated in patterns of purple and choking ammonia —

DATADA did dit dit DATADA

— leaving weals of pain across his soul.

Yet throughout his transposition something remained intact in the storm-driven hail of molecules which was Ivan Dalroi. More terrible than the hideous, shifting byplay of the dissolving levels of infinity was the terrifying cauldron which was deep-sealed in Dalroi's mind; a blast of raw energy, furious and fatal, which clung to his quivering body with an overriding possessiveness. It was the seed of the life-force, unquenchable fire, the indestructible thing which lived in the dark side of the mind, determined above all things to preserve its host. It took control of his mind and then his body, fighting the elements of transfinity which racked the hulk, and, though he took more punishment than his body was designed to take, it would not let him die.

He was drawn into a giant vortex, a swirling plasma-drift like a complex nebula of twisting luminosity; spiralling down an incredible cone with ever increasing rapidity, twisting and tumbling, caught helpless in the draught of some unseen, unfelt wind blowing from nowhere into nowhere. The nightmare speeded, pulsing with some vibrant waveform, spinning him endlessly, crushing his disjointed senses with senseless rhythms of light and pain.

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He was riding a broad wave-front through infinity, scattering galaxies of shrieking stars with a red-tinged shock wave. He was plunging into a hideous coal-sack, scraping perilous, constricting walls of sound, plummeting down a nightmare channel of heat and the green of soft spring grass. Into the coal-sack ... nothingness ... nothingness raised to the infinite power of infinity ... nothingness so empty that even the quality of darkness was absent.

Time passed. A whimper drew his mind out from the suffocating veils of absolute nil, the sound of a human voice. Only after a dozen such sounds did he realise the crying was his own. He opened his eyes, and the action spun him with nausea. The movement had stopped and he was at his destination. After a while he stood, surprised to find that his body still answered to the ragged nerve.

He was in the centre of an immense golden web. Under his feet a disc of golden luminescence, perhaps a metre in diameter, formed a precarious hub of some fantastic system of radial strands which were crossed at intervals by roughly concentric rings. But it was the scale of the thing which brought Dalroi back to his knees. Looking out in all directions across the surface of the slightly undulating web he

estimated he could see for roughly twenty miles before his sense of perspective turned traitor. Above and below, tinged with eternally shifting colours — was nothing at all, vast unimaginable and unendurable nothing.

Not believing his senses Dalroi instinctively turned his concentration inward to himself, refusing to accept the evidence of his eyes. He worked outward from basics, knowing that his sanity depended upon the rationality of his answers. *I think, therefore I am alive; I'm kneeling, therefore I have a body. Good, so far! Now where am I? Answer: in a giant web, nothing above, nothing below. Simply a web of gold stretched across a limitless space. But a web must have a beginning, an end, and a purpose. Or must it? Does everything have a purpose? What about the sphere with nothing inside and the inverse of nothing outside? When you jump outside of your own physics what do you use for reference points?*

All right, use physics as a basis. There is light, because I can see. Ah, yes! And gravity also. Not much, but sufficient for orientation. Good! Now, a web that is subject to gravity must be restrained from falling. How? Obviously the radial beams must be tethered at the other end.

Dalroi shrugged off the multitude of imponderables which bludgeoned his mind, chose an arbitrary radial strand, and began to follow it. The easiest method of locomotion was to step from strand to strand of the circular component of the web, like sleeper-hopping on a railway. The web was slightly resilient and his motion caused dramatic undulations to spread out in complex waveforms across the luminescent, patterned waste. The light gravity conserved his energy, and with easy synchronised leaps he began to clear two or three strands at a stride.

Four hours later the pattern began to change. The radial strands had diverged until, apart from the one he was following, no others had been visible for nearly an hour. Now a new convergence was beginning, and despite the fact that he was tiring rapidly, hope quickened his efforts. He was stumbling now, occasionally missing strands, and plunging through the web up to his groin. Anxiously he strained his eyes ahead, but the shifting golden radiance deceived the eyes and he was reluctant to place too much faith on visual evidence. And all round him the great Featureless emptiness shifted strange coloured harmonies on a background of nothingness.

Then he reached the point where the radial strands converged. In the centre was a disc of golden luminescence perhaps a metre in diameter. No end, no way out; only the centre of another hideous web. A cloud of bitterness and futility settled over him.

He was still trying to figure out the geometry by which divergent straight lines returned to a new point of focus when he noticed something on the surface of the central disc which threw him into near hysteria. Faint footmarks, as from a dusty sole, started from the centre and went off in the opposite direction. He had no need to check to know they were his own. He was back where he started!

This took a little thought. Had the web been a sphere its curvature would have been obvious; but it was not, it was a plane. Either he was traversing some dimension the existence of which he was unable to comprehend, or else Euclidian geometry did not apply to this atrocious place.

But if the shortest distance between point A and point A is a straight line, how do you go from point A to point B? This sort of debate could take a long time, and time was growing scarce. Food he could do without for a while, but water — Hell! He could not go long without water. He had to get out fast or go quietly crazy with thirst, chasing mirages round a golden web like an insane spider after imaginary flies. He had to get out fast or not get out at all.

If walking in a straight line fetches you back to your point of origin what happens if you walk in circles?

He chose a circular strand a few yards out and walked round it experimentally, feeling rather foolish when his trip placed him back at the beginning of the circle. But was it the beginning of the same circle? He inspected the golden hub and began to wonder. His slight footmarks were no longer visible.

Placing a coin on the hub he repeated the experiment, watching carefully. At the last step of the journey the penny disappeared. He was near a hub, but not the same hub! He could now traverse from point A to point B except that there was nothing to choose between them. A few more times round the perimeter convinced him that there never would be any difference between them. What else to try? A parabolic curve, perhaps, or a progressive spiral? Given a few years and enough paper he could construct a reasonable non-Euclidian geometry for this place. But he had not got a few years. His life expectancy on the web was measurable in days, and the last hours would be anything but happy.

Ombudsman Walter Rhodes kicked the stool until it smashed against the wall. Time was when the office of Ombudsman had been a straight fight between his small legal and administrative staff on the one hand and the forces of officialdom on the other; but the post had changed with the changing world and now he needed a private army of thirty-five dedicated men to challenge the organised graft and guile in high places and to penetrate the black wall of official secrecy. As of now his task-force had been reduced to thirty men. Of the other five, two were missing, two were in gaol, held incommunicado, and the other was dead. Officialdom, organised business, and plain malicious circumstance had taken a fatal swipe at the champions of the individual, and all that Walter Rhodes could do to relieve his anger was to smash the heavy, resinated pine-wood stool.

After a while his customary composure returned and he reached for the communicator.

"Get me the Chief Commissioner, person to person, visual as well."

The screen cleared slowly as the connection was made, and Van't Sellig's irritable, balding head came into view.

"Ah, yes! Ombudsman Rhodes. I was expecting you to call."

"I'll bet you were, Fritz! I've received your file on Dalroi. I think you have some explaining to do."

"Who tipped you off about Dalroi?"

"You know I can't reveal that," said Rhodes. He glanced down at the file placed out of sight of the vision-scanner. The complaint had been unsigned but he had had enough dealings with Inspector Quentain to be reasonably certain of its author.

Sellig grimaced wearily. "Never mind! I'll find out somehow. What do you want to know?"

"It says here that Dalroi was convicted of murder and sentenced to death by electrocution. A death warrant is appended. Also a release warrant dated a year after the supposed execution. Don't tell me that you're practising reincarnation at the police laboratories now?"

Van't Sellig sweated profusely. "You're asking the wrong sort of questions, Walter."

"Damn you, that's my job! You know I don't let go of a thing like this once I get my teeth into it."

"Very well, you've asked for it. The execution wasn't successful. God! Three times I watched him burn in that chair and each time went into a coma and came out of it under the pathologist's knife."

"I thought those days were over," said Rhodes angrily.

"It was far surer than the rope they used to use for hanging, Walter. For over two hundred years the electric chair didn't have a single failure — then came Dalroi. Why it didn't kill him we can never quite decide, but it's an experience I'll never forget."

"So I should damn well hope!" said Rhodes. "What happened then?"

"Then the Black Knights stepped in and took Dalroi away under section two-nine-four of the National Secrecy Acts."

"For what purpose?"

"I don't know." Sellig mopped the perspiration from his brow. "Two-nine-four covers the use of convicted murderers for experiments involving certain death. They use them as guinea-pigs in space-flight experiments and chemical warfare techniques, you know."

"No," said Ombudsman Rhodes, "I didn't know. Thanks for the tip. But what happened to Dalroi?"

"Even if I knew I couldn't tell you. From the legal point of view hand-over under two-nine-four is certified as death, and the case was closed as such. The pay-off was the shocker."

"Keep going," said Rhodes grimly.

"Dalroi wasn't guilty of murder. He killed all right, but later evidence proved he didn't have any option. There's even a suspicion he was framed. We informed the Black Knights and they kicked like hell. Finally they released — somebody."

"Somebody?"

Van't Sellig looked the epitome of misery. "I met Dalroi after his release, and talked with him. I don't know what they did to him, but on his release he wasn't quite the same person. He had no memory of what he'd been through at the hands of the Black Knights. Somehow they'd blanked out a complete year's memories. At a rough guess I'd say Dalroi is still undergoing his execution."

Rhodes drew a deep breath. "If I were you, Fritz, I'd start looking for a new job. From where I'm sitting there doesn't seem to be much future for you as Chief Commissioner."

"I'll take my chance," said Van't Sellig. "Not even you can move against the Black Knights."

"No? With the muck I'm raking up I've enough material to bring down the government."

"Look, Walter, you're out of your depth. Let Dalroi sink or swim in his own way. He'll reach hell just as soon. You can't interfere with the Black Knights and come out of it alive."

"I must!" said Rhodes. "There's a sight more here than appears at the surface, and you know it! And you're still holding two of my assistants. Are you going to release them or do I let the newspapers have the story?"

"You won't get away with it. There's not a paper in the country which'd touch that story today. Something big is in the air and its liable to break at any moment, but Central Security has clamped down a press censorship which is absolute. Nobody would dare to touch Dalroi's story."

"Then what the hell is going on?"

Van't Sellig shook his head resignedly. "You asked for this Walter. I'm going to tell you because you won't be satisfied until you know. If ever you breathe a word of it I'll crucify you so fast you'll come

unstuck right round the edges. The Black Knights are making a last-ditch stand against Failway. After the next election Failway will own the government and there'll be no stopping them from that point on. It's now or never. The Black Knights are pinning their faith on a secret weapon. Its name is Ivan Dalroi — the man who can't be killed!"

TEN

Trapped on a web of crazy, discontinuous geometry, Dalroi cursed and wept like a mad thing. *He could not die just yet!* If a man could drink vengeance and subsist on hate then he would do so. If it took him a million years of weeping or a thousand reincarnations he would get back somehow and make Failway pay for every blistering tear and every second of agony. Parabola, hyperbola, vector and cosine, degrees of arc bisecting the minutest degrees of arc. Where the hell was point C ... or is it D or E or even bloody omega?

He knew he should have died, but refused to accept the fact. Something, some part of his mind, was stronger even than the terrible cupped hands of death. There was a flame within him possessed of such thirsting for life that he knew his body would be dust long before the final spark flared out.

A pain was lancing through his head like the slow, rhythmic insertions of a hideous sewing machine forcing a carpet needle underneath the skull. A whisper played a fantastic memory in his ears, and he caught the sound and held it, using it as a focal point to grope for all the things he had been forced to forget. Not hallucination, no, this was memory. It was disembodied, unconnected with the pattern of his life, yet it was there!

Then he had it clear. Lissajous figures on oscilloscope screens banked before his eyes, changing patterns, responding to ... something. The air was reeking of ... ether, yes, that was it! And noises ... disconnected ... bells, unholy sounds, sounds never made nor heard in this life. Sounds that came from within the brain itself.

The shock hit him like a thousand volt discharge. Now he remembered. The terror, the stark horror of having his brain exposed. The saw on the skull, the surgeon cutting tissue and flesh to expose the naked brain; and himself, drugged but conscious, watching the writhing traces and trying desperately to concentrate lest the fear should drive him mad. The probes in the brain; no pain, but noise and sensation, a leg which moved without conscious volition and noises loud and clear which were never there to hear.

But when? A memory must have some origin, some time and place of access. How had these atrocious memories insinuated themselves into an apparently hole-free chain of experience? And why?

Why? Why? The question burned like a whiplash. God, there was a secret here! Something was burning in the back of his mind. He could not see or feel it yet he knew it to be there ... something he was not supposed to know. Yet he had to know! Suddenly it became of peculiar importance to him to find out.

It was more difficult than staying alive, more painful than dying. Only an effort of tremendous will enabled him to do it at all. Then, once he had started, it was easier. The same compulsion which had made him reject the thought of death gave him now a diabolical lever, a desperate means of entry into the forbidden depths of his own mind.

Down he went, ruthlessly stripping layer after layer of civilised repression; peeling back dread, abhorrence, disgust and the thousand darker things which fester in the unseen shadows. Grimly he cut down to the dark side of the mind, to the region where the censor, like the dull red doors of a furnace, scarcely insulating, masked the spiteful radiance which dwelt beyond. The censor was asleep or dead or worse. He demanded entry, and it was not denied him. The doors swung wide and he entered them in

dread and teetered on the edge of an unholy holocaust. At the fringes of the terrible fire which screamed and blistered in the awful chamber of the mind, he stood face to face with his own Id.

This was the seat of the elemental life-force, a molten maelstrom of unbridled instincts and terrible ambitions, stripped clear of the layers of insulation and repression which millions of years of evolution had laid over the frightful incandescent turmoil. He staggered blindly, seeking protection against the blistering fury and untamed malice which radiated like some dreadful alien sun. He was appalled by the hellish ferocity, the unimaginable pressures and the seething, grinding ebullition which threatened to crack the universe by its unbounded intensity.

And with a courage somewhat more than human, he threw himself into the intolerable well of strife.

Raw emotions, millions upon millions of amperes of naked energy, stark, illiberal, completely blind, spat in excruciating arcs forming a continuous pulse of pure liquid fire. The will to live was a fiendish powerhouse suddenly ablaze through surfeit of the terrible powers it was no longer able to contain. Anger and hatred was sheet lightning, spitting flame from merciless heavens, pouring virulent fury on the Satanic inferno. Sex, like a thousand-headed snake, wound its dark coils and convulsed in agony, tightening upon the conflagration and concentrating its malevolence and potency, pulsing the hellish plasma to new levels of atrocious ferocity.

Super-critical now, the hectic ferment knew no bounds. Steaming, spitting, searing, snarling, the flaming torrent burst through his mind like a million tons of exploding steel.

SURVIVE! HATE! SURVIVE!

It coursed through his veins, a vaporising mercurial pressure.

ACTION! REACTION! ACTION! REACTION! ACT!

Faster. Faster. Aurical, ventrical artery, vein, nerve, nose, knee. It pounded in his ears like a drop-hammer forging some cosmological crankshaft.

TOOTH! NAIL! WILL! SPITE! HATE! FIGHT!

He was lost, drowned in the furious frenzy, engulfed in the widening tide of naked vengeance, floundering in the hideous incandescent sea whose pulse was the terrible will to live.

ACTION! REACTION! ACTION! REACTION!

His body convulsed on the web, and the web pulsed and whimpered in response. He refused to die! He seized the power and mastered it. He was God, no, not God — Nemesis perhaps. He was bitter scorn, fighting fury, terrible revenge, irresistible force, absolute crushing evil. He was Dalroi! He had the power to smash the universe.

HATE! HATE! HATE!

He took hold of the web in solemn fury and burst the strands asunder. He tore loose the mocking nucleus and hurled the discus far over the seething plain. With a surge of superhuman malice he gathered the broken ends of the heavy strands and pulled, distorting the alien geometry, twisting the configuration of the once-stable dimension into something which teetered on the brink of self-destruction. Then he rose up, and by sheer indomitable force, he smashed the dimension back into the miniscule quanta of energy from which all things are made.

Transfinity shuddered. Strange new nebulae leaped into existence, and others paled and were

extinguished. Like the ripple of a depth-charge in a lake, the eddying tide of disturbance spread outward from the centre, carrying a wash that was felt even at the furthest ends of infinity and rebounded in complex criss-cross patterns of subtle rise and fall among the strange continua.

And through the flotsam of discontinued strata there floated the body of a man cursing in curious colours and complex harmonies; a thing of power, dreadful yet afraid of the strange new galleries of knowledge which had opened in his mind.

Somebody destroyed the Consedo International bank. There were several theories as to how this was achieved, but none one hundredth as ingenious as the fact. Consedo, subsidiary of Failway Holdings, was not the sort of place that one destroyed out of hand. But then, this was no ordinary disaster.

The thunder split the heavy darkness of the old town with a bruising shock that shattered windows for a two-mile radius and crumpled a street of slum houses on the river's bank. The steel and molybdenum caves of Consedo had tried to contain a star. The blinding blast of energy, which originated in a private safe-deposit box far down in the grim, grey vaults, opened the skyscraper building from top to bottom like a hatchet through a toothpaste tube. Thousands upon thousands of tons of the finest ferro-concrete shattered and peeled in banana-like submission to fall in a calamitous avalanche across the neighbouring streets and buildings.

But that was only the beginning. Deep under the earth the terrible fire still raged. A mere nutshell of star-stuff, its heat was more than sufficient to turn the alloy-steel jungle into sparkling rivulets of molten metal. The night sky flared with reflected light as girders and crumbling masonry spattered into the hellish pool. The deep vaults were linked under the road and under the foundations of neighbouring buildings, and these too began to crumble and smoke and finally collapse. Down came walls and pavements, pillars, shop-fronts, cars and roofs in a grinding cascade of steel, wood, glass and concrete, intermixed with crackling fire; all sliding with tantalising slowness into the widening hell-pit which once was Consedo.

On the edge of the uproar the fire and rescue teams stood in impotent horror watching the crumbling wastes with a helplessness as psychological as it was actual. Nothing like this had ever occurred before.

The shattered glass had torn the curtains into shreds and ploughed great furrows across the desk top. The gaunt oak panels were peppered with glassy spines, and the tri-di murals had imploded to reveal their shattered mysteries. As he rose from the floor, handkerchief blood-red through stopping the cut above his eyes, Cronstadt's face was ashen not so much from his narrow escape as from the implications of the angry blow-hole seven blocks away.

"God! What was that?" he asked.

His companion was still absorbing the shock and moved to the shattered window frames to stare stupidly at the enigmatic chaos. There were no lights, for the power had died with the first shattering blast, but the flicker and flare of the ruins of what minutes ago had seemed indestructible lit the room with a radiance like a foretaste of Hell. For several minutes then neither spoke, not trusting their voices to conceal the hysteria.

"Dalroi?" asked Cronstadt, at last voicing the unspoken question.

"Dalroi's dead," said Hildebrand. "They fired him into transfinity, unprotected. Of all the possible methods of execution, they used the only one which stood any chance of success."

"I know," said Cronstadt, "but what if even we have underrated Dalroi's potential. Suppose not even that could kill him?"

"I don't want to think about it. Transfinite space is a hell to end all hells. Assuming that physical survival was possible, which it isn't, the psychological impact alone would burn out the brain. Even if he survived, there still isn't any way back."

"We can't be sure," said Cronstadt. "Surely the return of Dalroi is less improbable than the chances of Consedo breaking into an unprovoked chain-reaction? In one fabulous micro-second Failway has lost perhaps one tenth of its hold on the commercial world. That is a coincidence which can't be overlooked."

Hildebrand gripped the sill with such pressure that white showed through the flesh of his knuckles.

"You're right, of course. But in this way ... Lord! ... what did he use? Consedo fell like a pack of playing cards and burns like a Roman-candle. A piece of the sun in a paper bag would have the same effect."

There was a knock on the door. Cronstadt opened it with difficulty, kicking the misplaced jamb savagely to release the reluctant wood.

"Parcel for you, Mr. Cronstadt. Delivered by special messenger."

Cronstadt took the parcel from the watchman, with a frown. Wrapped in the paper was a case of wood. It was very cold to the touch. Inside a thick layer of thermal insulating fibre cradled a small black orb. He examined it curiously, without touching it, puzzled by the wrongness in the way the sphere accepted light and absorbed it complete without reflection. It absorbed heat, too, and wisps of cool vapour from the air formed inside the open box.

"What the devil?" asked Cronstadt.

Hildebrand looked up, his eyes suddenly filled with hideous comprehension.

"Run!" he said. "Run for your bloody life!"

Cronstadt did not wait for explanations, fear scabbled with grasping fingers at the back of his skull, and controlled panic threw his feet down known corridors to the nearest emergency exit. Suddenly he too had divined the purpose of the uninvited parcel and he had a rough idea of the nature of the gift and its potency. They were fortunate. They were two blocks away when the headquarters of the Cronstadt Steel Corporation split wide and joined Consedo as a second flaming warning of the vengeful power that walked the land in anger. Dalroi was certainly back.

For a few minutes the two men stood sweating on the roadside, unable to speak. Around them confusion seethed and boiled as the fire and rescue teams redeployed their inadequate equipment and found new locations from which to stare stupidly at the new holocaust which had struck out of the night. Police strove to cordon-off roads and alleys in the area to stem the tides of the curious, who, twice shaken from their beds, flocked to the area in excited crowds. Where the tall towers of Cronstadt Steel had been, a new waste of boiling slag was rising.

"Fiends in Hell!" Cronstadt said. "We should have expected something like this. When you twist the Devil's tail ... "

Hildebrand was watching the surging crowd uneasily.

"Let's get out of here. I think we're being watched."

"Dalroi?"

"Not Dalroi. Somebody else."

They began to walk. Dark figures, moving out of the leaping shadows, purposefully closed in. In the comparative darkness of a canyon, where tall commercial buildings raked the red-flushed sky, the net closed down. With dark hoods, shadowed faces, incredible precision and timing, the Black Knights pounced.

ELEVEN

The night was wild and black as pitch. A strong wind sweeping up-river in driving gusts beat the rain against the signal cabin like buckets of grape-shot, and the tide of water sweeping the windows made direct observation impossible. The Yard-master at Failway goods-yard was having a bad night. Goods traffic pouring into the hungry maw of Failway was steadily increasing. Several special-goods had already been diverted into sidings to await clearance of the sheds, and an intolerable line of empty wagons was waiting the return of one of the seven diesels working the yard. With visibility at times down to twenty yards, the stage was all set for chaos.

Failway yard had long since outgrown its original space allocation and now sprawled crazy sections and branches back across the busy main lines where the great expresses touched two-hundred on the iron road to the sea. It was difficult enough to marshal the busy and complex yard with good visibility; this particular night, with the squalling rain and the wind howling like a hundred banshees, the Yard-master could scarcely detect an engine whistle or see the nearer signals. He was forced to rely on repeaters and the illuminated track-circuit diagram which included only the older sections of the yard. The situation was rapidly slipping beyond him.

The pressures applied by Failway to get more goods and a faster turnaround had forced the Failway authorities to throw overboard the elements of good practice and institute many hasty improvisations which were not interlocked to the main system. The Yard-master was sweating, not from the cold humidity, but from the anxiety-stress of the work he was trying to perform; painfully aware that the crawling traces of coloured light across his board represented in actuality the lives of men and the fate of hundreds of tons of moving steel and goods drawn by the tall diesels across a sea of dark and mud.

The empty wagons were still piling up below the hump, and there was danger of a complete stoppage unless they were cleared immediately. At midnight he opened up the radio and called the nearest diesel shunter.

"Come in, Seven."

"Seven to Yard Control. Can't you do anything about this damn weather?" Static lashed the loudspeaker.

"Take it up with the Union," said the Yard-master morosely. "That's one thing you can't blame on me. Look, Pete, I'm re-routing you to the hump to take a load of empties across the main to the East yard. Unless we get something out of here soon we're liable to choke the yard completely."

"Right! Give me a time for crossing the main line. The gradient's slipperier than hell and I'd not care to be out there when an express comes through."

The Yard-master grunted. "You worry about the gradient and move out fast when the signal clears. I doubt if I can get more than a minute's clearance across the main line at this hour of day."

In fact, the main-line controller gave him only a fifty second clearance. It was little enough, but it would have to suffice if Failway yard was to start to clear the specials in the further sidings. He took his cue from the passing of the Atlantic President and gunned the signals as soon as the way was clear, overriding the safety trips which rebelled against such hairs-breadth operation. With agonising slowness number

Seven crawled from the gradient and edged on to and then across the main tracks. The Yard-master watched its progress on the illuminated board where the blocks of light traversing tangentially exaggerated its slowness.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the entry of the fast-freight into the sector panel, and he snatched up the handset.

"Speed it up, Pete. I've got twenty seconds to clear the line."

Pete's reply was unprintable but indicated that his was the major stake in the race to clear the line before the hundred and fifty miles an hour freighter cut his entourage in two.

For a moment it did not look as though number Seven would make it, then the "points cleared" indicator showed and the Yard-master thankfully thumbed home the levers to clear the main line, watching subconsciously for the repeater to confirm his action. The repeater stayed dead. At first the fact failed to register in his mind, and when it did he instantly slammed all signals to danger and leaped for the radio.

"Pete, are you clear?"

"Sure. Now on the down gradient passing into the slipway."

"Something's wrong with the bloody board. For Chris's sake see if you can see the main gantry and tell me what it's reading."

Silence for a second, then: "All the fast down-lines are at clear."

"You sure? My board still gives the main-line routed to siding."

"That's not what it says out here. Lord! If that fast freight goes down the gradient it'll either derail or go clean through the other end."

His last words were swamped by the blare of a whistle. The fast-freight was speeding close.

A sudden squall hit the cabin, the pressure of the wind making it vibrate momentarily while the driving hail obscured all other sounds. The Yard-master jumped to his board to ascertain what was happening, and watched with unbelieving eyes as the lights winked out steadily, one by one, until the instrument was dead. In a corner of his shocked mind he had already ascertained the only possible explanation of how the board could fail in that particular way; somebody was below in the switching bay pulling out the fuses!

In the second he took to reach the door, catastrophe arrived. Like dark, solidified thunder, the fast-freight came off the main, down the gradient and thundered through the yard, its whistle sounding a mournful swan-song and its brakes burning uselessly in the face of its terrible momentum. The Yard-master forgot the switching bay and stumbled out into the storm, running with futile panic after the swiftly receding rear lamps as if he imagined he could catch them up and halt the unalterable. He was in time only to watch helplessly as the black thunderbolt disappeared into the solid bulk of Failway.

The freighter was doing over a hundred and thirty when it entered the loading platform. The brief horror of the loaders was pitifully short-lived. The locomotive ran the whole length of the bay and hit the end of the line with a driving crash which shook the whole building. It took away the hydraulic buffers, fifty feet of solid ramp and a considerable portion of the wall before the following rolling-stock hammered it together with a hail of debris into the river beyond. Had the rest of the train followed suit the damage would have been relatively slight, but the sudden check in momentum occasioned by the crash explosively telescoped the first wagons and made a convulsive caterpillar of those directly following.

Eighty tons of girder left the sanctuary of a flat truck and took down three roof-supporting columns and a line of offices before it drove to rest. Another hurtling load twisted the huge gantry crane into a weeping, useless metal spider. A fifty-foot low-loader stood on end like a fantastic totem-pole and was shortly demolished by a cable truck whose monstrous drums, like cotton reels on a long jam, began a drunken route down from the moving mountain only to be swallowed by the grinding cataclysm.

The silence which followed was a terrible thing to hear.

The Yard-master overcame his fear. Running back into the signal cabin he paused momentarily at the switch-bay door. The door was open but the room was empty. The floor was littered with fuse cartridges torn from the boards, and much of the wiring had been broken as though with an axe. Only a few circuits still functioned. Long blue wires, which had no right to be there, looped across the interlock banks, feeding the fatal "line clear" signal to the main line and setting the points to crushing death. This was ingenious and planned destruction carried out with split-second timing and an uncanny knowledge of the working of the yard.

Upstairs, only one instrument still functioned — the telephone. Even as he was making the call the Yard-master imagined he saw the figure of a man running from shadow to shadow between the useless shunting lights, heading into Failway.

Dalroi followed hard on the heels of the disaster, intent on entering Failway before the security net had time to close. The grinding catastrophe had stamped its panic deep into the hearts of the Failway staff, and nobody was sure what had happened nor what, if anything, was still to follow. This was a situation Dalroi knew well how to play to advantage.

His objective was the bay where the immense cylinders of compressed and liquefied gases were loaded on goods-shuttles for transfer to the various transfinite levels. In the midst of the chaos he had no difficulty in passing unobserved. The goods shuttles were crude compared with their passenger-carrying counterparts, being simply laminated cylindrical hulls with elaborate vacuum-proof hatches. The loading process was automatic. A capsule on a bogie ran to location at the head of the loader, the prepared load was charged into the capsule and the hatches closed.

Dalroi estimated his chances and watched carefully the indicator which showed the programmed destination of the capsule. When Failway Two was signalled on the board he quelled a fleeting instinct to caution, and took the risk. Eight huge gas cylinders comprised the load, about half the capsule's capacity. When the charge entered the capsule Dalroi was on top, fighting to prevent his limbs from being crushed as the cylinders settled to the form of the hold. He had scarcely settled when he felt the deadly acceleration as the bogie sped up the outworld track, but the conditions were luxurious compared with the last time he had ridden a Failway bogie. Then: *Foimp! Star scatter ... shiver ... inconceivable twisting ...*

The copper-nickel hull of the capsule shunted the transfinite field and attenuated the twisting disproportionality into something merely conducive to insanity. There were strange lights in the darkness of the capsule hold and movements where there was nothing there to move. Dalroi watched fascinated as the hold appeared to grow shorter as if to crush him, and then longer, seeming to extend for about a mile. Yellow-green coruscations sprayed off the metal, and his limbs heaved and jumped as his body bucked the trans-dimensional tides. His legs would grow large and hideous then wither to diminutive stumps; his head would seem to float like a balloon or become so heavy that he feared his skull would crack against the angry iron. He prayed the capsule would not enter a transfinite loop, for such distortions would then assume a permanence which nothing could reverse.

Once the walls became a mirror, and he lay breathless and perplexed in something which reminded him

of the interior of a giant vacuum flask, watching his eyes and chin dissolve into each other and occasionally to wander from his features altogether. Then it was over. There was a check in momentum which almost broke his bones, the gas cylinders shifted dangerously under him, and dark normality swam back. He had arrived. The problem resolved simply to getting out without getting killed.

The capsule canted at an angle and the hatches flew open on a ramp, the gas cylinders sliding out. He stayed with the cylinders until he had formed a split-second idea of the situation, then he kicked himself upward to break the killing momentum and grasped at the nearest stationary object. He was near the head of the ramp, and the cylinders plummeted on below him while the downward movement of his body caused friction burns on his hands as he desperately strove to prevent himself following the iron bottles fifty feet to the foot of the slide. Fortunately he stopped before the burns became intolerable. A swift look over the edge of the slide told him of its trestle construction. He moved over the side quickly and was on the trestles and into the shadowy complexity of the supports before any of the crew below looked in his direction.

Even as he descended he was assessing the possibilities of sabotage. He had no doubt of his ability to bring the whole installation to ruins in about seven minutes flat, but on a transfinite pleasure level there could be close on a million lives at stake and any acts of sabotage must be so directed that if possible the innocent were permitted to escape.

The problem was how to force the Failway controllers to allow the exodus of the very people whose lives Failway used as a veiled threat for its continued existence. In spite of the bitterness inside him, Dalroi had no intention of becoming a mass murderer — except in the last extreme.

He stepped cautiously out into the oriental splendour of Failway Two. Tropical sunlight from an artificial sun blazed golden radiance on sandy streets. On all sides splendid architecture rose: palaces and temples, spires, turrets and minarets, domes, towers and terraced walks. Slender oriental water-gardens vied with majestic, ornamented buildings for pride of vista and excellence of spectacle. The best of the entire, old Orient had been delicately blended into a fantastic wilderness of wonder.

The fragile sensitivity of old China and Japan sat serenely side by side with the splendid and the picturesque from Ceylon and the India that was. Myth and marvel; flowers of fable, rare and exotic; orchids and incredible fruits — all conspired with the scents of *chianan* and aloeswood and spice to fire the imagination with longing for a lost age of adventure.

Dalroi was suitably impressed. This was the fatal attraction of Failway which kept the visitors coming through its doors. Here, with the trade-winds blowing on his face, and the calm warmth of teak and sandalwood and tea, even Dalroi found it hard to concentrate on the anger in his heart. He had to remember objectively that the air came here as a liquefied gas boiling from immense pressure spheres, that the trade-winds were derived from hidden electrostatic jets, and that the broad and wonderful sun was a stabilised tritium plasma furnace. Even the imitation sea, on which plied junk and sampan and catamaran, was but the work of marvellous craftsmen.

He could understand now why public opinion would never support the campaigns to close Failway. This was a place for dreaming, and men do not give up their dreams willingly. Only in the gutter, from which the Failway labour force was conscripted, or in high places, where the political pressures were extreme, was the corroding influence of Failway truly appreciated. It needed a connoisseur of human frailty like Dalroi to know the uttermost depths of human misery and degradation which Failway scattered in its wake.

Dalroi was troubled by a sense of wrongness, something out of phase between the method and the intention, something alien. It seemed almost that the corruption which ensued from Failway practice was

deliberate, as if the whole façade of Failway existed only to corrupt. In such a completely artificial and controlled environment the individual was more than usually subject to the pressures of deliberate manipulation. Dalroi, to whom individuality was sacred, knew all too well how strong those pressures were.

TWELVE

The notice board read:

STRATEGIC DEFENCE RESERVE

REHABILITATION CENTRE

This was fiction, as any who dared attempt to penetrate the defences to a sufficient depth would soon discover. The soldiers were not a fiction. These were battle-trained men on permanent loan from a crack commando unit, and the small carbines which they carried had hair triggers and no safety catches.

Inside the military perimeter was the wire, a broad barrier of barbed malice relieved only by the occasional T.V. pickup and the red warnings of a minefield in the no-man's-land beyond. The electrified fence gave no such warnings. Only a very shrewd eye would read the green ceramic insulators on the posts as indicative of the violent, twisting electrocution which awaited the incautious hand. There were other devices too. Four towers covering the inner perimeter harboured the A.F.I. projectors, the mere scatter of whose radiation could reduce a brave man to a coward. In the path of the beam circuits the ground was baked to brick, and the blackened grass at the edge of the tracks sported curious growth mutations under the fierce irradiation. Over all, the pale-lilac ion cloud crackled with expectancy, guarding the reaches exposed only to the radar-watchful sky.

In the centre of the land enclosed by this fearful barricade stood one of the most secret installations in the world. All that was visible at the surface was a squat, white blockhouse giving entry to the many levels deep below the ground. In these deep chambers, shrouded with darkness and with mystery, was the home of the legendary Black Knights.

The emergency conference was convened in the briefing room six hundred feet below. The assembly at the table was about as varied as one could imagine: Baron Cronstadt, the man of power and authority, whose way of life was chiselled into his commanding features; Professor Hildebrand, whose lean asceticism but emphasised his intellectual prowess; Presley, whose staring eyes and unalterable piety proclaimed his fanaticism in the service of a deity whose name was Obedience and Self-Denial; lastly, the Monitor, whose appearance was deceptively youthful and whose pleasant mien gave little hint of the ruthlessness with which he shattered his enemies and which had carried him swiftly into the top echelon of the Black Knights. Only one man was missing from the group — Gormalu.

The atmosphere was tense. The dark guards around the periphery emphasised the fact that, this time, the members of the Cronstadt committee were not assembled of their own volition. The Monitor's eyes were grim.

"For some little time there has been an unusual but fruitful association between the Black Knights and the Cronstadt committee. That association has now ended."

"You have a reason for this about-face?" asked Cronstadt abruptly.

"I do. A Black Knight never accepts anything or anyone at face value. Your own status has been under constant review. I now have sufficient reason to damn the lot of you."

"Specifically?"

"We've been betrayed. Gormalu has sold us out."

There was a stunned silence for several seconds as the others absorbed the impact of the statement.

"Son of a bitch!" Cronstadt's brow was a cloud of thunder.

"Where is he now?"

"We think he's in Failway. He had a brush with Dalroi and went straight over to the other side. In the circumstances I don't blame him, but it's my guess that he always was their man. Cronstadt, I'm holding you responsible for his default."

Cronstadt shrugged. "He always was a bad risk," he said, "but his knowledge of Failway was invaluable. I don't see how we could have done otherwise."

"That remains to be seen," said the Monitor, "but right now we're faced with a pretty desperate situation. Gormalu helped us to place most of our undercover team in Failway. From the silence which has ensued since Gormalu went, I doubt if many of them still survive. My God! What a bloody rat-trap this is!"

"What do you intend to do?" asked Cronstadt.

"What can we do? It's criminal to sit still and lunatic to make a move. If I were to throw sufficient men at Failway I might even win — just about. But I doubt if many of the four million visitors now in Failway would come out alive. My hands are tied by this threat of ghastly retribution. Our only hope now is Dalroi, and God alone knows what's happened to him. After that trick he pulled at Consedo ... "

"Consedo," said Cronstadt. "I've been thinking about that."

"So have I," said the Monitor. "Now I want to go over it again because the facts aren't in very good agreement with the theory. One of you sons of bitches is holding-out on me. What happened at Consedo was no ordinary act of destruction. It was something new. No hard radiation, no radioactive contamination, no fall-out — just a pure blaze of energy with the release controlled mainly down into the infra-red and visible bands. SciTech tentatively suggest the reaction was that between normal and contra-terrene molecules. You realise what that implies?"

"Yes," said Cronstadt. "It's a damned impossibility."

"Precisely. To do it you'd need to be able both to produce and handle c-t material, and to be able to control the mode of energy release. The whole concept of such a reaction is still in the realm of the wildest unknowns."

He paused to lend emphasis to his point. "Frankly, this hints at a knowledge of physical principles far beyond anything dreamt of by our technology. It's the product of a completely new order of science. Dalroi was bright, but he was not that sort of genius. So how did he come by that sort of knowledge? Hildebrand, you're the expert on Dalroi's brain. Suppose you start explaining."

Hildebrand clenched and reclinched his exquisite fingers. "What am I supposed to answer? You know the theory as well as I. In prehistory the progenitors of the human animal had a fantastic core of survival energy, which became overlaid by evolving brain processes. Dalroi has a quirk which gives him direct access to this darker side of the mind when facing a survival threat. It raises his natural survival potential from the unusually high to the phenomenal."

"Go on!" said the Monitor.

"The rest you know already. It was my prediction that exposure to repeated survival threats would increase Dalroi's access to the dark-side areas. The more he was hit the harder he would bounce until he became the nearest thing to an unstoppable force that human flesh could contain."

"Now I want the part you have not told me," said the Monitor. "I want the part that explains Consedo."

"Nothing explains it. Dalroi's a remarkable individual even without the dark-side access. He has a streak of hatred a mile wide and such natural level of mental energy that a session of psycho-analysis with him made the analyst feel he'd been in contact with a sheet-rolling mill. Dalroi's a throwback to the hard core-stock of humanity. As a fighting animal he's probably a hell of a lot tougher and more cunning than most others in the world today, but that shouldn't give him any advantage over any other mortal save that he could kill you before you could think about going for your gun."

"He came back out of transfinite space," observed Cronstadt suddenly. "He didn't do that by conditioned reflex action. There's a hell of a lot we still don't understand here. What sort of creature is Dalroi, anyway?"

"Don't ask me to explain," said Hildebrand, in a voice suddenly both quiet and far-away. "I've told you all it's safe for you to know."

The Monitor was on him in a trice. "So you do know something! Tell me now, or I'll make you sorry you were born. What else did Dalroi find in the dark side of his mind?"

"If I told you," said Hildebrand sadly, "you could not believe it, and even if you believed there is nothing you could do. You're such little people and even the universe is not quite as you imagine."

"Christ!" said the Monitor. "I'll give you riddles!" He motioned for a guard. "Take this man away and hold him carefully. I shall need him for interrogation. Have the necessary apparatus prepared."

"Now," he turned triumphantly back to the table, "has anyone else anything to add to that?"

Presley looked up, his staring eyes proclaiming the fanatical fire which haunted his spirit.

"There is a curious correspondence between descriptions of transfinite space and classical ideas on the nature of Hell; the eternal winds, the torment, the formlessness, the consuming fire which never actually destroys. If this is so then someone at the dawn of legend must also have gone there and returned, in order to leave such a description in our heritage. It is possible there is another way in and out of transfinity without using the Failway apparatus — some special act of faith or resolution or despair."

"It's an interesting speculation," said the Monitor, "but we haven't time for games."

"I wasn't playing. I was thinking of Gormalu. I have never seen a man more surely tainted with the breath of Hades. Where did he come from? What made him blind?"

"You're wasting time," said the Monitor. "What's this to do with Dalroi?"

"Dalroi also went to transfinite hell, and returned with gifts of devilry. But how did he come back? And if he came alone, how many others have trodden the same paths, and for what reason? I would hazard a guess that we are up against a mystery the answer to which is not to be found in this universe: an answer that lies somewhere at the end of a journey the price of which is madness."

Dalroi's exploration of Failway Two was rapid and systematic, for he knew a crisis was coming. There

was no nailing the exact sensation: an electric tension in the air, a tightening of the scalp, the unease of watching eyes which were never really there — whatever it was, it nagged in Dalroi's bones, an uninformed instinct to beware. Dalroi had more sense than to disregard a hunch, and primed the radiation pistol in his pocket. He sensed trouble, though from what quarter he could not determine.

A moment later he knew. The artificial sun coughed and died and he was thrown into a world of utter darkness; a world of sound without sight, movement without possibility of seeing the mover. *Gormalu's world!*

He choked back his first impulse to panic and wondered if blindness had struck him without warning, but a rising tumult from the area around him told of others similarly placed. He drew a boron match and rasped it into life. The flame threw back the shadow in a circle about him, and others swiftly moved forward, attracted like moths to the diminutive flickering flame.

"Listen!" said Dalroi urgently. "The sun has failed. Don't try to run. Find lights wherever you can: start bonfires and wait patiently. Don't move too far until it's light enough to see."

A few more also had matches, and the street began to weave with erratic sparks of fire. Others, less prepared, fought their way from dark places to reach transient flames, which died before the journey was complete. Panic was spreading as the need for light struck home in the hearts of the bewildered assembly. The murmur of complaint and bewilderment mounted like an ever increasing hymn of fright. Soon, to strike a match was to become the centre of a vicious, screaming scrum fighting for possession of the tiny lighted splint.

People began to run in the darkness, blundering into iron and masonry, striking frenziedly at flesh and stone and empty air; running no one knew to where, or from what, or anything except that their souls were terrified of staying in the darkness.

Gormalu's world! A blind man's revenge! The idea forced itself into Dalroi's mind. The absence of lighting in the streets and buildings was itself a sinister suggestion that this was no normal mishap. Even the loudspeakers were mute, yet the power was not wholly dead for the deep throb of the ventilators, so low as to be inaudible except by conscious recognition, continued its sullen grumble.

Gormalu's world! By now Dalroi was certain. This was a piece of carefully calculated maliciousness. Gormalu was here in Failway, somewhere on this level. The diabolical doctor, unseen, malignant, was enjoying his mastery. Hell was at hand and the Devil had come into his own.

Dalroi steeled himself in the darkness, pressed flat against a wall, killing the fear born of eyes that could tell him nothing, forging precise details of the scene from memory. A habit of detailed observation gave him many facets of information an untrained man would miss. Somewhere to his right there should be a service ladder to the roof. He touched the column of steel with his hand and began climbing upward in the darkness.

Gaining the roof, he crossed it and searched along the further wall. He found the steps, and moments later, the ironwork of the service catwalk. Now he was surer of his ground. In his mind's eye he had a fair plan of the catwalks, simpler than the streets and alleys below, with less obstacles and a surer guide in the darkness. He turned in the direction of the Failway service bays.

An unexpected obstruction on the catwalk brought him down swearing, and something metallic skittered along in the darkness. Something about the weight of the unseen object caught his attention and he searched for it urgently. As his hand found one, his foot contacted another and he drew them to him for examination. They were curiously-shaped boxes with well rounded corners. A short rod or antenna protruded from each and they both had fixing straps. They suggested something he vaguely remembered.

But what? *Two boxes, two antennae ... walkie-talkies, perhaps? No, nobody makes walkie-talkies like that. Bottom curved almost as though to fit ... on a shoulder!*

The memory came. In his hands he held Gormalu's bats'-eye radar boxes, the electronic eyes which normally perched like vultures on the blind doctor's shoulders. It fitted the circumstances so well that he had no doubt of his identification. What troubled him was why they had been abandoned. It did not make sense. *In the country of the blind the one-eyed man is king.* Gormalu had relinquished his most valuable asset — the ability to move freely in darkness.

Or had he? Suddenly Dalroi knew the answer. *In the darkness Gormalu was not blind!*

The sightless eyes were not sightless any more; eyes that were dead in the daylight were living and useful in the absolute darkness. *Infra-red vision!* It fitted perfectly. Dalroi took the notion further. Infra-red and VHF radio bands overlap. That would explain Gormalu's uncanny accuracy with the bat's-eye boxes. The man could see using wavelengths into the broadcast-radio part of the spectrum. The thought was chilling. What manner of creature was Gormalu?

He considered this silently. Suddenly the tables were reversed and it was Gormalu who was sighted and he who was blind. He moved on with new urgency. He had to find Gormalu before Gormalu found him.

THIRTEEN

Misjudging the course of the catwalk in the darkness he lost his bearings and plunged headlong down a short flight of stairs on to a rooftop, landing with a bone-jarring impact. He was about to regain his route when he stopped and pulled himself in under the stair. Somebody was coming along the catwalk, not cautiously like a man walking in the darkness, but with the swift tread of one who could see in his environment. Not Gormalu for sure, for this was the step of a tall and agile man. Dalroi worked tighter against the stair. The footsteps came nearer and passed.

Dalroi moved like a tiger, swiftly, ferociously, leaping up the steps in the passer's wake, with no illusions about the chances he was taking. He was in the position of a blind man attempting an assault on an armed man in daylight. With cat-tread he measured the pace of the one in front. Only as he closed in did the dark footsteps falter. Dalroi sprang blindly.

He found a neck and it broke even as the other attempted to react. Following the body to the ground he explored it rapidly with his hands. The soft garments suggested it was one of Gormalu's henchmen, either Timoshu or Matshee, and a short knife completed the suggestion. He then found what he at first thought was a weapon, but which proved to be a small but powerful dark-lamp. His heart leaped. This was the break he had been looking for. He followed the distorted neck to the head and his fingers closed thankfully on a pair of infra-red goggles. He donned them swiftly and dull vision swam back to his eyes.

He was in a world of black and white and grey, like a grotesque monochrome film-set. The major illumination on the scene came from the banks of concealed heaters which supplemented the warmth of the now absent artificial sun. In the valleys of wrongness which were streets and terraces below him, blind men fought with blind, or hid or collapsed or blundered aimlessly.

Dalroi could see no sign of the figure he was seeking, but the body of Timoshu confirmed his suspicions. *Gormalu was here!* He had to find Gormalu fast, for he sensed the devilry in the darkness. The blind bewilderment of Failway's own staff pointed up the fact that the situation was both unforeseen and quite beyond control.

The screaming began in a further sector well beyond his range of vision, a mammoth shriek of frenzy and

anguish. Swiftly he traversed the catwalks, knowing that this must be the start of what he feared. Even as he neared the spot he could sense the fear rising out of the bewildered crowd. His blood ran cold.

In the square a group of people had gone berserk. With staring eyes and idiot expressions they had reached the mad abandonment born of fear. Naked panic probed with intolerable fingers into the crowd; terror upon crazing terror touched with icy fingers, plucking the senses from their brains. Caustic, cutting, corroding frenzy mazed the intellect. Most inhumanly they fought. They fought in the darkness; they fought themselves; they fought each other. Insane with fear, demented under the grip of some power they could neither avoid nor understand, they reverted to the status of cornered rats, and everything in the helpless darkness was their enemy.

Dalroi was sick. He had seen it all before. During the abortive rebellion which had risen during his youth the police had produced a weapon from the secret stock-piles dedicated to civil obedience. This was the dreaded 'shredder', based on A.F.I., the artificial-fear-induction process ... It was well named. It literally shredded the nervous system of those in its path. Of course the rebellion had fallen to pieces, but fourteen new hospitals had to be established to tend those permanently crazed. Dalroi remembered. The children had been most susceptible to the barbarous radiation. For a long time there had been a shortage of schoolmates in Old Town.

The same memory made him lay aside the radiation pistol. The cartridge-charge of the pistol had a resonant frequency roughly the same as that of a shredder, and he had no wish to become part of the conflagration which resulted from an exploding radiation cartridge at resonance. There was enough murder in his heart now to make Timoshu's short knife adequate for his purpose. His directive was simple: find Gormalu and kill him.

Bitterly he recognised the trap. Somehow Gormalu knew that he was on this level, and this was his own twisted method of bringing Dalroi into the open. He had no doubt that when he appeared Gormalu would hit him with everything available. Dalroi was past caring. If it was true that he was immune to ordinary murder then he had nothing to fear; if not, he was going on anyway. If Gormalu wanted to fight he had picked on the right adversary.

The problem of locating Gormalu was answered for him. His nerves twisted with a sudden convulsion which nearly brought him to his knees. Gormalu must have seen him and brought the shredder to bear in his direction. Far away on a further catwalk he could see the bright i-r halo hovering about the muzzle of the shredder, although the instrument and its operator were too indistinct to be seen. He wondered whether Gormalu realised his identity or if he was merely playing safe. With the second bolt he threw himself on to the cold metal of the walk and writhed with not entirely spurious agony. With an angry gout of fire the radiation pistol burst on the handrail where he had left it.

Ten seconds later the beam shifted and Dalroi breathed a sigh of relief. What was to follow would be difficult enough without having his nerves skinned in advance. Moving now with the utmost caution he inched along the catwalk to where the walkway intercepted the one occupied by Gormalu.

Even as he rose to his feet he held a suspicion in his mind that he could not possibly make it. As the beam swung back hastily in response to his foolhardy frontal attack, the suspicion deepened into a certainty. The first bolt caught him in mid-air and so convulsed his body that he almost missed the guard rail. He checked himself in time, and with a fortitude not completely his own he walked in a cloud of desperate pain straight along the beam-path of the shredder. Something within him snapped. His mind was choked with ascending pressures, and the fierce determination to succeed clamped over his shrieking nerves and forced him to ignore their agonised messages.

Willpower was no use; no creature was gifted with the will to overcome the racking fire which so crazed

the nibbling nerve. Only the intolerably fearful thing which roosted in the dark side of his mind could give the orders to force his muscles to move into mounting and uncontrollable waves of pain and fear. Deliberately he walked. The excruciating agony mounted with each triggered burst; fire upon fire, inconceivable agony, corroding torment eating his nerves. Only the blind hate and desperation within him beat back the protective darkness from his mind, kept him conscious, forced him cruelly on.

He could see Gormalu now, crouched behind the shredder: two bright and dreadful eyes set in the death's head where always before dark glasses had obscured the face. Gormalu was frightened, and with good reason. Nobody could walk along the beam-path of a shredder — nobody except Dalroi! Nobody would attempt it unless driven by more than ordinary motives. Such endurance needed something more than mortal motivation.

Dalroi kept going, the nerves of his whole body vibrating with hideous discharges and his brain seemingly on the verge of collapse from the conflict of pressures. The knife was in his fingers and Gormalu was only yards ahead. He took the full blast of the shredder in his temple and blood-red images trampled along his optic nerves until he thought his eyeballs would burst. A brush of pure flame traversed his spinal cord. He hit the shredder and it canted wildly on its gimbals.

Gormalu, paralysed with fear, lay before him on the catwalk. Dalroi seized the scraggy shoulder and struck down with the knife, a vicious, murderous stroke.

It never connected. There was an implosion of air into the space where the devilish doctor had lain, and the speed of his removal dragged patches of skin from Dalroi's fingers. The knife plunged through emptiness and clattered uselessly against the steel of the walkway. Dalroi knelt, stupefied with shock, and wept with a blind and futile rage at the unholy trick which had thwarted his revenge.

A welt of scarlet lightning split the black sky. Fearing new devilry Dalroi looked around for cover, but stopped as he realised the flash came from the dead sun. Another flash, and a final pinpoint of lavender showed that the re-ignition had been successful. Power was coming back into Failway Two, and the crisis was over.

But Dalroi recognised the lull before the sickening storm. His encounter with Gormalu had awakened something dormant in his mind. Gormalu, or somebody like Gormalu, was already in among his deep perceptions; the age-old enemy, the bat-blind bogey which lurks in man's subconscious, was not a myth but a reality. Deep laid in the well of impossible recollections was this antithesis of man. Instinctively he now knew what type of creature Gormalu was. His fingers curled with hate.

Picking up the shredder he bent it over the guardrail with a savage swing and threw the debris away. The act of destruction came so naturally to him that he paused and looked at his hands and wondered what eons of repetition had given his fingers such inborn familiarity. He was treading on the threshold of unknown hell, but the things that he needed to know would not come back to him.

ACTION! REACTION! ACTION! REACTION! ACT!

He had anger without opportunity. Impotently he was forced to wait for the gathering fury. He pressed the infrared goggles into his pocket and moved along the catwalks in the weird dawn glare of the re-lit sun, choosing his direction more by instinct than by design. Lights were coming on in the buildings below, block by block, and people were staring upward, drinking in the welcome light.

He felt like a scene-shifter in the flies of some incredible stage, looking down on the end of a drama such as no theatre could ever know. Grimly he realised the simile was exact. Failway Two was a stage, a grotesque, soulless collection of props and effects, with innocent bystanders as unsuspecting actors playing out a melodrama with real tears and real blood.

Anger slashed through him like a knife. He had to get off of the stage, away from the make-believe. He had to reach the wings where they operated the lights and the strings which kept the puppets dancing. He had to come to grips with the author and the producer and, perhaps, the impresario. Somebody had wantonly written Berina into the script, and with the same scratch of the pen had scored an indelible mark on Dalroi's soul.

He went as far in one direction as he could. He was no longer awed by the scenery, he was looking for the fact behind the fiction. At last the catwalks angled and he was up against a wall, apparently no different from a thousand other walls, yet when he studied it in perspective it seemed to form no part of any other structure. Following its contours he became convinced that this was one of the limits of Failway Two. With an ear to the wall he could just detect the thump of mighty pistons beating a subsonic rhythm which needed to be felt rather than heard.

Hidden in the alcove a small metal door, slightly ajar, invited his attention. He passed into a dark passage where acrid smoke lay in a horizontal plane on a current of rising warmth. He hurried through, guessing that chance had played into his hands, arriving in a mammoth powerhouse where generators and a myriad giant devices were staggered over a vast and awesome floor. The air reeked with ozone and the smell of burning insulation, doubtless the result of Gormalu's work to sabotage the sun. Machines were starting up, winding upward with throaty screams, passing resonance with shattering intensity, coming back to life.

One, quite the largest engine that Dalroi had ever seen, was black and broken, with tubes split, bearings torn, castings fractured and fused. It had evidently been the centre of a high temperature explosion. At a rough guess it had once been a liquid hydrogen alternator and somebody had switched the pump input to oxygen. The titanium-tungstate stalactites would need a solar furnace to recast the pattern.

Dalroi was disappointed. It was not here that he could find the answers to his questions, nor any way to ward-off the blow he knew was about to fall. *There must be something more!*

Nobody noticed that he passed. Overhead cranes above the smoke-haze carried beams and crates with a controlled frenzy. A narrow-gauge railway scattered furious electric trucks on unknown electronic errands. Something, a riveter probably, screamed and thumped in the distance, overlaying its own noise with a pattern of explosive echoes.

Dalroi continued the way he was going. After nearly half a mile of the machinery jungle he came up against another wall. This rose so high that it passed out of sight above the tangles of pipe and girder-work. Its thickness was measurable by the fact that the single door which he could find was recessed nearly thirty feet into the concrete.

FOURTEEN

Six hundred feet below the ground the concrete caves snapped back quick echoes of iron-tipped heels on unyielding stone and the occasional snicker of a carbine butt on a black steel buckle. The bolts on the heavy door broke back with the sharp, certain action of powerful solenoids, and the Monitor entered.

In the cell Cronstadt rose warily, blinking at the light. "How much longer are you going to keep me here?"

The Monitor bowed slightly. "Until you rot if necessary. It appears you and your friends have conspired to turn a serious situation into something verging on the catastrophic"

"I swear to God I'm on your side. I had no idea about Gormalu."

"The singular thing about this case is that there is quite a deal that you don't seem to know. How a man of

your acumen could have come this far in total ignorance of what you were attempting, is something I shall never understand. I can only assume that your overwhelming avarice completely blinded you to the real issues."

"Damn you! I was not in this alone. You, too, were involved."

"For the very good reason," said the Monitor, "that I knew there had to be something more in the scheme than appeared on the surface. There was a hell of an undercurrent at work and I was just waiting for one of you to show your hand. I must confess to being misled in thinking that the operation was directed against Failway. Only recently did I realise that it was not Failway but Dalroi who was the target."

"What the hell do you mean?"

The Monitor smiled grimly. "That's right, Baron! Continue to proclaim your innocence. Frankly, your life depends on it. Let me ask you, do you know what Failway is?"

"Yes, it's a big business proposition — dirty but highly profitable."

"No," said the Monitor. "Failway is not what it seems. What you see is only the façade. But a façade for what? That's what I needed to know. And suddenly ... it's all clear to me. Failway is a trap — a Godallmighty trap laid with terrible jaws set to catch a few certain gifted individuals. It is baited with the most irresistible of lures — power, corruption and oppression; who set it up and who designed it is something I have yet to learn. But its intended victim I do know. They were after Dalroi. And with the connivance of your committee we've thrown him to the wolves."

"This is madness!"

"I wish it were. Did you never ask yourself about Dalroi, how he came by that immunity to murder? Did you never think any further than that?"

Before Cronstadt could answer, the communicator on the Monitor's lapel sounded briefly.

"Monitor."

"Communications Lab, Sir. We have the radio receiver down here which was removed from Gormalu's laboratory. It's similar to a sub-etheric set but it won't tune over the usual bands. There's a shoal of stations on it the like of which we've never heard before."

"Damn!" said the Monitor. "I'm coming down to have a look."

"Trouble?" asked Cronstadt.

"I don't know yet. You'd better come too. We've had a team stripping Gormalu's place. There's stuff in there which will take all of twenty years to understand. Gormalu got out of there so fast he didn't even bother to arm the mines he'd left in the basement. That seems to be a measure of the panic which Dalroi had induced into everyone connected with Failway. Gormalu must have been a very frightened man."

"I still can't understand how we let him take us in so completely."

"My dear Cronstadt," said the Monitor, "none of us is beyond suspicion. I don't think Gormalu is the only traitor. You yourself are on record as once having bid for the Failway monopoly. Presley is firmly convinced that it's an antechamber to hell, and Hildebrand ... "

"What are you going to do about Hildebrand?"

"I don't know yet. Shoot him probably ... and how many others also? I've had to place my trust in some very imperfect material. It would only take me about an hour with any of you to come to the real truth in your hearts — but I fear you'd be very little use to me by the time I was finished. You'd be incurably insane."

"You're a strange cuss yourself," said Cronstadt, unabashed. "You don't even have a name. What do we know of you and your ambitions?"

The Monitor laughed lightly, almost boyishly, and pushed back the lank hair which disturbed his brow. "Count yourself lucky you know neither. It doesn't pay to be too curious about the hierarchy of the Black Knights. It is an estate which is entered through a very small doorway."

"So I've heard," said Cronstadt dryly.

When he came out again through the door of the Communications Laboratory, the Monitor's smile was gone and his confidence was ripped to shreds.

"My God! Cronstadt! What have we got ourselves into? At a rough guess there's around half a billion stations broadcasting on bands covered by that receiver and not one of them comes from Earthside. It's like a window into another sort of universe, a little keyhole where you can listen in on something which cannot possibly exist. It's unholy, and I don't mind admitting I'm frightened."

"There must be some rational explanation."

"There is. That receiver is picking up transmissions originating from somewhere in transfinite space."

"That's impossible!"

"You think I don't know that!" said the Monitor. "Ask any scientist and he'll tell you that there are only seven even remotely habitable transition levels in transfinite space, and Failway has them all. There are a series of equations which prove quite simply by means of progressive variables that no other levels through to infinity can ever contain anything which we can construe as life. I tell you now that those sub-radio transmissions represent not only life, but life on a scale such as we can only dimly conceive. There must be whole galaxies populated and jabbering at each other on sub-radio channels which we don't even know how to tap."

"Is that so shocking? We've never doubted the possibility of intelligent life in our own cosmos. Is it so terrible that thinking beings should exist in some other continuum?"

"Only," said the Monitor, sickly, "when you hear one of them speaking in English, issuing orders that the destruction of Ivan Dalroi must be accomplished absolutely regardless of the cost."

"Fiends in Hall!" said Cronstadt. "And this apparatus belonged to Gormalu?"

"Yes. I just wonder how many more there are around, how many other people I sometimes have to trust, sit at home at nights and receive their orders from the other side of nowhere. You know, Cronstadt, there are times when I hate the whole bloody human race. There isn't one of them who wouldn't sell his soul for money or revenge or martyrdom or whatever their petty spirits crave. The whole race is rotten with the pursuit of cheap excitement."

"I've never doubted it," said Cronstadt. "May I hear these transmissions?"

"Help yourself," said the Monitor wearily. "For all I know they may be intended for your ears anyway."

When Cronstadt turned from the apparatus his face was the colour of putty. "You're right," he said. "We're in trouble. Dalroi versus Failway was odds enough to shake the Devil: but Dalroi versus whatever lives in the transfinite irrational planes could be sheer disaster. What the hell will he have to contend with now?"

"I don't know," said the Monitor, "but whoever engineered this played a masterful hand. The whole set-up was designed to get Dalroi where they wanted him — and like bloody fools we played along. Hell, if Dalroi really cuts loose they're going to have to settle him in a big way."

"But if that happens in Failway it'll be the biggest catastrophe of the age."

"And if it happens out of Failway it won't be a catastrophe, it'll be extinction. I'm going to war: I don't have any option any more. The pogrom we sought to avoid is being thrust upon us, so I don't have any alternative. I'm going to take a task-force and seal off Failway Terminus so tight a mouse won't be able to get his whiskers in or out unless I say so. And if you don't know any prayers, Cronstadt, you'd better learn some fast because unless I miss my guess we're so far out of our depth that we'd better become amphibious fast if we're going to survive."

It was a heavy metal door, gas but not pressure tight, and fitted with a flux lock. There were ways of tricking the magnetic tumblers of such locks if the sensitivity of the reading-heads had fallen sufficiently low. Dalroi had a magnetic pick-lock in his wallet. He inserted it into the lock and tapped the end with a small magnet. Once. Twice. The ferrite rod of the pick-lock read the residual magnetism in the tumblers and the magnet cycled the magnetic flux to produce the characteristic hysteresis.

He pressed the rod into the reading position and waited. The relay went over with a reluctant click. Kicking the door to upset the tumblers, he pulled sharply, broke the seals, and seconds later was through into the terrain beyond.

Under a pale, blue, artificial moon lay a field of black mutation poppy, a vast sea of broad-petalled poisonous blossoms upturned to an impossible sky — the source of the cepi on which the Failway slave empire was based. Dalroi swore.

The cepi was at once more potent and more degrading than the opium from which it had been mutated. If this was a sample of the almost legendary cepi fields of Failway, then its masters could easily produce enough narcotics to bring the civilised world to its knees. With this ample source of raw material Failway could afford the multiple essential distillations to produce the rarer drugs which, once experienced, were impossible to withdraw without madness intervening.

He moved into the field and examined the broad black petals without touching them. The rare fullness of the growth was surprising, for cepi does not take kindly to cultivation; in this he realised the significance of the ultraviolet moon hanging on a tracery of girders perhaps two miles above his head. These were unnatural plants growing in unnatural conditions under an unbelievable moon. All the shifting madness of transfinite space had seemed more natural than the alien deliberateness of this one field of terrible flowers. Again he sensed something incredibly wrong.

He was almost on top of the pickers before he saw them, so well did the colour of their skins match the hue of the brown foliage. He thought at first he had come across a company of negroes, and it was several seconds before anguished realisation told him that the blue-brown of their skins was the result of prolonged exposure to the blue, atrocious moon.

Most were nearly naked, some completely so, and they squatted on their haunches, Asiatic style, between the die-straight rows, eyes staring ahead, apparently unseeing, while their hands gathered the

cepi. Everyone was in an advanced state of cepi hypnosis. Dalroi might have been wrong, but he could have sworn that among the nearer group of degraded faces he could identify at least two of the members of the fact-finding group he had started out to trace. He shrugged. There was nothing he could do for them now.

There are many ways to gather cepi. The best way is to puncture the sac before it is fully ripe, and to allow the sap therein to dry in a small, milky tear on the outside of the growing pod. Such an operation needs to be performed with care, for the un-dry liquor is barbarously addictive and induces raw hallucinations completely without the restraint of prepared cepi. It is easily absorbed through the skin. Those who gather cepi tears with unprotected hands either die or are forced by the power of the drug to remain pickers for the rest of their short, befuddled lives. To gratify such an addiction a man willingly enters a state of slavery on a cepi field, and, since like all cepi derivatives the drug was specific, only that source could satisfy the craving.

Dalroi reconnoitred carefully. There were no guards that he could see; none would be needed, for cepi kept its own narcotic watch on pickers who attempted to default — but a line of sheds and lights on the edge of the shadow suggested an encampment where the pickers slept. Humidifier heads dotted about the rows argued that part of the cultivation process was a heavy drenching of the foliage. The two facts taken together suggested a daily routine or cycle of events. Dalroi became thoughtful.

Cepi was the kingpoint of the Failway slave empire; destroying the cepi destroyed Failway, but it would also bring death or madness to thousands dependent on Failway drugs. It would be a difficult decision to make.

"If Failway can be broken it can only be by one man who can't be touched by force or guile, fear or pity; one man whose frenzy is such that he could bear a million murders on his conscience without snapping; a man whose terrible thirst for vengeance would lead him on where even dedicated madmen fear to tread." Cronstadt had said that to him.

And: "It had to be somebody tough and somebody who was not afraid to kill; it had to be somebody with a passionate and relentless hatred of Failway and with a mind strong enough not to burn out under the strain ... whose innate capacity and ruthless determination ... transcended all other emotions."

"A highly intelligent gutter-rat," said Dalroi to nobody in particular. "That's me!"

The sound of his voice shocked him, for he was not in the habit of talking to himself. An alert part of his mind tripped on the incident and analysed it. The answer was worrying. Somehow the subtle vapour from the blossoms was affecting his thinking. Knowing the soporific effect of cepi on a non-addicted person he realised that if he was to take any effective action against the field he had better start quickly. Within an hour the vapour would have robbed him of his purpose; after two hours he might not bother to leave ... ever.

Again a voice swam in his mind. This time his own: *"Failway grows like a malignant cancer ... you can't remove such barbarous poisons ... you have to take up a knife and hack out the rotting flesh ... cauterising the wound with red-hot iron and cooling the iron with tears of pain."*

"Damn!" said Dalroi. The decision was made. He looked for a point as far away from the cepi as possible, where he could do some serious destructive thinking. Outside the sphere of light from the ungodly moon a vast, dark plain lurked in black bewilderment. There was no indication that mortal foot had ever travelled or explored except where the blue moon shone. Dalroi walked out into the darkness.

FIFTEEN

The cepi field was of earth, declining gently to a flat, glassy surface. Obviously the soil for the field had been imported and laid over whatever composed the basic plane of the continuum. The idea of dimensionless plain intrigued Dalroi. It was another of those mathematical abstractions become reality. He knelt and tried the surface with his hand. Not hot, not cold; glassy and flawless as far as he could tell. As to its composition, he remembered Gormalu's paradox: "Nothing inside, and the inverse of nothing outside it, or vice versa according to your mathematical standpoint."

The picture clarified. The mathematics of Failway projection had located on one side of the theoretical two-dimensional figure. On this surface Failway had set its pleasure installation walled against nobody knew what, and outside the wall they had established a field of cepi. Beyond that the plain stretched to ... infinity? Unchanged ... limitless ... empty? The notion worried him.

How do you know a place is infinite until you've reached the edge and proved it not so? How do you know it is empty until something comes out of the darkness and proves that it is not? It is unnatural for men to live on the very edge of the unknown and not be eternally curious.

A sudden dip in the illumination behind him broke the chain of thought. The moon was growing paler and duller with the passing seconds. He returned to the edge of the field and studied the position. The pickers had left the field, and the humidifiers were starting their saturating micro-spray. Here was a change in the cycle. Now, if ever, was the time to make his move.

The half-plan forming in his mind crystallised to completeness. Centrally in the field stood four towers which, drawing together as they ascended, supported the incredible spire on which burned the ultraviolet moon. That the structure was two miles high awed Dalroi not a bit. He was more interested in the fact that the illumination was controllable.

Searching carefully he located the cable-run to the towers, and, near the edge of the field, he found the control cabin, a small blockhouse which straddled the cable channel. Dalroi approached it warily, finally throwing a clump of earth at the metal roof. Nothing happened, so he guessed the technician responsible for dimming the moon had already left.

The door was unlocked, so he entered and closed it behind him. The cabin was warm and vibrating with the surge of power even though the moon was only at quarter intensity.

The controls were unfamiliar but a rapid analysis of their functions extracted a guiding principle. Much of the equipment concerned primary ignition, and this he ignored. He was not so much concerned with extinguishing the moon as with taking it to such intensity that the radiation became intolerable to the cepi. The task could prove dangerous. A meter graduated in novemdecillions, function unspecified, made the hair rise on the back of his neck. One false move when juggling with such power could well roast him where he stood.

With taut hands, and his brow dripping with perspiration, he turned the energy up. Needles climbed scales and approached and passed red warning limits without incident. The hum of power sang through the cabin like the tune of a thousand bees.

The light increased not in linear proportions but exponentially, rising to swift brilliance and still increasing almost as fast as the eye could adapt. The artificial moon became a sun, spilling blue fire. Searing radiation cut into the land and into the dark foliage with merciless intensity. Dalroi drew the shields as far as he could while balancing the controls, the next best thing to a prayer hovering on his lips.

The colour-shift of the radiated light told him that the delicate balance of the elements in the sun had been

destroyed. The visible light shift was towards the red end of the spectrum, and the heat rising fast as the energy entered the infra-red band.

If this was a simple drift of the radiation frequencies, the whole energy output might well enter the E.H.F. radio band, with unpredictable consequences. If, however, the sun was spreading its emissions over a wider portion of the electro-magnetic spectrum, part of the energy would excite radiations into the X-ray and gamma-radiation bands. The control cabin had a thin lead shield but this would be no protection against concentrated hard radiation, nor had he any means of knowing when he had received a fatal dosage.

It was a risk too grave to take. He punched the power off fast, hoping that it had achieved its purpose, and waited for the brilliance to subside. He had to time his movements carefully. As soon as the terrain outside was tenable the police squads would be coming out to get him. If he stayed too long he was set fair to be cut down by the local security force; if he moved too quickly he was chancing an unknown density of hard radiation with equally deadly results. Only ... a glance at the heavily-blued monitoring window shattered his calculations with a new problem which made the others pale into insignificance. The radiation outside, far from decreasing, had grown tenfold in its brilliance. The artificial sun was going nova.

He had heard of such things from the days when artificial luminaries had been sent into orbit about the earth to eliminate night. One such device, doubtless contaminated by cosmic debris, also went nova. A large continent called Africa changed its contours overnight; but that was a long time ago and nobody had dared to try it since. Now the hectic plasma-furnace high above his head had started a similar reaction, consuming the very elements which strove to contain it, and continuing without need of the energy input which had brought it into life.

Dalroi hastily brought the shutter over the window. The door was already shut fast but the light outside was so intense that the mere scatter rebounding from the crevices between the door and the frame flooded the interior with a level of radiation which hurt his eyes. An examination of the walls and roof of the cabin showed him that the structure offered but meagre protection, being merely to shield the technicians while the sun was being first run up to criticality. No provision had been made for this sort of catastrophe; indeed, it was doubtful if any sort of protection was possible.

He wondered idly how long the tower would last in the face of the heat which was still building rapidly. A rough calculation assured him that most of it would vaporise when the hyper-critical stage was reached. At about that time also the lead shielding of the cabin would be falling in silvery dribblets soon to be followed by the molten steel of the framework. The point was hypothetical. Dalroi figured he would be dead and dry long before the metals came to pouring point.

The temperature rose mercilessly. Already the walls were too hot to touch and the ventilators were admitting a smoke-laden fug which told of the fire ravaging the cepi in the field. Dalroi shut the ventilator tight. Though he badly needed the air-change he had to avoid the stupefying cepi fumes for as long as possible. Only as a last resort would he welcome its release from pain.

Dull thunder rocked the structure and knocked him on to the floor. A rising, continuous scream, like the voice of a thousand rocket jets, savaged his ears. Everything vibrated as though caught in the teeth of a mighty, rocking storm.

That is it! thought Dalroi.

Something coming: *a million banshees swooping down; ten million express trains driving down a vertical shaft; a hundred million intercontinental rockets converging on the same point at the*

same instant. Upheaval: fire spitting, earth shattering, winding, clawing, driving, universe-shaking cataclysm ... the terrible removal from disorientation to something worse and back again with soul-twisting transition. Time lapse! Time relapse! Time collapse!

"Die!" said the living fire.

"Hate!" said Dalroi. "Hate!"

CONCEPTION! DECEPTION!

TRANSCRIPTION! ABSTRACTION!

HATE! HATE! HATE!

Bruising shock; boulder upon boulder; shoulder twisted; knee where backbone used to be. Flesh afire, forehead flaming, eyes incandescent.

He could smell his flesh scorching as he struggled to his feet only to find his shoes were burning. Suddenly the light was gone. A swift shift from yellow into red, and he was standing in a helpless darkness that snored like a giant. He fought the shutter from the window, ignoring the blistering heat of the metal. Dying radiation sauntered in.

The sun had disappeared. Before him, far across the wasted field was a young volcano whose slopes concealed the wanton pit which the sun had burned for itself in falling. Somewhere far below, the sun still lived and spewed gouts of red-hot porridge into the loud and dying air. The crisis was over. Only when he noticed the ruined instruments under his hand did Dalroi realise that he had no right to be alive.

He moved. The door was buckled beyond repair but he crashed it savagely and the weakened metal buckled and broke. The terrain outside was a fantasy painted in red and black. The cepe was charred black ash, brittle charcoal trceries which fell constantly with minute rhyming tinkles on to the brick-faced soil. The only light was the blood-red radiance from the pit, deepening and dying even as he ran out into the darkness. It was a grotesque shadow-play, a macabre pictorial comment on a contemporary scene of destruction.

Ombudsman Rhodes looked up as the girl entered. "Your name is Zdenka?"

The girl frowned at the hospital dress in which she had been attired. "What business is it of yours what my name is?"

"It's my job to ask questions about people in trouble. One of my assistants pulled you out of the river. You were so stiff with drugs he didn't know whether to call an ambulance or a hearse. That sounds like trouble to me. Have you anything you'd like to add to the story."

"Go to hell!"

"Soon," said the Ombudsman patiently, "but first I have a few questions. Your identity tablet lists you as working for Ivan Dalroi. I'd have thought a girl could get into enough trouble around town without associating with someone like him."

"Dalroi's all right," said Zdenka. "It's just that he goes out and looks for trouble before it comes round looking for him."

"He seems to have found enough this time," said Rhodes critically. "If we're going to get him out of it I need every scrap of information I can get."

"What happened to him?"

"He bulldozed a sizable piece out of the side of Failway Terminal by diverting an express into the unloading bay, and was last seen heading into Failway, purpose unknown."

"That's Dalroi!" Zdenka said. "He was all set to tear the place apart."

"One man?"

"Dalroi's not one man. He's a kilo of fissile uranium with a grudge against everybody who doesn't see life the way he sees it. Failway enticed his girlfriend away, and he means to make somebody sweat because of it."

"As an individual, he can only do so much damage before he falls."

"Then you don't know Dalroi. Dalroi's fights are a well-known local phenomena. When he gets in a tight corner he goes mad. I don't think he knows it himself, but nobody can touch him, and ... "

"And?" asked Rhodes.

"I don't know," Zdenka said. "I've seen it but I don't believe it. Somehow he — jumps. One second he's being threatened with a gun and the next second he's holding it. You can't see him go. His reaction speed is fantastic"

"That agrees with my own information," said the Ombudsman. "How much more do you know about what's going on?"

"Not much. Dalroi was working for the Cronstadt committee, but he never takes anybody's word as gospel. He wanted to know more about the committee itself. I located an ex-journalist named Harry Dever and took him to the cabin at Passfields for an interview with Dalroi. Somebody attacked us at the cabin and Harry Dever was shot. I think they must have used a hypo-gun on me because the next thing I remember was awakening on the river bank with your assistant trying to persuade me back to life."

"And you remember nothing of what happened to you between the time you were at the cabin and when we found you?"

"Nothing, why?"

"You'd been treated with a very full measure of a somewhat exotic truth drug normally available only to police laboratories. Somebody very much wanted some information out of you and didn't much care if he killed you to obtain it. When he'd got what he wanted he dropped you in the river. You were lucky ... The drugs slowed your metabolism else you'd have died from exposure even though you didn't drown. You were never intended to come out of the river alive. Have you any idea who did that to you?"

"I — I can't remember anything. It's all a blank."

"Very well," said Rhodes, "but try. There's an unseen war going on which could break out into the most bloody massacre of the century. What it's all about I can only guess, but Dalroi's in the middle of it somewhere and if he isn't dead already then it's only a matter of time. Failway against Dalroi is the sort of odds which makes my blood run cold, and I'm not even sure the situation is as simple as that. If you can remember anything at all which might help you've got to let me know."

"Just before Dever and I were attacked he started to talk about Gormalu."

"Anything else?"

"Dever said the Black Knights were looking for Dalroi — asking questions."

"Yes," said the Ombudsman quietly. "I rather imagine they would be. There's a loose association between the Cronstadt committee and the Black Knights, but they make strained and unhappy bedfellows. It will be interesting to see what happens to Democracy when the bonds of expediency break down. It will be even more interesting when they learn they've been fighting the wrong battle. Between them they have conspired to put Dalroi precisely where his opponents most wish him to be. In the name of Humanity I've got to help Dalroi in any way I can. That's why I still think you can help me."

"So help me, I've told you all I know."

"I don't think you have. You've omitted one person from the story — somebody who could be vital. I'm familiar with the tactics of Failway and of the Black Knights, and it was neither of their teams who attacked you at Passfields, else I scarcely think you'd be alive to tell the tale. Neither of them have need to use rivers to dispose of unwanted bodies. I can only conclude, therefore, that the attacker was a friend of Dalroi's — and that raises the question of what he wanted from you. Tell me Zdenka, why did you kill Harry Dever — and who was it caught you in the act?"

Her outraged reaction was stillborn, nullified by the Ombudsman's swift horror at something behind her at the door. He reached for the gun at his knee, but the plate glass of the door shattered and a gas shell cracked against the wooden desktop before he could complete the action. As the vapour fanned out the paralysis was instantaneous. He stiffened and fell, his features locked in outraged amazement and his eyes fixed glassily on the black masks and cowls of the intruders.

SIXTEEN

Dalroi made it back to the great wall while there was still enough light to give him bearings. He turned away from the door through which he had come and headed into the darkness. Shortly he ran down the earth ramp and on to the glassy basic strata. The light failed completely and only the occasional touch of his fingers on the concrete gave him his bearings.

He was careful. If he lost contact with the wall there was a reasonable certainty that he could wander forever on the black plain and never find anything but darkness and the black, flat floor. He was playing a hunch that somewhere on the perimeter of Failway Two there was another door, one at which he would not be expected. Against him were the facts that there need not be another door, and even if there was he could easily miss it with his fingertips.

He remembered the infra-red goggles in his pocket and snapped them on. Very, very faintly the wall stood out in contrast to the glassy plain and enabled him to speed his progress. He stopped abruptly when he saw the light.

It was no ordinary light, but a form of dark-lamp with a pencil beam. Approaching cautiously he saw the chain of reflectors on rafts some fifty yards out, a typical beam-trap for those who walked in the darkness.

From this he knew both that there was a door close by and that he was probably expected. The goggles enabled him to pass the beam trap without springing the alarm, and the door was easily opened. He entered, half expecting a more malicious trap, but found none. Apparently, complete reliance was placed on the alarm, and this he had avoided.

He found himself in a tunnel built through the great outer wall of Failway Two. It was similar to the first

through which he had passed to find the field of cepi. At the other end was a hall corresponding to the one where the giant generators had been, but this one was concerned with building. Prefabricated palaces and panoramas, constructed with amazing imagination and realism, stood awaiting the craftsmen's final touch. Everything from furniture down to the daintiest bowl was here assembled and matched for atmosphere and authenticity before being introduced into the pleasure world beyond. This was the property department of Failway Two.

The scale of the project was staggering. Fully a whole new town of oriental wonder being assembled in a way no Prince of Orient could possibly have imagined. At this moment the lights were low and nobody was about, as if there was a lull between working shifts. Dalroi moved swiftly between flights of marble steps and gilded minarets towards where he judged the pleasure-ground to be.

Another door, and he was back in the world of make-believe, a furtive figure slinking in the corner of bazaar and alley in the dim twilight of a mock-oriental evening. The shock of Gormalu's unofficial night seemed to have been forgotten by the throng in the plazas. The cafés, dancing rooms and temples of love, were doing good business. Outwardly everything was running as normal but the tenseness in the Failway staff betrayed the scent of manhunt. Dalroi realised he needed a disguise if he was to remain long undetected.

A lone figure in a deserted alley gave him an idea. He closed swiftly and struck once, dragging the limp figure into a doorway. Before he could begin the exchange of clothes there was a yell from somewhere overhead, some witness to the assault. Briefly a siren sounded an alarm and men came running. Dalroi cursed and decided to get out fast. He headed up the alley away from the running feet, skidded round a corner and scattered a row of bystanders, adding to the rising confusion.

He had turned into a main thoroughfare, and the pavements were crowded. He plunged through crowds of amazed pleasure seekers, scattering them like skittles by the sheer force of his powerful shoulders. At the next intersection he nearly fell into a trap. Security men had been alerted and waited with drawn guns. He saw them in time to dive into an open door and up a flight of stairs to a balcony. The balcony ran round to the back of the house and from there he leaped down through ornamental trellis entwined with creeper and decorated with lanterns, stumbled through a luminescent fishpond and was away over the walls like a breath of wind.

Only luck had saved him from the first screaming bullets, but it was stamina and desperation which enabled him to clear the closing mantrap. The walks were suddenly alive with running men. Whether or not they knew his identity, Failway was taking no chances. The bullets were intended to kill and no surrender was offered or made possible. Dalroi escaped the only way he knew; by running further, faster and over obstacles more daunting than his pursuers dared assay. Soon he cleared the more thickly populated zone and broke into the quieter, more select and even more exotic areas which lay beyond.

In a silent street where the scents of luxury were so strong they held almost a life of their own, he paused to regain his breath and to analyse the situation. Time was running out on him. Shrill whistles told of the hunters not very far behind, gathering reinforcements with the passing minutes. By this time the whole area would be surrounded and the net would be closing remorselessly. Only a radical rethinking of his tactics could save him.

A door opened nearby and a girl looked out along the pavement under the flowering trees. Dalroi caught his breath and pressed into a shadow, but as she turned, the lamp-light glowed on her face and tresses and the name burst involuntarily from his lips.

"Berina!" The irony of the situation made his mouth go dry.

"Ivan!" She gave a gasp of surprise. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for the reason why Failway wanted you in particular."

"Is it you they're after?"

"Nobody else," said Dalroi.

She looked wildly up and down the street. Nobody was in sight. "Quickly, in here."

He hesitated and then followed her through the door into an atmosphere rich with warmth and fragrant with incense. The dwelling was decorated with oriental luxury, overwhelming with its charm and grace. Magnificent drapes, and screens of the finest hand-worked tracery contrasted brilliantly with couches and redwood furniture of such delicacy that it seemed the lightest usage would make them fly asunder. Here was a cool symphony of seductiveness, refined, poised, exquisitely timeless and unreal.

"Bitch!" said Dalroi, looking round. "I loved you with a different kind of love than you dispense here."

She looked at him with a certain puzzled wonderment. "I hadn't thought you'd remember me long."

"Does the moon forget the sun?"

"That's rather a wonderful thing to say. Is it possible that you loved that much?"

Dalroi scowled. "Love is a catalyst. The finest things and the worst a man discovers are already within him. Loving you was an indispensable hell. Such an experience is a window to a new world. Even afterward the sense of longing continues to corrode the soul."

"My God!" said Berina. "I never even guessed you had a soul."

"How could you, not having one of your own. That kind of pain has no physical analogue. Nothing is ever quite the same again."

"Stay with me."

"No," said Dalroi. "That's a mistake I've made before. It cost me a great deal to learn to live with myself again. I'd sooner face what lies out there."

She looked up, her mouth pouting with rare amusement. "I can make you stay if I wish."

"Not any more," said Dalroi. "Once I'd have fallen at your feet and wept at the opportunity. Now I can resist even the temptation — so much can a man lose of himself."

"Poor Ivan! Do I detect another pallid romance? What's her name? Has she the charms of a sweet seductress? Is she skilled in the finer arts of love?"

"You don't understand."

"Can she play your emotions like a harp, as I can; or give you the taste of rare sensations such as you never knew existed?"

"You don't understand!" Dalroi's anger flared. "My present mistress is a far more constant courtesan. Her name is Vengeance: vengeance against Failway, against the pressure, the bribery and the blackmail; vengeance against the rot that has got everything, against the system that took you from me."

"Stay with me," she said. "Don't you hear the whistles? The Security men are coming. They're combing the streets."

"I'll take my chances. I'm getting out."

"You don't have to. They won't search here. I can see that they leave this house alone."

"What kind of promise is that?" asked Dalroi. "Those men out there are killers and they're out for blood — my blood."

"I have influence ... "

"I'll bet you have. The influence of the cheese in the mousetrap. The oldest bait in the world."

She struggled to her feet in fury. "You never change, do you? No time is inappropriate for the vicious gibe or the stab to the heart."

"You've played me false before, remember? What makes you think I'd trust you now?"

She thrust herself between him and the door. "Don't be a fool!"

"Get out of my way!" said Dalroi.

"No, you must not go out there now." She threw her arms about his neck and kissed him.

There was a sudden crash as the door burst open, kicked violently from outside.

"An intriguing situation," said Peter Madden, entering, gun in hand. "I rather thought I'd find you here."

SEVENTEEN

"My God!" said Peter Madden. "You've a great deal to answer for. If killing you wasn't a matter of prime urgency I'd take you to the Security wing and extract that much vengeance from your body before you died."

Dalroi looked at the radiation pistol and at Madden's tunic streaked with charcoal and still acrid from the lingering smoke of the ruined cepi field.

"Looking down the wrong end of your gun is becoming a habit," he said. "It's a vice I can afford to do without."

"The cure is permanent and guaranteed," said Madden. "I shall shoot you if you dare to move an inch. Even if I didn't kill you you'd not be much use without a chest. You're a danger to yourself and to everyone else. I can't take chances." His finger tightened on the trigger.

The explosion of a slug pistol shattered the silence. Madden stared at his hand in disbelief and agony, and the radiation pistol clattered to the floor. Berina kept him covered with her still-smoking gun.

"Thanks!" said Dalroi. "He was just mad enough to try it"

Madden's eyes were full of cold shock. "That was very foolish, Berina. If I had killed him I might have overlooked the fact that you sought to harbour him. Even yet I might give you a second chance."

"Since when did you ever give anyone any sort of chance?" asked Berina quietly. "Live or die, your whole damn organisation is starting to collapse. I, for one, intend to help it on its way."

"You're a little premature," said Madden. "I'll surely break you for this. You know how well I can do that."

"Yes." She spat vehemently in his face. "I've seen what you've done to the others. Do you think that entitles you to anything but hate?"

"The biter bit," said Dalroi pleasantly. "But now we're due for a short session of questions and answers."

"Don't waste your breath," said Madden. "The squad will be here looking for me in a moment. Under no circumstances can you be permitted to escape."

"Nevertheless," Dalroi picked up the radiation pistol and adjusted it to low intensity meaningly, "I think we'll try. I don't need to tell you what this weapon can do to the eyeballs, so I advise you not to become tongue-tied. There's something I'd rather like to know: exactly what's the urgency to see me dead?"

Madden glanced down at the cepi-ash streaks on his tunic. "Consedo, Failway goods-yard, and now this — and you still need to ask? You're a hell of a fellow, Dalroi! When you're around I don't sleep so well at nights."

"The feeling is mutual," said Dalroi, "but you've dodged the question. You had me measured for a coffin long before Consedo. From the first moment we met you've had it in for me. Who gave you the instructions to kill me, Madden?"

"The dislike was purely personal. I took exception to your face."

"No," said Dalroi, raising the pistol. "There's more to the story than that. Securing my death was your prime objective. I want to know on whose decision and why the urgency?"

His finger moved imperceptibly but sufficient. Madden clapped his hands over his eyes in sudden anguish.

"Take a tip," said Dalroi. "Never defy a man who has nothing to lose. He tends to forget the niceties of something called fair-play."

"It isn't that easy," said Madden. "Even if I wanted to I couldn't talk. There's a psychosomatic trigger planted in my brain which prevents me from answering most of the things you want to know, no matter what pressures you use. You can't get information from a corpse."

Dalroi shrugged. "I'm not particular which way you die. Tell me about Gormalu. I already know he isn't human."

Madden crossed and uncrossed his fingers with agitation. "I don't think you are either, Dalroi. Not quite. But you're dangerous, Dalroi, far more dangerous than you know yourself. You're a danger to all of us. Gormalu knew that and wanted you killed quietly if possible. In his own twisted way he was quite a humanitarian. You see, somebody wants you dead and a lot of people are liable to get hurt by the very act of your execution. You have no idea how desperately they want you dead. Why the hell don't you die reasonably?"

"Because I choose not to," said Dalroi. "I don't scare easily, either. Not any more. I'll see you both and Gormalu to hell, and it won't be in easy stages."

"I doubt if that's true, but if it was only us you had to contend with you'd stand about one per cent chance of living through the next twenty-four hours. As it stands you've more trouble coming to you than you could dream of in a lifetime's nightmares. I don't give you one chance of survival in infinity raised to the infinite power. There's no hope for you, but if humanity means anything you'll try and arrange to receive

your execution somewhere pretty lonely."

"Keep talking," said Dalroi. "Who's behind all this?"

Madden pressed his knuckles to his eyes. "If I even tried to tell you, my heart would freeze."

"Let it," said Dalroi. His trigger finger tightened again.

"Dalroi, for pity's sake!"

"Failway killed all the pity that was ever in me."

Madden's eyes were filled with misery and fear. His words stumbled awkwardly as he strove to pick his meanings without stumbling over the mental trigger which would freeze his heart.

"Failway level ... is a spot of three-dimensional reality inserted into a pattern of stabilised chaos ... with an electronic rope ladder which lets you in and out. No mind can grasp the universes beyond ... but things live out there in the multiple darknesses ... things which are beyond our knowing."

"Is it things who so much want me dead?"

Madden opened his mouth to speak, but his eyes dilated with sudden horror. He fought back a choking sob and clutched at his chest. Breath rasped in a dry throat and he tottered and slumped to the ground. Then for a second he rallied and his hand sought Dalroi's.

"Dalroi, you've got to stop them! For Humanity's sake! Stop them!"

"Where?" said Dalroi. "How?"

"Go to Failway Six. Careful. They're waiting for you there. That's the only way to get at them. You can do it ... "

The last sentence choked away into a half sob. Dalroi knelt and examined the prostrate form.

"Is he dead?" asked Berina.

Dalroi laid his head on Madden's chest and listened to the heart. "Almost. Whoever laid that mental block forgot to take into account the effect of years of addiction to cepi. He might even live if he isn't moved."

Berina held out the slug pistol, but Dalroi thrust it aside.

"No. If he lives he's earned it. Toward the end he was genuinely on our side. He sacrificed his life to give me that last answer. Now I have to move fast. If this situation is one half as bad as I'm thinking, there's going to be such hell let loose as would make Madden's police state look like a benevolent institution."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to keep an appointment — on Failway Six."

"Are you crazy?" Berina stared at him aghast. "You can't go into Failway Six! Don't you see, that's what they've been waiting for. Madden said so himself. That's where they want you to go."

"I don't much care," said Dalroi. "I've lost all capacity for that kind of thinking. Either they'll get me or I'll get them. It's a question that has to be resolved."

"But why do they want to kill you, in particular?"

Dalroi felt his head. Deep inside he felt the throbbing rhythm — not heartbeat, but something vastly more powerful — quieter now, but the same pulse that flared sometimes to activity and drove him crazily to achieve things which were far beyond his sanest comprehension.

"I don't know," said Dalroi. "There's something living inside of me, something bigger than all hell and twice as ugly. But it's something which belongs. I think it's that they're afraid of, so afraid they're prepared to lose all Failway and damn several million souls to see it destroyed. Don't you see, they know what it is, but I don't. I have to go into Failway Six in order to find myself."

"It's your funeral!"

"You know," said Dalroi, "even that phrase has lost its sting. Is there a way I can get into Failway Six without going back to the terminus?"

"There's a service shuttle connection direct, but it's not designed for the living."

"Where can I find it?"

"I don't advise you to."

"Why not?"

"We call it the graveyard service. If anyone dies in Failway the bodies are consigned to Failway Six via the graveyard service. Don't ask me why the hell. I assume they've a crematorium down there. Do you want to start out looking for yourself by travelling in a coffin?"

"I don't have much choice," said Dalroi. "How can I get aboard without attracting attention?"

Berina shrugged. "If that's what you want I can arrange it"

"For heaven's sake do that," Dalroi said. "I should hate whatever's coming to happen here. Too many people around. If they're waiting for me on Failway Six then I'd better not keep them waiting. I only hope they've chosen to do battle in a place where they can do the maximum amount of damage to the minimum of people."

"You think you stand a chance?"

"They're afraid of me," said Dalroi simply. "There has to be some reason for that."

Together they left the house. No security men were in the immediate vicinity and people were returning to the streets now that the search had passed. Berina led the way and Dalroi followed at a discreet distance. Near the outskirts of the golden city the oriental camouflage gave way to the functional lines of a service area. She motioned for him to loiter while she went inside.

Minutes later she returned and beckoned him to follow into what he rightly surmised to be a mortuary. A clammy chill hugged his skin as he followed between rows of surgical white slabs to the door where a man with a white apron and pallid skin waited with a metal casket. Dalroi looked into his eyes. The fellow was in an advanced state of cepi hypnosis, obeying Berina's instructions with a leaden dullness which branded him as nearer automaton than human.

Berina looked at Dalroi and at the coffin, and there was agony in her eyes.

"You have to do this, don't you?"

"Yes," said Dalroi. "You know me."

She nodded. "I thought that's what you'd say. I was a fool ever to come into Failway. You know that, don't you?"

"No," Dalroi said. "I don't think you had much choice. You see, they planned it that way, hoping I'd follow."

"My God!"

"That's a sample of how they manipulate people. That's the reason I have to go through with this. It's them or me, and they aren't going to stop pushing people around until either they've won or until I stop them."

"Give them hell, Dalroi. If ever you loved me, give them hell!"

Dalroi climbed into the coffin. She placed one kiss on his forehead then arranged the lid. Darkness. He felt the rollers spin as the coffin moved along the track then the firm vibration as the load was picked up by a belt en-route for the graveyard shuttle and the unknowns of Failway Six.

The loading was automatic. The coffin hit the end of the capsule with a clang which made his ears ring. Then the nerveless excitement of the speeding track and the dimensionless agony of shooting the matrix field. In his confinement, Dalroi screamed. Such was the nature of the stark fantasy and claustrophobia which the journey induced that he was still screaming when the coffin reached Failway Six.

From his nightmares he disentangled two stimuli which had direct reference to reality. The first was an overwhelming drowsiness caused by near asphyxiation, the second was a vibrant roar which shook the very fabric of his environment. He kicked open the lid and sat up to find himself suddenly at the mouth of hell. He was nearing the hearth of a furnace the size of which made him gasp with amazement. The inexorable black steel belt seemed destined to deliver him into the incandescent chamber which rose like the nave of some small cathedral charged with blinding radiance.

Swinging out rapidly, he balanced for precious seconds while he tried to gauge the hazards of a jump, then kicked off into the darkness. It was a blind drop, for the intense light of the furnace robbed his eyes of the ability to differentiate things in the heated gloom below the hearth.

He landed some twenty feet below, one foot striking the casing of something which may have been an oil pump, and twisted himself clumsily. Agony burned into a sprained knee. He was in a world of pumps and boilers like the engine room of one of the wickedly powerful tugs he used to stow away on when, as a youth, home life became particularly intolerable.

For many minutes he stood in the darkness under the hearth and listened to the pulsing pipes and savoured the richness of heated oil while he rested his knee and recomposed his nerves. The drop had shaken him more than he had supposed; more, in fact, than had his passage through transfinity. Something about the environment was gnawing at his mind. *My God it is! See now, oil feed compressor ... gauges ... feedlines ... balancer ... jets ... injectors ... Oh My God! Gear like this we used on the Vagrant Curlew ... only there we fed turbines and here they feed crematoria. Nobody in their right senses would use this set-up as a meat fryer ... unless ... unless it was put here especially for me!*

His senses reeled in the thick heat. Psychological warfare! Somebody had stolen a memory out of his mind and built it into a pit at the back of nowhere. The elements of madness built into the equipment. *These boys aren't missing any tricks! Dalroi, what the hell is in you to make them go to this trouble?* Only the black belt above his head with its occasional steel coffin destined for the fire kept him

in touch with reality. There was an unbearable feeling of terrifying alien-ness about the whole idea which made his bones ache deep inside.

What the hell have I got myself into?

He looked for a way out, and found it. A deserted corridor, dim and brown like that of a school he once had known, stretched away to a flight of concrete stairs. He didn't need to count the steps to remember their feel. Another part of life, another memory trapped in concrete, out of context, an idle snapshot turned to reality.

Insanity must be something like this!

EIGHTEEN

A door gave on to a street, and as he stepped through the whole weight of his dismay and anguish fell upon him. It was night, damp and chill, and the street was a complex of all the wasted and crippled streets that ever had torn his soul under the dim lamplight.

If he had hoped to find himself alone, as he had so often been alone, he was disappointed. Figures moved, as figures always did, forlornly along the dark pavements calling or talking to others, or singing to themselves in consolation, or walking the roads unseeing while contending with some inner misery. If this was the place of his execution then his hopes of dying alone were not likely to be realised.

In the incredible fidelity of scene and atmosphere the wonder was horribly complete. The property-men of Failway possessed an artistry almost lost to the outside world.

Given a mood for a particular area they interpreted it into a reality of bricks and paint, light and shade, artifact and object, with a skill which was phenomenal.

No panorama was too large or detail too small for their attentions, and the whole scheme was blended by a diabolical understanding of the whims and foibles of human nature. As a work of three-dimensional art a Failway installation was incredible; as an interpretation of the human soul it was clever to the point of insane genius.

The Elysian-fields of Failway One drew the finest fancies from mythology, and the mind and body became transported to a miniature world of light and wonder, modelled on the grandeur and the dreams of ancient Greece and Rome, Failway Two took the splendours of everybody's dream of orient, and in a blaze of gold and contrast wove a new magic, such that the mightiest of eastern princes would have cried in awe and amazement.

So also with the turbulent wilderness and excitement of Failway Three, the soft, sweet seductive sensuality of Failway Four; and the brash, brazen passions of Failway Five — complete, insanely accurate and believable dream-worlds of fantasy, pleasure and escape.

Only here, on Failway Six, did the unnatural cunning of the grand deception shock the mind into awareness of the inhuman genius which controlled the whole design. Just as Failway interpreted with quiet precision every element of gaiety, wonder, awe, excitement, and the thousand human emotions, so did they also interpret the dark and the sordid. Dalroi, with his quick appreciation of atmosphere and intent, was shattered by the impact of the world into which he stepped.

He stood almost blindly for a few moments, forcing his mind to accept the truth of what he saw. Failway Six was a close analogy of all the scenes and places where, as a boy, he had known fright, anger, confusion, hate, hunger and uncontrollable dismay. It was a mirror held up to his soul. He felt as forlorn

and dirty as the streets on which he stood. Failway Six was a city of inhospitable streets, callous slum tenements and cruel, soul-destroying gloom. It was the environmental influence straight out of Dalroi's psyche.

It took him a few moments to convince himself that this unholy place was not the unfortunate byproduct of apathy, time and vicious economics, but had been deliberately constructed, brick by sorry, blackened brick, to some Satanic, detailed master plan. High-riding over the narrow streets and alleys an ancient electric locomotive hauled a train of filthy, dilapidated carriages in fine with the rooftops, shattering the brittle silence with an unkempt roar. Humidifiers, simulating rain, laid a fine carpet of condensation over the scarred and unwashed roads, and from scraggy curtained windows of a dozen lighted hulks of buildings flowed shafts of discordant jazz, or bawdy voices raised in alcoholic song or anger.

Dalroi savoured the atmosphere carefully. Being a connoisseur of the moods of men he could appreciate the faithful reproduction of the sordid and the desperate. The setting was perfect, he reflected sickly, down to the last dark puddle and the floating grains of dirty chaff therein. Anything could happen in such a hateful place.

He moved instinctively into the shadows, avoiding the illumination of the greenish gas flares, and carefully picking his way from door to door, exploring the mood and trying to understand the depth of the genius behind it. Everything fitted too neatly into place: from the worn steps and the dirty, blistered paint to the patched fanlights and the greasy halls, the effect exactly matched the credible.

He turned to an alley undercutting the railway and was not amazed to find it lined with cracked ceramic tiles and rotting bricks. Desolation was complete and accurate even to the slight stalactite of a water drip through the concrete up above. This was the atmosphere of black despair that drove the humanity out of a man and led him down to the gutter by the shortest available route. Here were all the elements of crime and loneliness and violence brought to reality by the most vivid and ruthless piece of scene-setting that ever existed.

Dalroi moved warily ahead, uncertain now of his next move and still trying to capture the implications of this atrocious place. Breaking free of the damp, black tunnels, he moved out into a cobbled street where the lights shone through the windows of a bar and the hot breath of liquor and coarse voices spilled out on to damp pavements. The subtlety of the scene closed round him like a dead hand clutching. He laughed mirthlessly as the trick unfolded in his mind. This place was inhuman, alien. It was tailored with minute precision to key into the memories and habit pattern of Ivan Dalroi! They had brought him home to die!

He felt the almost masochistic lure to encounter the pangs of past hopelessness, to slip back into the mire of shades and secrets which had characterised his youth. He entered the bar and scanned the assembly, knowing before he looked that every sorry character would be in place. He ordered splitza laced with white spirit, as he always had in the Old Town, and savoured the colourless fire as it trickled down his throat.

The atmosphere was insidious, working its way down inside him, filling half-forgotten needs with an almost soporific exactness. Detail by detail, with exquisite finesse, the place seeped into the voids in the dark side of his soul. There was no doubt about it now — this was the place appointed for his execution. Somebody had constructed it deliberately, with ruthless knowledge of the workings of his mind. These were the streets of Hell.

He studied the occupants of the bar carefully. Nearly all the men were Failway patrons, drawn by the inexplicable urge to spend their vacations in the squalid shadows of Failway Six. These were the haunted men, the men drawn inexorably back seeking to rediscover the fatal fascination of some dark hour in their

lives when they had acquired the taste for passions which only the skillful *demimonde* of Failway could unfailingly supply. Here and there were sailors back from the vicious waterfronts of half a hundred ports, tainted with subtle vices from the orient and restless appetites from the tropics. This was the place where the cold-eyed thirsting could find its slaking and where the sleepless agonies of wanting found a little brief relief.

The women were painted with a lavish imprecision which stamped them for what they were. These were some of the legions of hostesses employed in hopeless bondage by Failway to cater for the patron's wants. Failway training and selection, ever meticulous, matched the women to the particular class of clientele. From the naïve nymphs of Failway One to the oriental coquettes of Failway Two, the pattern traced wearily down. Failway Three, with its sharp-eyed, sophisticated adventuresses was replaced by the skillful seductresses of Failway Four and in turn by the gilded, padded courtesans of Failway Five. Failway Six dispensed with dreaming and smacked the hateful cast of cold reality over the souls of men.

The more he thought about it, the more the wrongness grew to a certainty and the certainty to a stifled panic born not of fear of death but the proximity of the completely unknown. The immaculate exactness of the environment betrayed the skeleton of alien intent by its very fidelity. No man, being mortal and therefore liable to error, could have designed Failway Six in all its wretchedness. The whole degrading work was of a higher order of art and perception than any human genius could attain — and its very existence denoted a level of skills and technology which left him gasping. He ordered more splitza and settled into a corner. There was nothing he could do but wait.

With the gradual drift of evening the bar slowly emptied as patrons and hostesses turned away into the night, singly or together, moving like shadows back into the enfolding shadows. Nobody bothered Dalroi and he bothered no one, nor did he notice one curious glance nor any hint of the eyes which must surely be watching him. For half an hour he drank alone, becoming finally aware that even the staff had deserted to leave him in sole possession of the bar, lit and open and in every way credible except for the complete lack of life other than his own.

If Dalroi experienced anything at all it was an ache of loneliness, the abhorrent vacuum of enforced solitude, the antithesis of security. He accepted the fury gathering above him as unalterable and unavoidable, and in his quiet fatalism he forgot even to be greatly afraid. A growing silence over the artificial city attracted his attention and puzzled him, for though it was long into the simulated night even a sleeping city normally has its slight aura of sound. Unable longer to restrain his curiosity he finally left the bar. At first he encountered only completely deserted places, but as he turned a corner the reason for the accumulating silence became apparent.

Dark vehicles, like those of a forbidden army, were traversing the streets. Everywhere a quiet and orderly evacuation was taking place. Teams of figures were entering the buildings and waking the occupants, conducting them to places on the trucks swiftly and without fuss. The essential urgency of the occasion was overruled by the imperative need to avoid panic. Dalroi mentally saluted the organisers of Failway. They were caterers for every need including the need to evacuate silently an entire city.

Carefully he moved through the streets towards the transfinite passenger shuttle installation. Again the precise bonds of organisation were apparent. The immense shuttles slid away at one-second intervals, programmed for Failway Terminal, and the fleet of vehicles kept coming with a steady stream of hastily awakened sleepers, many of whom were obviously under cepi hypnosis and had no idea of the nature of their nocturnal journey.

Later the Security men began to comb the streets, looking for stragglers, but the search was perfunctory. Dalroi climbed to the roof of a group of deserted flats and lay out of sight while the search went past. The weight of exhaustion and sleepless hours bore down on him, and, unwillingly, he slept.

When he awoke the whole city was empty and abandoned. He reconnoitred the silent streets and probed into the buildings without finding trace of any remaining soul. So far as he could tell he was the only living thing in the whole area of Failway Six. Although it was now time for the artificial morning the plasma-sun remained dark, and a sinister silence held deep over the unofficial night.

He grew uncomfortably aware that the sky was growing lighter, not with the stained greys of the artificial morning which would never come, but with a mercuric blueness only just out of ultra-violet. Checking the charge in the radiation pistol Dalroi climbed down from the high roof to the murky streets, dim crevasses in the unlikely dawn.

The city had been abandoned with all services still running and as he touched the pavements he experienced a twinge of incredible loneliness that behind the dimly lighted windows no sleepers stirred or lovers moved or cried or sang or wept. Only his footsteps blunted the quick silence.

"Make no mistake," said Dalroi to his unseen persecutors. "If I survive I'll hunt you to the far corners of infinity."

There was a white flash, brilliant, eclipsing vision with a dynamic blankness. It filled the whole atmosphere and coruscated and burned on corners and projections. Dalroi himself became the centre of a shaft of living white fire which ate at him with tongues of cold flame and then as rapidly was extinguished. The white fires flickered and died; nothing was burnt, or was scorched or showed any sign of difference.

Dalroi's skin crawled. This was a new phenomenon, of unknown potency, but presumably it was designed to be deadly. In what way? His attention fastened on the radiation pistol in his hand, an incredible fear forming in his mind. In verification he squeezed the trigger. The gun mashed under his fingers and disintegrated into crumbling powder. Stupidly he watched the particles fall.

Metal! Fear flashed sharply. Something happened to the molecular binding forces in the metal. All metals? He turned to a lamp standard and smote it sharply with his hand. The blow catalysed some reaction and the standard broke crisply and fell in untidy, crumbling shards before his feet. *Not only metal!* Glass, ceramic, plastic — every substance the lamp had contained crumbled to sickening dust under his probing toes. *My God! The whole damn place is made of dust!*

His shoes disintegrated with a sudden exotherm which made him jump. The fibres of his clothing shredded, unwillingly at first, then with growing impetus, and the particles dusted as they fell from his body, leaving him naked and unarmed. He looked in bewilderment at the tall empty buildings which surrounded him. Such lights as had shone were slowly going out as the filaments fatigued. How sound were these apparently solid walls and the hideous banks of masonry?

Somewhere in a clock a pivot broke, causing an escapement to jam. The pendulum swung with just sufficient momentum to jar the mechanism. The catalysis touched off, and the mechanism crumbled into powder. The pendulum fell through the bottom of the case on to a marble mantel-shelf, and a seven storey tenement crumbled into a heap of noisy dust. A bursting fuse shattered its cartridge and a line of tawdry shops became a pile of flowing particles; a cistern burst and two blocks disappeared.

The last of the lights collapsed and died, but in the artificial sky remained the weird blue fluorescence, an ungodly aurora, and it was by this light that Dalroi moved. As his bare feet touched the ground the pavements crumbled into bowls of dust under the impact. Sewers collapsed like dusty deathtraps, and on either side the tall buildings began to totter and wave as some small impetus touched off a chain reaction which led to complete disintegration.

He was half afraid of choking in the dust, but it settled swiftly by some electrostatic charge, though several times he sank deeply into drifts of crumbled brick dust and nearly suffocated on that account. Of

the unknown enemy he saw no sign, but they had in one incredible second robbed him of weapons, of cover, and of everything outside of his own body which a lifetime of fighting had taught him to use for self-preservation.

Somebody wants me dead! ... So badly they don't measure the cost in ordinary terms. Hell! What's so special about me? I'm Dalroi ... and I've got something burning at the back of my brain ... and sometimes I get almighty mad ... and do things I never quite remember. What is it a man can have which makes him so special they'd tear the universe apart to see him in his grave? And if he has it ... how does he recognise it and use it to survive?

Something blew up with a jet of fire, and a whole quarter of the artificial city slid into oblivion. Behind the dusty desolation the quick, trim lines of the transfinite passenger shuttle installation came into view. He waded through the dusting rubble, knowing what he would find yet unable to resist the faint hope that the installation was untouched. A bright shuttle capsule mashed like a rotten tin and turned to dusty dribbles as he touched it with his hand. With eyes long past astonishment he watched the matrix coils powder to brown and copper and gold on the crumbling floor. On a tottering girder a solitary notice hanging over what had been the passenger bays crumbled its topical legend:

NO WAY OUT

"You can say that again!" said Dalroi sourly to nobody at all.

He was trapped on a transfinite level, and out there — out in the multiple darknesses all around — waited the something which so desperately wanted him dead; something whose power and malice was to be feared with more than ordinary dead.

Trapped! He had been trapped in transfinity before and managed to escape. How? No memory of that. What happens when I touch the limit of endurance? What comes over me that's all fire and fury and crazing bitterness and anger? Oh God! What untapped power becomes unleashed? What is it that lives in me in the dark side of the mind?

Nothing happened.

Why don't they come out and get me? Are they biding their time before the final punch — or are they afraid? Afraid? That's a laugh! I might just manage a good spit at them if the damn dust hadn't made my mouth so dry. Why should they be afraid of me? I'm Dalroi ... I was born in the Old Town precinct ... and a little bit of the Devil has got into my brain. Is that the sort of crime that shakes the Universe? Is that why they want me dead?

Something happened. The remnants of the city crumbled, not spasmodically but in a continuous stream, tumbling like dry water. Walls tottered and splintered and were dust long before they hit the ground. The whole dim landscape writhed and trembled and dissolved, striving to form one bare, flat waste of powder, like shifting, unclean snow.

Then he felt the tremor beneath his feet and knew, sickly, why the rest of the city was falling. Vibration, terrible and deep, of ever increasing amplitude, was shaking the terrain bodily. In a few moments no features were left; only a pale, shifting waste under the ungodly blue radiance which dwelt above.

This is it! This is the moment they've been waiting for. How is it to come — this thing called death?

In the dim distance the black plain held its secrets. No lights, no movements; nothing but the harrowing certainty of eyes watching from the darkness, of unknown unknowable power being concentrated and focused on one solitary morsel of humanity called Dalroi.

How is it to come? In a fire-flash ... heat, searing, scalding ... or as lightning, to cinders ... or radiation ... high velocity projectile ... by pressure, vacuum, gas ... starvation, paralysis ... or a new way of dying ... Watch it, Dalroi! Your paranoia's showing! You're on the wrong end of a war of nerves!

The vibration stepped up, tearing at his feet, creating warmth by frenzied friction. *God, it hurts!* Like a sea around him the livid dust rose in a hurling turbulence, shocked into such pitch of vibrant activity that it flowed and eddied like a tide of water. Fluidised by the pressure of colliding particles, it expanded up to his waist, then to his shoulder; a monstrous flood in seething flow; a drowning, bitter sea of heated dryness in which he had no hope of swimming to survival.

And it burned. He was immersed in a boiling shot-blast of hot grit. Where his feet touched down on the denser layers beneath, the vibration tore at his naked feet, trying to tear the skin off, and producing friction burns. He leaped, partly to draw clear breath above the swirling grit-storm and partly to ease the agony of standing; and each time he leaped the lower part of his body descended again into excruciating fire.

And the fire and the tearing vibration reached steadily higher and higher. He felt he was in a boiling bath that was trying to tear the flesh from his bones; he felt he was plunging into boiling lead, into vats of simmering steel ... into the sun ... Agony beyond endurance which had to be endured; pain so intense that it was no longer pain but a synaptic short-circuit which funnelled all his awareness into one vast pit illuminated by black lightning. Then something snapped within him.

Desperation piled on desperation, resolution on resolution; the megaton impulse of the unconquerable will to live pulsed in his brain. Fury more brilliant and more destructive than a nova charged his bloodstream with a fantastic plasma derived from the core of creation.

Somebody will pay for this! God, I'll make them pay!

Anger burst over him like a storm but he could still recognise the diabolical nature of the trap. No matter what effort of will or desperation he achieved he could never hope to wade clear of the boiling maelstrom. Inflammable dust motes were bursting into spontaneous points of fire and it was only a matter of time before the whole mass became incandescent. His mind and his will might live, but it was a matter of minutes only before his body was burnt and torn to dust.

Ashes to ashes and dust to dust. Not this way, thought Dalroi. Not this way and not now.

For a fragment of a second he blacked out, but the life impulse pounding in his brain reset the tripped circuit-breakers of his mind and forced him back to scalding consciousness.

There had to be some way out!

VIBRATION STRICTION RELAXATION

AMPLITUDE FREQUENCY

There had to be an answer!

There was an answer. The vibration was a standing wave, adjusted to place him at the anti-node so that the punishment would have full effect. If he could only reach the nodal point ...

He could see it now that he knew what to look for. The pattern of standing waves was traced by the activity of the dust, like sand on a vibrating tray. At the nodal points the lessened activity was marked by a valley in the whirling flood. Here a man could stand in the midst of the fury and escape all but the

incidental effects. He thrust himself forward. Within seconds his feet touched down on cooler surfaces and the dust rose no higher than his waist. Before and behind him the barbarous dust rose higher and hotter like the waves of some monstrous time-locked sea.

NINETEEN

His relief was of short duration. Whether it was deliberate or some quirk of the harmonics of the place he never knew, but suddenly there was a rapid mode-change which plunged him into an anguished wave now well above his head. He founded, and more by luck than judgement broke out to a new node point. He pressed swiftly along the channel formed by the standing wave, intent on reaching the limits of the city material, beyond which there would be nothing in which to drown or burn.

Something else slammed into the fabric of the nightmare terrain, another frequency from another direction, beating with the first then locking into synchronisation an octave above. The node channel began to twist and dissolve, breaking into patterns and diamonds like a monstrous living quilted eiderdown. Progress became a matter of timing and placing, a wild dance through shifting red-hot quicksand with agony the reward for a misplaced foot or a misjudged tempo. Dalroi was dancing the Devil's ballet, with death as the most critical of audiences.

The unknown enemy must have guessed what he was up to, for the vibration patterns changed again. The immense dunes began rolling, huge as houses, and the uncertain valleys shifted even as he trod. The synchronisation escaped him, and for a second he knew he was roasting alive, but suddenly he was on the edge of the city that had been, stumbling down a weak, vibrating incline on to a plain of cool black darkness. His eyes were wide with terror, not from the narrowness of his escape from death but with fear of the thing which burned in the dark side of his mind. The last half mile he had not walked ... he had jumped!

The conflict smote him with the force of a physical blow. He had jumped — projected himself across half a mile of space without intention and without knowing how. The trouble was that he knew the sensation was familiar to him. He had jumped before, many times, but where and how he could not quite recall. It was a part of those things his mind refused to admit, a dark shadow chained deep in the dungeons of the subconscious.

Only once, on the web, could he recall consciously breaking through into the realms of self-projection. He could remember breaking free of the web, but after that all was confused nightmare and blankness. He had woken in a hospital just as the doctor was signing his death certificate. Of his journey to that peculiar circumstance he had no knowledge at all.

I must have jumped ... Only ... His blood ran cold. Gormalu jumped too — and Gormalu's not human!

I had his neck under my fingers and he jumped — clean out of existence. When I was trapped on the web — and just now — I also jumped. God! Don't tell me I'm not human either: I'm Dalroi, I was born in Old Town ... my mother was a tramp and my father was an alcoholic ... and between them they hadn't enough energy to roll out of bed, let alone jump.

The vibration died unwillingly. The dust behind him collapsed in ribbed patterns on the bedrock, and Dalroi searched carefully around the black terrain seeking the signs of his persecutors. He was naked and his skin was raw and inflamed and burned as though he had been bathed in vitriol, but he believed now what he had refused to believe before: he had an immunity to murder, a painful kind of ersatz immortality. How or why was an academic point, but for the moment he clung to it with an animal belief. Nothing else could have brought him out of that hell alive.

But, he conceded grimly, it was not himself who needed to be convinced. Whatever was out there was not going to be as easily persuaded. They might never succeed in killing him — but he was having a hell of a painful time while they tried. And then again, perhaps they knew precisely ... how to kill an immortal ...

What next? They must know that I escaped the trap. Perhaps that was just a softening-up process. They were dead right! Much softer and I'd go right through a jelly-sieve. But they didn't go to all that trouble just to baste me turkey-red and then let me escape. I wish to hell I knew what was coming next. I have a feeling this is the finale.

He saw the beam swinging towards him, its path detailed by dust motes in the air, and he flung himself on to the floor. The beam halted and locked over him, flooding the area with a D-line sodium yellow glare. Another projector lashed out from behind, then another and another until he lay centrally in a circle of spotlights. Surprisingly, nothing hurt. He rose warily to his feet and, shielding his eyes, he walked experimentally along the floor. The projectors were locked on to him with elegant precision, for he moved no nearer to the edge of the brilliant circle.

"All right?" said Dalroi to the bright darkness. "So what do you want — a tap dance?"

The position was inconceivably bad. While he was bathed in that illumination anyone out in the darkness could hit him with almost anything without fail. A rifle, a revolver, a radiation pistol — a hand grenade even. It was a situation that needed to be rectified as soon as he could decide how to do it. After ten minutes it did not seem as though anyone was going to hit him at all, and the incongruity struck home.

Why a sodium light? These people must have progressed well past the stage of fluor-atomics, and a sodium discharge is not particularly efficient even by our own standards. Hell, have I made a mistake? I've been waiting for a brickbat from out of the darkness when maybe it's something in the light that is the danger.

The idea grew to a certainty and the certainty to a rising panic. Dalroi was never one to underestimate his opponents' capabilities and the circle of light put him at a gross psychological disadvantage. Experimentally he tried to jump, but without the crazing fury and desperation seething in his veins the effort was useless. Jumping was strictly a survival reaction and this particular peril was one in which the survival threat was carefully obscured. He needed to be teetering near to the essential brink of destruction before the trigger flung him clear in a burst of wild madness; he had to know the breath of death before he could evoke such superhuman talent.

My God! Suppose I don't know how before it's too late!

He concentrated, exploring the senses of his body, trying to detect the first impulse which would tell him how he was supposed to die. He was well aware that a heavy dose of hard radiation could damage him beyond recovery without his being able to detect it, but he felt in his bones it would be something more virulent, more painful and more swiftly effective than blood cancer. He primed his mind to react to the first microsecond of pain, knowing he would have no time to make a conscious decision.

He nearly did not make it.

The nature of the threat, the pain and the reaction were as near instantaneous as his senses could measure.

SODIUM! SODIUM!

The words shrieked through his mind. The supposed lamps were ion projectors seeding his body with

molecules of metallic sodium. Sodium reacts with moisture in the body ... exothermally ... produces hydrogen ... spontaneous combustion ... produces sodium hydroxide ... eats flesh ... fatally toxic.

Simultaneously his flesh burst into flame and he jumped ...

No sudden transition, this. They were waiting for him with some fiendish understanding of transfinity. His progress was arrested by the slam of a wall of solid energy which he struck with a momentum that would have killed him outright had he been moving in a normal space-time continuum. He jumped again. Again force slashed out and beat him back ... burning ... burning ...

He jumped once more. This time the whole megaton impulse of the fire in his mind flared with unbelievable intensity. Anger, hatred and desperation came together like triple components of sub-critical mass uniting to form the ultimate of chain reactions. Uncontrolled, uncontrollable, the power punched through his body and his brain. *He was Dalroi ... the irresistible force ... and he had the power to destroy the universe!* The irresistible force closed again with the immovable wall his antagonists had set around him. This time it was the wall that had to give.

Transfinity shuddered. Streamers of light speared away into the black depths and the wall of energy collapsed back on its creators like a sheet of mad lightning. Dalroi, spinning like a top, toppled into a pit of reined darkness, wondering how much more punishment he would have to take before his antagonists realised they were fighting a lost battle.

Even as he broke through into the next strata of transfinity he knew his persecutors had no intention of calling the battle lost. No matter how his body burned it was his mind which was to take the brunt of the shock. His eyes refused to focus on the kaleidoscope of impossibilities which passed before his agonised gaze. Shapes and forces seethed before him, geometrical idiocies, non-Euclidian absurdities; an ebullient configuration of seven-dimensional images both living and inanimate.

The gross nightmare bore heavily on his powers of reason. Sound, too, held all the acoustic unreality of something which reason declares cannot possibly exist. Dalroi was the intruder, an object inflicting as much curiosity and fear as the sudden appearance of a one-dimensional man in a crowded shopping centre on a Saturday afternoon. He felt the waves of terror and consternation beating back at him as the unimaginable entities skittered insanely in an inconceivable number of directions to leave him standing on an abstract and impossible plane.

I'M BURNING, said Dalroi. CAN'T YOU SEE I'M BURNING.

If they understood at all they gave no sign. Fear begat anger, and the atmosphere crackled with hostility. Entities approached, winging quickly on mind-splitting trajectories which would have driven a ballistics computer into screaming hysteria.

BURNING! BURNING! BURNING!

The sweet smell of intended murder seeped into Dalroi's nostrils.

CAN'T YOU SEE I'M BURNING!

Encouraged by his passive resistance the entities wheeled to press an emboldened attack. Sounds stuttered and stammered and his mind groped for patterns of sound as the only possible substitute for intelligibility.

CUT! CUT! CUT! SPLITTER! CUT! said the sparkling chaos.

"Hate!" said Dalroi. "HATE!" His words were a blaze of gold on blue, hazed against the keen brilliance.

His mind twisted between rejection of the seven-dimensional images and an attempt to resolve them in three-dimensional terms. In neither case was he successful. His position was that of a blind idiot without legs engaged in a rapier duel with a practised swordsman. He could neither see the enemy, follow his manoeuvres nor know where the next blow was to fall. The chaotic patterns seethed before his eyes, evoking impossible perspectives and mind-twisting matrices of things material, things immaterial and things which were different from either. Sanity teetered dangerously on an unstable pivot.

SPLITTER! SPLITTER! CUT

His left arm drooped with a thousand agonies which were overlaid with a numbing dullness. The limb felt as if it had become encased with lead. He knew his arm had been hurt, but by what or how badly it was impossible to tell, for the multiple refractions of the media in which he moved distorted even his own image beyond recognition. More terribly, he sensed he was beaten. His eyes and brain had no way of interpreting or responding to a seven-dimensional configuration, yet he sensed from the waves of immortal panic which splintered and phased around him that he was more terrible than they.

BURNING! BURNING!

His only chance was to fight them on their own ground. He had to learn how to manipulate a geometry which could tolerate seven lines each at right-angles to the rest; and this he had to do in the face of an attack as vehement as it was abstract. He forced his mind to grapple with the cascading irrationalities. The violence with which his mind withdrew told him that he could never do it and remain sane enough to be objective.

p
s e cut
i r
h e cut
Triangles w d SPLITTER cut

Yellow was acrid in his mouth. "Hate!" said Dalroi. "HATE!"

Fire sang like soft steel splitting over a piercing tool, tumbling into troughs of boiling light. Movement was an echo which had no origin; pain was a red dimensionless haze; attitude was a concrete substance which rippled off the tongue like an ecstatic prayer.

Sound, SOUND that he could touch, taste, smell, eddied like small explosive clouds of coloured malice. Time was a shrill wind, echoing isolation, discreet quanta, a string of numbered knives to be separated and re-aligned.

SPLITTER! SPLITTER! CUT!

Madness seized him. Desperation more desperate than the mere laws of preservation charged him with an awful strength. Intelligences were all around him, moving in, trying each to press a separate hurt. In the face of Dalroi's new burst of inspired spite they drew back in apparent consternation. Warmth wounded; light loitered loftily, shapes spun and shattered; sensations shivered. Time cut like a fine edge of a whetted blade. Entropy moaned with anguish.

TOOTH! NAIL! WILL! SPITE! HATE! FIGHT!

Dalroi turned on his persecutors with a maniacal fury, the dark thing in his mind burning bright like a

thousand beacons. The furious furnace within him burst into his blood with a marvellous flood of intrinsic contempt and barbarism. With every ounce of his being vibrating he hurled at his alien adversaries a vast tide of corrosive, vitriolic hatred.

Something snapped.

There was a period of blindness which had nothing akin to lack of seeing, and a gulf of pain which had no correspondence with sensation. There was searing heat without warmth, pressure unfelt, a moment locked in trans-temporal stillness and a fold in time which would have ruptured the most carefully constructed clock.

When the bright darkness cleared he gazed aghast on the twisted discords which surrounded him. He took up a black triangle and counted the sides. *Twenty-four now. God, what have I got myself into?*

TWENTY

The dilemma fazed him temporarily. Seven dimensions had been trial enough, but this — this was madness. The chaotic geometry had been smashed apart and replaced with chaos upon chaos upon chaos. Dimensionality was lost, criteria had run amok. The awesome blast of malicious fury which had burst from him had destroyed the tottering reference frame of this hideous universe, and no geometrical concept could begin to grasp the formless groping after new order which dominated the nightmare scene.

Atoms toyed in meaningless associations; radiations strayed looking for finite laws of nature; raw energy abounded, harmless, having no anathema which to attack or repel, raw intelligence, alien and *sans corpore* coalesced into frightened spinning whirlpools of spluttering light. Dalroi stood trying to collect his mazed senses and to grasp the enormity of the havoc he had wrought. He had no doubt of what he had done. He had knocked a complete dimensional level straight into a transfinite loop, the absurd mathematical shriek from which no undistorted form had ever returned.

The quasi-universe fell apart. He fell like a part of the rainbow, blazed like the sun on a spring morning, howled like the wind through a million keyholes. He was spredeagled across the realms of null, racked by the waves of a tideless sub-atomic sea. He was a loose coalition of atomic particles caught in transfinity's deadliest trap, yet the raging thing in the dark side of his mind was a binding force which locked his molecules together and maintained a reasoning being in the midst of unchartable madness.

He knew now beyond doubt that the fabric of transfinite space was amenable to control by thought. He had within him the power to create chaos or end it, to project himself through the transfinite lattices or to bend them to his will. It was all a question of ... formulation. One had to know what to manipulate, and how and when. Given that, some special act of resolution or despair was sufficient to catalyse the reaction.

Right now he wanted a particular destination for a particular purpose. Caught up in the maddening vortex of a transfinite loop he worked desperately to find the formula. Somewhere it was forgotten ... deliberately repressed. He had to have that information even if he went through his mind with an atomic-hydrogen torch.

The secret yielded under the ruthless self-analysis. From the shadows he culled the coordinates he needed, a meaningless string of symbolism. With effortless, inhuman reaction he computed the unready mathematics and without the luxury of hesitation or wonder — he jumped.

BURNING!

BURNING!

BURNING!

"Korch, what's the present position at Failway?"

"Panic," said Korch dryly. "To give them their due they seem quite as baffled about all this as we are. They've sent a boomerang shuttle into the Failway Six stratum. They haven't developed all the photographs yet, but first indications are that the entire installation has been blasted flat. I've never seen anything like it. There's a waste in there which looks as though it's never been occupied since eternity."

"That checks," said the Monitor. "Whatever they did to Dalroi they'd have to do in a big way."

"You think they got him?"

"I don't know what the hell to think. This whole affair has more loose ends than the average sheep. Somebody on the other side of nowhere wanted Dalroi's head and I don't think it was for a hunting trophy. As far as I can judge the whole reason for the existence of Failway was to act as a combined bait and execution block for Dalroi or somebody like him. Does that make sense to you?"

"Not a bit," said Korch.

"Nor to me. The more you look at it the more insane it becomes. Calculate the cost of putting in the Failway installation and figure how long it would take to get that investment back. Don't bother. I'll tell you the answer — it's seventeen hundred years. Hardly an attraction for a get-rich-quick merchant, and if it's merely the bait for a Godallmighty trap then it adds up to an awful lot of wanting for somebody's skin."

"Or an awful lot of fear."

"That seems to be the answer," said the Monitor, "but it still doesn't make sense. I'll swear Dalroi never knew of their existence before they started on him. We're missing the whole point somewhere and it's imperative we catch up fast."

"How can we do that?"

"Perhaps we can't, but just supposing they don't get Dalroi? Suppose he manages to get back ... What's he liable to do?"

"Start looking for the ones who set all this up for him, I suppose. And a rare job he'd make of it too!"

"Precisely, so I've collected a group of prime suspects which we'll invite him to find — on our own ground. I've put them in the cells below here and left enough clues so that Dalroi will know where to come looking. There's Cronstadt, Hildebrand, Presley, and Ombudsman Rhodes, who asks all the wrong questions about all the right people."

"I don't see how Rhodes fits in?"

"Neither do I, but Harry Dever was one of his men. You can take it from me that Rhodes is in the thick of this somewhere. Rhodes knows a lot more than he's saying and I have a feeling that if Dalroi came back we'd start getting a few straight answers."

"But with Dalroi ... ! You're taking a hell of a risk. Remember Consedo?"

"I don't think this would be another Consedo. I suspect Dalroi's vengeance may be a little more personal. There's another point also. While I intend to let Dalroi in if he comes, I have no intention of letting him out

again."

Korch considered this for a moment then whistled softly through his teeth. "What makes you think you can hold Dalroi if Failway can't?"

"A certain cylinder labelled X47 Neurogas which I saved from World War Three."

"X47's banned under the Tel-Aviv Humanitarian Convention."

"You think I don't know that? But I don't think we're dealing with humanitarians either. There are forces involved in this struggle which could wipe out the entire human race without so much as a sideways glance. Dalroi is one of them. Regardless of who or what he's fighting I don't think we can let a man with powers like that remain at large in our society?"

"A hypothetical point," said Korch, "since Dalroi has not and never may return. But supposing he did, you still can't localise X47. Release one milligram of that in the vicinity of the cells and you'd affect everybody in the entire area."

"The fact had not escaped me, but you cannot have a trap without bait, and bait, is, almost by definition, expendable."

"My God!" said Korch. "You must want to get Dalroi badly."

"I do," said the Monitor, "I certainly do."

At one hour past midnight the brittle clatter of the alarm bell shattered the silence deep in the subterranean H.Q. of the Black Knights. The Monitor was activating his communicator button even before it toned his personal summons.

"Korch here. Chief. I think you were right. The electrified fence just went down. The control board's fused solid as though it got mixed with a thousand-KV power line."

The Monitor took a deep breath. "Nothing short of a direct strike by lightning could fuse that board solid."

"Uh! So we were struck by lightning out of a clear sky and clean through the ion-cloud umbrella. That sort of coincidence I don't like. My money says Dalroi's arrived and he's not being too gentle about his means of entry."

"Anything on the screens?"

"There's enough mush to write a love lyric but nothing which is identifiable with Dalroi. There's some extremely broad-band interference chewing into our circuits somewhere. Effectively we're blind. If that's Dalroi he's got some rare tricks up his sleeve."

"That's Dalroi all right, and I don't imagine we've seen all of his tricks yet. Upgrade the alert to yellow imperative, and be prepared for anything. The next half hour could be decidedly rough."

"What about the A.F.I. projectors?"

"Turn them off. We don't want to burn him on the way in. Only if he tries to go out again."

Silence for long seconds. "Too late," said Korch, just a hint of hysteria in his voice. "The A.F.I.'s just fused. Load resistance died somehow. The magnetrons went up like fireworks. Hell, are you sure you know what you're doing, letting Dalroi in here?"

"I don't think I could stop him even if I wanted to. You're sure that everyone knows what to do?"

"Positive. I've checked them through it half a hundred times. Dalroi comes in but he doesn't go out again. If he does it'll be over a big pile of dead bodies."

"Don't joke," said the Monitor. "It could even happen that way. Give me the full range of video pick-ups in the cells, I want to ... Hell!"

"What's the matter?"

"The girl, Zen, she's still in the cells with the others. There's no sense in her getting a dose of X47 too. How much time do you reckon I've got?"

"If Dalroi's only just through the A.F.I. range I'd say about four minutes. The Devil take all blind personnel-detecting instruments!"

"I'm going down to get the girl out," said the Monitor. "Signal me if he gets too close before I'm through. I'll leave my communicator open so we can compare notes."

"Check!" Korch closed his eyes. He did not like last minute rearrangements.

By the time the Monitor arrived the doors of the individual cells had been opened and the prisoners had congregated in the wide passage that led through the cell area. There was no doubt that they took this as a sign of their impending release and they came forward eagerly when the main doors broke open to admit the Monitor. But when the great doors sealed behind him the atmosphere grew electric.

"Something's happening," said Cronstadt. His face was a shade of grey from the contagious fear. "You're expecting some sort of trouble."

"I'm expecting Dalroi," said the Monitor tonelessly, "and that tends to have the same effect. I don't know what he wants, but I suspect it's a little spectacular vengeance. If anyone here has anything on his conscience he'd better figure out a few good explanations. Dalroi in a vengeful mood doesn't bear thinking about."

"You're letting him come in?" asked Cronstadt. Fear and disbelief stood high on his face.

"Frankly I don't have any way to stop him."

"Speed it up!" Korch's urgent voice came over the communicator. "I guess he's nearly here by now. Things are too damn silent."

The Monitor started to say something then thought better of it. He caught Zen by the arm.

"You'd better come out of here. For the next half an hour anything goes. Dalroi's after the blood of one of these idiots and I'd sooner watch it on the screen than in person. You're not involved. We'd better get out of here before that rampant boy friend of yours starts tearing the whole bloody place apart."

Zen stood her ground. "Take your hands off me! I'll take my own chances. You're as much involved as anyone in what's happened to Dalroi. Suppose he starts looking for you?"

"Speed it up," said Korch. "Something's starting to happen."

The Monitor had no use for finesse. He chopped Zen savagely with his hand and swung the sagging body over his shoulder. As they passed through the door the solenoids clamped down, locking the slab with an

ominous finality, leaving Cronstadt, Presley, the Ombudsman and Hildebrand looking at each other with mutual unquiet.

The Monitor signalled the guards to abandon the cell area. He set the trips in the recess wherein lay the cylinder of X47 neurogas and its attendant controllers, then turned to go up the stairs. As he did so pandemonium broke out. The speaker system cut in with a string of conflicting orders which terminated in a shout. In the background somebody was screaming with hysteria. The Monitor's face paled. The men who were breaking down were seasoned Black Knights, conditioned to the toughest deeds and scenes. Whatever they had contacted had broken mind and spirit with singularly shattering effect. Nothing had any right to be as horrific as that.

"Korch! For Christ's sake what's going on up there?"

Korch was almost incoherent. "My God! Oh my God! He suddenly appeared ... and he's burning ... My God! He's all on fire."

"Hell!" said the Monitor. "Don't you crack up on me."

"I tell you he's burning. I never saw a living man on fire before. God, I feel giddy!"

The Monitor cut the connection impatiently and pressed on up the stairs. As he reached the landing a wave of giddiness hit him too. He threw it off with a puzzled frown and continued for five more paces before his sense of balance went haywire and the floor rushed up to meet him. He fell heavily, instinctively cushioning Zen's head as they hit the ground.

Cursing wildly he sat up and nearly overbalanced until his fingers contacted the wall. He gripped tightly to the corner of a panel and tried to analyse the situation. The corridor appeared to be revolving wildly. He felt he was on a mad merry-go-round with himself at the centre point. He knew that something was affecting both his eye muscles and his sense of balance. The swinging, shifting disorientation tied his stomach into knots and filled him with a profound nausea. He tried crawling, but the floor seemed to buck and twist beneath him so alarmingly that he had to rest every few seconds to reassure himself that he was in no danger of being spun helplessly down the corridor by centrifugal force.

The communicator fell from his pocket and clattered to the floor. In recovering it he thumbed the button and Korch's voice came in chanting: "Burning ... Burning ... Burning!"

TWENTY-ONE

It said much for the discipline of his training that the Monitor was still capable of logical thought. Something was affecting them all, and, with Dalroi in the vicinity, it was certainly no casual misfortune. The question was, how was it done. Carving arcs above his head was a ventilator louvre. That made sense! He moved himself giddily out of the immediate air-stream and the whirl-around grew slightly less. He even climbed to his knees without falling, though the gyrations still spun the usefulness from his eyes and limbs. Whatever it was, then, it was coming in through the ventilator shafts. A logical move where one wished to paralyse an entire underground installation. Only ...

This revealed the strength of Dalroi's hand with a shattering clarity. The air conditioning plant was equipped with batteries of filters, electro-static precipitators, scrubbers, charcoal beds, UV sterilisers, low-temperature condensers and every device that science could provide to ensure that what was happening could not possibly occur. In some way Dalroi had contrived a method to make molecules, indistinguishable from those of normal air, which would carry the seeds of this gross disorientation through the most critical of treatment plants. The hair prickled on the back of the Monitor's neck. He had

grossly underestimated Dalroi's capabilities.

"How can a man burn?" asked Korch plaintively through the communications set. "All going round!"

"Shut up!" said the Monitor. "I have to think. Do you suppose there's a fit man anywhere in the place?"

Korch said nothing so the Monitor drew his own conclusions. Things were working out all wrong, catastrophically wrong. He tried the communicator again.

"Where's Dalroi now?"

"He's coming down and ... God, you should see the way he's burning!"

"Keep him in view on the screens," said the Monitor. "Use a camera. I want to have a record of whatever it is he does."

He leaned back and tried to think. When he closed his eyes the nausea overwhelmed him with such violence that he felt he was being drawn inside-out; with his eyes open the spinning environment charged him with such insecurity that panic and self-preservation destroyed objective thinking. The disorientation was growing worse. There was nothing to do but wait.

Shortly the expected began to happen. From the centre of his own particular vortex the Monitor heard the whine of the elevator descending. Dalroi was on his way. Sickly the Monitor tried to roll himself out of the fairway, but the giddy whirl defeated his muscle coordination and he merely rocked backward and forward on his back crying with frustration. The elevator doors snarled slightly and something entered the corridor. The Monitor, impelled by fear and fascination, strove to focus his eyes on Dalroi as he appeared.

"Oh, My God! Oh, My God! He's all on fire! Dalroi's burning!"

The apparition was dimly recognisable as Dalroi, but the face was the face of a soul fire-tormented through eternity. Satan's kingdom had opened and vomited one of the luckless spawn of Hell. Lines of agony were etched more deeply than they had any right to be in a face that once had been human. One arm hung limply by his side and the fire flowed from the naked body like flames from a burning brand. But it was the eyes which dominated; eyes which held a flame of their own, far brighter and more consuming than the fire which racked the body. It was fire against fire, spirit against combustion, limitless power against inconsequential flame.

The figure moved towards him, and the Monitor nearly blacked-out trying to force his eyes and his mind to follow its progress. It came close and stopped before the blur which was the prostrate Zen, paused for a brief examination then lifted her body like a babe, one handed, and came on to the Monitor's side. The words, when they came, were more than words: garlanded in flame like the pronouncements of some ancient god of war.

"I had to come back for her. Revenge will be so very very sweet," was all that Dalroi said.

The Monitor strove to sit up, his mind protesting at the wrongness of the statement, but something gave way inside him and blackness that closed around spun him sickeningly downward into oblivion.

When the Monitor awoke he was feeling sick and empty and Korch was standing over him dashing water into his face.

"What happened to Dalroi?" asked the Monitor wanly.

"Gone," said Korch. "It was unholy. I was watching through the screens. Dalroi took the girl and walked towards the video pickup in the corridor. My God! That face — it haunts me. Do you suppose a martyr would look like that when he was being crucified?"

"Stick to the point!" said the Monitor quickly.

"Dalroi walked up the corridor, then he went."

"Went where?"

"Nowhere. He stepped a little way into the air and vanished. He and the girl both vanished ... like the flame going out on a candle."

"Jesus!" said the Monitor. "I might have known there'd be days like this! Then Dalroi didn't go into the cells?"

"No, he didn't even try. I got the impression he only came for the girl."

"He did," said the Monitor grimly. "He even told me as much. But why the hell? She had no part in this."

"We slipped up," said Korch. "I put through a call to Census when I was sure Dalroi was gone. There's no record of that girl."

"What?"

"Just that. She never was born and she never existed anywhere. Officially she never even existed. Hell, I think she was one of them!"

"Get the prisoners back to their cells," said the Monitor ominously. "Somebody's got to be made to answer these riddles and I think I'll start with them." He moved downstairs to the panel to disarm the cylinder of X47. As he opened the case he swore sharply.

"Korch!"

"Sir?"

"Don't go near the cells. There's five milligrams of X47 down there. Did Dalroi get anywhere near that panel?"

"Nowhere near."

"Then somebody else did — somebody who wanted to stop the others talking. Give me a view of the cells on the screen. Ah yes! I rather thought as much."

"Give it to me straight," said Korch. "After all that, I guess I can take anything."

"Cronstadt, Presley and Rhodes are obviously under neurogas. We may yet get them out in time to save them. But Hildebrand — now there's a mystery for you! He's completely disappeared."

Petch Hollow was a damp and mouldering bowl of leaves overhung by tall, dark trees. Nobody went there now save those, perhaps, with murder on their conscience and the need to find a few days' undisturbed repose for the corpse under the raincoat in the back of the car. Even the hill surrounding was desperate and uninspired, and in the trees around the hollow no birds sang. It was one of Nature's forlorn places with an inbuilt atmosphere of causes lost and unrelieved despair.

It was here that Dalroi stopped. He dropped the girl's body to the ground and paced away a short distance waiting for her to wake. By now the fire in his flesh was burning low but he still dared not look at himself lest the horror broke the block he had set up in his mind to reject the pain which would otherwise have crazed him. Instead he had to listen to a noise, the throbbing in his skull, a pain he had no power to reject because it was built too deeply into him. He had to listen, because there was no way to wrench it out of his mind.

Finally the girl awoke. At first she sat up, bewildered by the dawn and the trees and the dampness of the ground on which she lay. Then, turning, she saw Dalroi and instantly her eyes were full of fear and hideous comprehension.

"Dalroi!"

"Yes," said Dalroi. "You'll never know what it cost me to arrange this meeting. You know what its purpose is."

"Revenge!" She struggled to her feet, facing him, her face pale and shining in the wan sunlight and suddenly possessed of a certain otherworldliness. "You came back to kill me."

"You set me up for all this, Zen. Throughout everything you were the one person I never doubted. You did a good job, too. It was no fault of yours that I came through it. Had Gormalu served you better I should not be here now. Now you're going to tell me why I have to die. Why the hell does it have to be me? What is this thing that's inside of me?"

Mixed with the fear in her eyes was a tinge of compassion.

"Don't hate me, Dalroi. If you knew as much about yourself as we know about you then you'd see we have no option. We didn't choose to play this game. Self-preservation forced us into it. We have known bitterness such as even your heart could never start to comprehend."

"Hell," said Dalroi. "What harm did I ever do to you?"

"You really don't know, do you, Dalroi? God! After all this and you still don't know who or what you are. Deep down inside you're still the same old Dalroi. It hurts me even to think of it. You were the baby with the power to crack the universe, the youth who could ravage the cosmos, the man who had the most unspeakable talent for destruction in all the transfinite strata — and yet you never wanted or tried to claim your powers. You still have no idea what a terrible creature you are."

"I'm learning," said Dalroi. "Some friends of yours have been giving me some lessons on how to live dangerously."

"The pain?" she asked. "Is it terrible? You weren't intended to survive it."

"I had the same impression," said Dalroi dryly. "But you still have not told me why. What is it about me that you so much want to see me dead?"

"It isn't you, Dalroi, but the thing inside of you in the dark side of the mind. We can't tolerate it, and we can't kill it except by killing you. Under no circumstances can we permit it to live, and itself it will not suffer you to die."

"What is this thing of which you're so afraid?"

"It's the power that brutally ravished a million island universes; an insane dominance of spirit which conquers and kills, abuses, breaks, lays waste and despoils everything it touches. In you is the seed of

Hell itself."

"Whatever it is," said Dalroi, "it belongs there. I was born with it."

"I know," said Zen quietly. "And that's the pity. You're an attractive brute, Dalroi. Oh, I wish to God it didn't have to be in you."

Dalroi's reaction was triggered by the minutest hardening of her eyes. As her fingers raised and the white fire flashed towards his temple so he jumped. Zen jumped also. Dalroi came out on the edge of the hollow; she only a yard away. Again the white fire flashed at his face. He jumped again and again, always emerging to find her just beside him.

Rapidly he weakened. The game was unfamiliar; for him it was a survival reaction almost unused, making great demands on his already hammered physique. She jumped with an expertise of long familiarity and control. He soon realised he must reach that microsecond of hesitation which would enable the fire to strike. The next time he emerged he stood stock still.

If he had expected triumph in her face he was disillusioned. She stood before him white faced and anguished and her eyes were filled with profound misery.

The fire struck and coalesced inside his brain, short-circuiting the neurones, robbing him of anger and resolve and consciousness and everything except the imponderable will to live. The last thing he remembered was falling, and as he lay, a white face pressed against his and hot tears fell on his cheek — tears which burned with greater heat than the fire which he had carried on his body out of transfinity.

TWENTY-TWO

"Will he live?" asked the Monitor anxiously.

The doctor looked down at Rhodes' unconscious body swathed in white. "What do you think?" he asked cynically. "If I could revive a neurogas patient I'd go in for reincarnation in a big way."

"But will he be able to talk?"

The doctor's disgust was unrestrained. "Yes, he will be able to talk. With enough adrenalin and the use of the artificial heart-lung apparatus I can keep him alive just that long. I can only hope that he has enough mind left to employ his dying gasps calling down curses on the criminal idiot who left him as bait in a trap primed with neurogas."

"When will he talk?"

The doctor exhaled heavily. "The sooner the better, perhaps. His mind can't last long with continued oxygen starvation." He adjusted his syringes carefully. "I can give you about half an hour's conversation with the corpse of the man you murdered. See me when you've finished and I'll give you something to help you sleep tonight."

"Rhodes," said the Monitor, "can you hear me?"

"I hear you," said the Ombudsman, and the voice rattled dryly through the tube in his throat.

"Tell me about Dalroi? Who is Dalroi?"

Rhodes told him in a voice like a creaking ghost. The atmosphere grew tense and still as the words fell to a piping whisper then to a sigh like wind among reeds and finally to silence as the spirit fled away. The

Monitor saluted and paid his last respects, and felt, for the first time in his life, the meaning of humility.

Korch was waiting for him at the door. "Any luck?"

"Yes." The Monitor mopped his brow. "He put more sense into those thirty minutes than the human race has into twenty thousand years of philosophy. I went into there as a man and I leave as an animal."

"Are you all right, Chief?"

"All right!" The Monitor was quick with scorn. "We shall none of us be all right again, ever. Hell, I feel dirty and sick and tired of it all. You'd better come with me. We have an appointment to keep with our keeper. How does it feel to be living in a zoo?"

At first Dalroi thought he was blind, so peculiar was the quality of the darkness. His eyes and head ached abominably. Only after, when he had lain staring at the blackness for many minutes, could he discern the dim outlines of the room. The shapes were unfamiliar, yet each detail his adjusting eyes revealed discharged a bolt of emotional shock. This was a place he did not know, yet every facet was painted with overtones of remembered fear. It was part of the sequence of things he could never quite remember.

He felt weak, terribly weak. It did not take him many seconds to realise the weakness was not natural. Touching his face he found with something of a shock, that the flesh was clean and whole, but his left arm was immobile and covered with a heavy plastic dressing. But the weakness ... he could never remember feeling quite so drained and empty before. His metabolism was so low that his body scarcely ticked over. They had found his Achilles' heel.

The surge of anger which welled up inside him leaked impotently away. Whatever drugs they had used on him had been remarkably effective. He no longer had the power to raise mountains — he scarcely had the power to move his limbs. He sagged back on the soft couch, trying to conserve a little energy, a reserve to meet whatever was to come. But even as he lay the weakness grew and cheated him of his last vitality. When death came, no matter what its form, he would be powerless to resist.

Footsteps sounded in a corridor somewhere, coming closer towards the dark shadow of the door. Dalroi propped himself on a leaden arm and looked out from under leaden eyelids. Despite a curious enervation his mind still boiled like a cauldron of vaporising lead, extraordinarily aware. He knew now with dreadful certainty that he had seen this room before. This was the antechamber ... to the other place, the place where things had been done to his brain ... where horror had amassed upon horror at the hands of someone whose identity was a shadow. Only, it was not a shadow any more — it was the clear image of a man, a man of brilliant intensity and purpose who had worked on his brain with a dexterity slightly more than human.

Raw fear flared up as he began to gather the pieces of the puzzle and fit them into place. Even as the pattern became clearer and the door opened to reveal his executioner. Hildebrand was there, scowling while his eyes adjusted to the darkness, a weapon of unfamiliar pattern in his hand.

"Dalroi, are you awake?"

"Go to hell!" said Dalroi with great difficulty. Every syllable a conscious effort.

Hildebrand came and stood over him silently. "Don't try to move. The drug allows you only minimal reaction. Any sudden exertion would burst your heart. You'd be dead long before you could reach me."

"But reach you I would," promised Dalroi.

"I don't doubt that at all. I have no illusions about the risk I'm taking. I should have destroyed you the last time I had you under the knife, but I thought I could repair something which is apparently irreparable. This time I shall take no such chances. I've been waiting a long time to rectify that mistake."

"Who are you?" asked Dalroi. Black shadows stirred in his brain. "And what did you do in my mind?"

"I tried to drive a wedge between you and what you were in danger of discovering. I tried to set up a block between the subconscious and the deep brain. Only that could have saved your life. I did not succeed. You carry things in your head which are more terrible and enigmatic than the weapons of Creation."

"Who are you?" repeated Dalroi wearily.

Hildebrand stood up straight. "I am called Gar Carra na Leodat. My occupation is watching out for ones such as you. I come from a place you cannot imagine and from a level of civilisation you can only dimly understand. I am a custodian of humanity."

"I hadn't noticed," Dalroi said. "Is that why you have to kill me?"

Hildebrand's eyes grew large and haunted with hidden sorrow. "Let me ask you a question now. Have you any idea what hell-fire inhabits you? Do you know who you are, Dalroi?"

Dalroi tried to nod, but his head seemed to weigh a ton and the movement was still born. "Yes," said Dalroi. "I think I do. We are mutual enemies. One of us is going to have to die."

Hildebrand sighted the weapon at Dalroi's head. "Just so! You must by now realise that you are no match for us. What we lack in spite we make up for in persistence and sheer numbers."

"And what I lack in numbers I make up for in sheer hatred," Dalroi said. "Nature built us as terrible opposites."

"How much do you know about us?" asked Hildebrand.

"Little. I know that Gormalu is not human. I know that both you and Zen have no origin in the world I know. I sense that Failway has a function not only as a trap but as a brake on our kind of culture. It was set there like a cancer to eat the heart out of our species, to delay something in our evolution. Homo Sapiens is being engineered, manipulated by unseen forces which live far beyond our notions of the transfinite strata."

"You think that is a terrible thing?"

"A man takes enough pushing around from his own kind without other agencies having a poke," said Dalroi bitterly.

"The two things are not unconnected. Don't judge until you know our reasons. I will tell you our story. It concerns a time and a place beyond even your imagination. Once, among the many civilisations of the multiple galaxies, there arose a race of upstart creatures more terrible than any who opposed them. The upstarts were a race of warriors and murderers who ravaged whatever worlds they reached. They were fanatical killers, who could tolerate the existence of no other species than their own and those on whom they lived. By any standards they were supermen."

"I hate you," said Dalroi.

"In self-defence the civilised species of the multiple galaxies joined forces against the Destroyers, and put

them down not once, but many times. Yet always the terrible ones arose and returned with hatreds and lusts renewed. Whole universes were shaken with their thunder. The civilised ones, in anger and desperation, decided to end the matter once and for all, but having the humanity that goes with high culture they could not tolerate the complete destruction of a race.

"After crushing the Destroyers at terrible costs to themselves they took the remnants of the race and transferred them to a far exile in a corner of transfinity, and built by genetic engineering a blockage whereby all the inherited knowledge in the racial brain was locked down out of reach. But the blocks grow weaker as the millennia pass and we have to resort to selective weeding of individuals who penetrate their own minds too deeply, and arrange wars and diversions whereby we can sap the vitality of the species as a whole."

"And that is the predicament of Homo Sapiens?"

"Just so. Your race is descended from those same Destroyers. You carry the ever-pregnant seeds of Hell in your souls. The truth of this is self-evident. If ever there was a race addicted to practising spite and vengeance one upon the other it is yours. Bloodshed, murder, rape, war, slavery, torture, persecution, genocide — you name the crime and you'll find it on your doorstep. From the thumbscrew through to neurogas you know it all."

"Then what am I?" asked Dalroi.

"You," said Hildebrand, smiling wearily, "you're the mutation, the one that didn't breed true. You're a throwback. In you the genetic chain grew thin and weak and the pressure of the pent-up life-force damaged the blocks which kept you from knowing the rest of yourself. Something snapped and gave you access to a little of the deep brain wherein lies all the old race memories and skills. It released to you a little of the flair for destructive science, the hyper-fast survival reactions, the amazing strength of the life force which refuses to accept death as a fact.

"In you, a split-hair's breadth beneath the surface is all the old corroding insanity, all the prowess, all the bitter refusal to submit or compromise. You are the potential killer it is so difficult to kill, the hell-spawn which has such a thirsting for life that it can twist the basic laws of the universe into a pattern for survival. You are the virus which could infect the culture. Can you wonder we wish so desperately to see you dead?"

"Can you prove what you say?" asked Dalroi.

"I can do better than prove it. I'm going to show you for yourself. I'm going to remove the block completely, let you see fully all the things that lie in the dark side of your mind."

"Why should you?"

"Because I think the shock of all that hell released at once will kill you. You don't have the old physique, Dalroi. You haven't been brought up to stand that sort of unrestrained barbarity. You've been softened by the taints of your so-called earthly civilisation. There's a certain poetic justice about the idea."

Dalroi tried to move, to force himself to fight. He actually managed to get halfway off the couch before the pressure in his chest doubled him up. He toppled and fell to the ground perilously short of breath and with his consciousness and will flickering dim under the tide of inhibitors that coalesced in his blood stream.

"I told you that was foolish," said Hildebrand quietly.

He went away and shortly returned with a trolley on to which he lifted Dalroi with one trained movement. Bands of steely hardness clamped on Dalroi's arms and legs and Dalroi's darkened senses were aware only that they were leaving the room, passing now down a corridor with doors of surgical whiteness into an operating theatre pungent with the smell of ether and terrible with the sharp click of instruments being dropped on a tray.

Zen came up and looked down at him. Her face was white and troubled under the white cowl she wore on her head, and her hands worked at the instruments with a precision slightly more than human. He wondered idly if her tears always burned like they had in Petch Hollow or whether they were sometimes soft and warm and salty like tears of human kind. As she leaned over him a tear did fall on his lips and he moved his tongue with the last ounce of energy left in his body and tasted it, and knew what he wanted to know. He felt like crying also, except there was not enough life left in him even to raise a tear.

Hildebrand moved a gantry into sight and on it oscilloscopes phased and wrote with green fingers the stories told by the electrodes they were placing round Dalroi's head.

They shaved his scalp and isolated his mind from pain and feeling. Then came the part he was dreading. The saw bit into the skull ...

Irrational fear ... the instinctive need to protect the sinister seed in his brain ... overwhelmed him. Dalroi was no coward and had it been merely life they were taking from him he could have borne the moment with drugged equanimity. But the panic spread not from his own psyche but from the deeper thing that flared and haunted in the dread, dark chambers of the brain. Here was splintering fright, shattering apprehension, harrowing dread ... and as yet they had only bared the brain.

Then came the probes, seeking down through the convolutions of the brain, triggering sights and sounds and fantasies which had nothing to do with experience. It was a mad kaleidoscope of sensory stimuli — a hand, a light, a scene, a voice, a bell tolling as it once had tolled across a mighty courtyard somewhere dimly past remembering.

Through it all came Hildebrand's voice.

"Know thyself, Dalroi. Know thyself!"

Searing lightning stabbed, and his mind took a wrench which should have passed him into immortality. The block was breaking down. His body stiffened as the maelstrom blasted out into his conscious mind.

Imagine that the world is made of thunder, that the rivers run with boiling yellow phosphorous ... that the rain is concentrated hydrofluoric acid slashed to fury by a bromine gale ... that all the birds are blind and venomous and desperately mad ... take this allegory and you can still only dimly visualise the terrain of Dalroi's mind as the bitter tide flowed out.

Dalroi stood again at the seat of the life-force, a force as fantastic as a million motor-generators over-loaded to simultaneous destruction on the hearths of Hell. Malice was a note on a gigantic organ thrust deep into the inner ear; hatred was a shaft of illumination so bright that it blinded through sixty feet of concrete. The urge to kill was a black, corroding jet of vapour of such velocity and scale that it could have countered the rotation of the Milky Way.

And then it died ... The pressures faded and fled, folded and dropped. Hildebrand sprang to his instruments and watched with unbelieving eyes as the writhing traces died on the faces of the 'scopes.

"You've killed it!" His voice was high with disbelief and wonder. "Dalroi, do you know what you've done? You've killed it!"

But Dalroi was past making answer. The bitter war which raged through his mind had thrown him into a state of deep shock, and if he had any awareness left at all it was focused on the slight saltiness of a tear which had fallen on his lips.

The door burst open with a crash and the Monitor entered with Korch at his heels. Hildebrand signalled them back with a singular lack of curiosity, and drew the probes from Dalroi's brain and began repairing the skull. For a long time nobody spoke, and Hildebrand worked on with swift fingers of genius aided by advanced and unknown skills. When he had finished he turned and walked to the Monitor's side.

"I see you know who I am," he said.

The Monitor nodded briefly. "Yes, I know, and I know now what Dalroi meant to you. Rhodes told me before he died."

"I'm sorry he had to die," said Hildebrand, "but he began to know too much about us. He was a true humanitarian and a man of great intelligence. He even guessed the nature of Failway. That policeman Quentain proved his guess by kidnapping Zdenka and interrogating her under drugs. When they realised how sadly out of depth they were, Rhodes tried to cover by pretending he'd found her in the river. In his own way he endorsed Dalroi's execution because he realised we had no alternative. There are hopes yet for the race who can breed such a man."

"What are you going to do with us?" asked the Monitor.

"With Homo Sapiens? We shall continue to watch you as we have always done. You are the juvenile delinquents of the multiple galaxies. One day, perhaps, you will come of age and we shall welcome you home again. In the meantime ... "

"... in the meantime," said the Monitor, "you will manipulate us and organise our wars and our disasters just to keep us out of mischief."

"Certainly. Can you think of a better control than letting you work off your spite on yourselves? As an exercise in Stellar ecology, Failway was an instrument not without merit. A pity you discovered it so soon. My comrade Gormalu provided the technical advice, but all the misery it evolved was purely of your own devising. What toys can we give you which you will not turn into weapons of oppression? While creatures like Madden and Cronstadt and yourself continue to strut and threaten and coerce we have no alternative but to protect ourselves from your psychopathic rat-race by any means at our disposal. You would not do otherwise if the position was reversed."

"No," said the Monitor sadly. "I don't suppose we would."

"We're leaving now," said Hildebrand, nodding to Zen who had remained at Dalroi's side. "Our task of eliminating the danger of Dalroi is finished. Perhaps another field man like Gormalu will be with you shortly — perhaps he's already here. Look to the centres of war or disaster, or anywhere that a man controls the destiny of many, and there you may find him encouraging you to be bestial to yourselves. Look to your tyrants and dictators, for he will be there somewhere. And one day, perhaps, you'll be too grown-up to listen to him — but oh, you've a hell of a distance to travel yet!"

"I wonder," said the Monitor, "what our history would have been like without your hand forever pushing us over the precipice?"

"Short, sharp and brutish," said Hildebrand/Car Carra na Leodat. "We push the forces of destruction inward on themselves before any become too powerful. But we have nothing to gain and a great deal to lose by leniency, so don't push your luck. Remember we can deal you a new Dark Age at any time we

choose, and only another like Dalroi could stand against us."

Hildebrand/na Leodat nodded to Zen. "It is time we were going."

She looked at the form of Dalroi then back to him quickly, an unspoken question in her eyes, but na Leodat shook his head. Then the two of them stepped upward as though on an invisible stairway, and abruptly vanished from sight.

The Monitor gazed thoughtfully at the sudden emptiness for a few moments then walked to Dalroi's side and stood as if regarding a corpse. The slight throb of a vein in Dalroi's temple attracted his attention and he realised for the first time that Dalroi still lived.

"Korch, fetch me a heavy blaster."

"What you going to do, cremate him?"

"As near as I can," said the Monitor. "I shan't rest easy while he lives."

"But he must be harmless now or they'd not have left him."

"Is that a risk that you're prepared to take? Could you live in the same world as Dalroi now?"

"I take your point," said Korch. "There's a blaster out in the truck. Wouldn't a pistol be quicker?"

"I said a heavy blaster, damn you! Nothing less than ashes will convince me that this limb of Satan won't reach down at me out of the darkness. Nothing less than ... " He looked round, but Korch had already gone about his errand, suddenly infected with the Monitor's more than mortal fear.

Something coming back to life ...

The Monitor did not know, could not have known that Dalroi was already conscious and listening — listening to the first pulses of a throbbing rhythm deep in his brain. Yet with some unknown, unknowable perception he felt the growing eddy and flow of menace, cold and chill upon his brow.

"Korch, where the Hell's that blaster?"

A growing pulse of something coming back to life ... something incredible ... something terrible ... something ... God! How they underestimated the old cunning!

"Korch, for Christ's sake! He's coming round!"

Something coming back to life ... the re-lit flame in the primeval furnace ... the fantastic chain reaction of bitterest passions in the multiple galaxies ... growing ...

"Korch! My God, Korch! If we don't kill him now we're lost for sure."

"Here's a mark seven," said Korch, returning, "and God preserve our eyeballs if you fire it here at this range."

... growing ... tinged with all the old corroding bitterness and stealth, all the hatreds and the lusts, all the bright, untarnished fury, all the unrestrained barbarity ... all the mammoth resolution to survive ...

Dalroi stirred in the bonds that held him to the trolley, and attempted to sit up. In that same instant the Monitor fired the blaster at point-blank range. The back-flash deprived him of his senses and it was a full

minute before he and Korch were able to crawl and grope, with damaged eyes, through the wreckage of the room. The further wall had mainly collapsed and the roof was torn asunder. In the room beyond were the remnants of the trolley, burnt and shattered. Of Dalroi there were no remains at all.

Korch began praying to a deity the name of which he had not used with reverence since a child. The Monitor sat staring through the grey mists in his eyes to a small part of the damaged roof through which broke a shaft of sunlight as if through a winter's sky.

"He's gone," said Korch finally. "Do you think he's going to come back?"

"Who can tell?" asked the Monitor slowly. His face was stiff with the mask of some unknown passion. "With that sort of hell in him I shouldn't think there's much mischief here which could gratify his appetite. But I wonder if the people out there believe in a God, consoling and benevolent. I have a feeling they're going to need a little solace ... "
