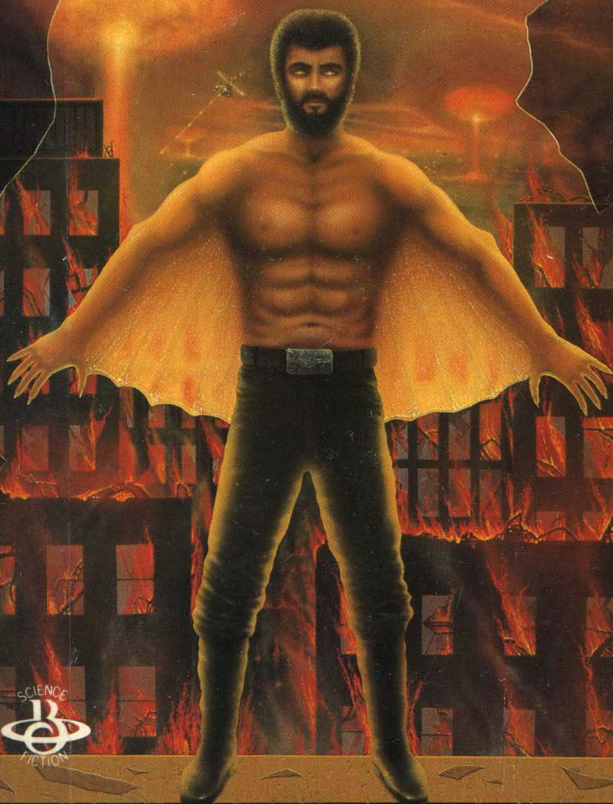


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RAYMOND Z. GALLUN

BIOBLAST



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**“PEOPLE OF EARTH,
HEED MY WARNING . . .**

**I am Lance Tolliver! Ogre! Bigfoot! Mad Boy!
Accused murderer! Mutant! Some suggest I can
do wonders! This is not a joke, but fact! Come
and get me, and I will show you! Only that way
will we find out whether I am useful . . . or a
disaster!”**

RAYMOND Z. GALLUN

BIOBLAST



BERKLEY BOOKS, NEW YORK

*For Bertha and our daughter, Deidre,
and for the distant places
(still just on Earth)
that we three visit and love.*

BIOBLAST

**A Berkley Book / published by arrangement with
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CHAPTER I

The night patrolman at the rural shopping plaza heard the crash and tinkle as a front window of the supermarket was smashed with a large rock. It was as bluntly direct an act as that of a foraging bear.

Moments later, the cop peered into the store's interior, which, for security after closing time, was left partly illuminated. Unbelieving and scandalized, he saw somebody devouring raw steaks in the meat department.

By then, monitoring devices would have set off signals at the nearest police headquarters, and have shifted viewing screens there to the site of the disturbance. But on his own, the tough and disgusted patrolman followed the intruder through the break, and hurried aggressively forward toward making a quick arrest.

However, the scarecrow figure, with a steak still gripped in its jaws, doubled back and, with erratic,

evasive agility and speed, darted out the broken window.

"Hey, you!" the big cop roared.

The fugitive rocketed at a gimping lope across the empty parking lot, and disappeared among the dark trees.

"Holy Mary, what next?" the frustrated officer muttered, blowing air up past his nose . . .

Motorcycle buffs aren't generally mean, of course; but Hep Arbow and Cheek Bossiter had latent sadistic tendencies, at present enhanced by a few drinks. They were remotely aware of a radio alert about a peculiar store burglary near a neighboring town a few nights before, and had had some rough laughs over it, yet they weren't thinking about this now.

Before they quite reached the pedestrian, he shied to one side against the gravelly slope, where, for a considerable stretch, the road cut through a hill mass. Thus his easy escape was blocked.

Hep braked, and Cheek followed suit.

"Hey, Cheek," Hep wondered softly. "What dumb hitchhiker would be trying to ride his thumb on an almost empty road after dark? They're resurfacing. Couldn't he read the 'restricted traffic' signs?"

"Maybe no hitchhiker," Cheek answered. "Maybe some crooked-up local-yokel tottering home. Maybe lots of things."

"So let's find out," Hep said.

The roar of their engines echoed ominously in the cleft as they gunned ahead fifty meters and stopped, their muscular legs spraddled, propping their rumbling bikes.

"Hey, buddy, want a lift?" Hep challenged the night-vagrant.

"The creep's scared shitless," Cheek sneered.

Still in the saddles, and with their booted feet wide apart, they walked their vehicles over toward the gravelled steepness, trapping their quarry inside a tight V. As the guy tried to slip away, Cheek reached out a large hand to take hold of a thin arm. Hep grabbed the fellow's opposite shoulder.

The face that the two cyclists saw in the brilliant headlamp reflection from the cleft slope looked a little crooked on the left side. It was also badly scratched. This weird character was panting; he seemed not only scared but exhausted. His aspect was hardly impressive, though he was tall. His queer, pale eyes looked dazed, yet disquieting.

Cheek Bossiter, irritated by the oddity and apparent weakness of this worn-out derelict, longed to smash his fist full force into his silly face. Likely he would do better than that pretty soon.

But just now he declared mildly, "We're lonesome, chum. And bored. We think it might be entertaining to talk to you. Exchange philosophical notes, so to speak. Maybe figure out some funny games. All right?"

Something dawned on Hep Arbow just then.

"Wups, Cheek, remember?" he said.

About forty minutes later, the owner of an all-night diner handed his phone to a flustered motorist, who had demanded that he call an ambulance and the State Police.

"Yeah, officer—just like the boss-man here says," the motorist puffed. "Back a couple of kay-ems on N-414 that's being fixed. Two big kids with motorcycles. Not a smashup, because their bikes were just parked off the road, undamaged. Guess those kids are both finished—one with his head all sideways, the other with his liver hanging out in the dirt. There was hardly any traffic, so I don't think they could have been hit while standing. One had a bloody hunting knife,

though. Maybe they just got into a fight with each other. If they weren't murdered. There was that alert for a maniac . . . ”

One of the men was already dead, his spinal cord entirely severed between two crushed cervical vertebrae. Just before the other expired on the way to the hospital—advanced surgery might have repaired his ruined viscera, but not the deep and diffuse hemorrhaging within his cerebellum or lower brain—he gasped out three phrases:

“That raw-meat gobbling lunatic! He did this! A devil!”

His tone and choice of words were more those of some law-abiding and horrified grandfather than of Cheek Bossiter as he had usually been.

Spruce Crest, a prestigious, well-endowed sanatorium for the disturbed, located some thirty kilometers from where the violence had occurred, had already been contacted because of the supermarket incident. None of its patients was missing. Still, the individual sought fell clearly within the range of its endeavors. Also, it was the handiest source of psychiatric assistance in combing the thicket-and-tree-shagged mountains and taking into custody with the least fuss the person who now was also wanted in connection with two homicides.

CHAPTER 2

On the second morning, the Mad Boy was cornered on a slope, among rocks and undergrowth.

"It's him," the cop who had been in on the supermarket incident gruffed, while a state trooper took pictures.

Dr. Ted Destin of Spruce Crest was also among the hunters. In the almost timeless, moveless pause of startled discovery, he raised his hand to restrain his companions, and gave the trapped quarry a quick appraisal with young and compassionate eyes. His knowledge of his field was extensive, but he knew that his actual experience was limited. Still he earnestly honored his Hippocratic oath.

Much of what he saw and interpreted would have seemed obvious to any medical person of his kind: the wild yet semi-stunned wolf-glare in those pale eyes, as if this fellow's consciousness hovered somewhere between alertly defended reality and a fantasy-escape-world of

his own; the defensive, hiding crouch of the long-boned, very thin figure among the mountain laurel bushes.

Other details fitted in without clinical incongruity: age, around twenty. Clothed in filthy and tattered institutional denims and the wrecks of shoes. He showed other indications of wear and tear and injury. This guy had evidently been on his not very competent own, away from whatever place he had been taken care of in, for quite a while. Then, the slight lopsidedness of him. His left eye was displaced downward a couple of millimeters, and his limbs didn't quite match their mates. Here was somebody who seemed congenitally warped both in physique and brain—a not infrequent combination—from birth. On his right cheek was a narrow scab, as from a cut.

The state troopers, the town cop, and even the experienced attendants from Spruce Crest were all plainly eager to close in on this public menace at once. His snarl-bared white teeth, and the way his left arm—the weaker one—was drawn back and poised, with a fist, tendon-pale with tautness, clenched at its end, hinted beyond doubt that he was dangerous. But Ted Destin's upraised hand still managed to hold the others in check for a moment more, while he continued his observations.

Yes, there were odd circumstances, not noticed at once. There were dried runnels, as of tears, in the dust on the cheeks, above the black beard, which was full of burrs, and thick and matted like the black hair of the head.

But the right arm, the less scrawny of the two, bared to the shoulder because the blue sleeve had been torn away, was crudely bound to the chest by long, narrow ribbons of bark, probably stripped from withes. This fellow wasn't entirely lacking in ingenuity to have devised this arrangement, and to have tied it one-handed. The shoulder, elbow, and wrist joints were swollen and red. The relaxed knuckles of the right hand, though

filthy, showed great, unfestered, clean-healing scabs. This last fact was particularly strange.

Yet there seemed to be something more. It eluded Destin because it was apart from the crouched figure itself. Now, though, he found it:

Four little birds—two pairs? warblers of some sort?—were fluttering and hovering quite close to the Mad Boy, chirping anxiously.

The logical explanation was that they had nests nearby and were trying to drive off threatening intruders.

But there was an inconsistency here. Why didn't the birds go for him and his companions as well? Destin wondered.

Or were they so fearful of the demented lad that they ignored everybody else?

This theory was also flawed. So Destin, being quite flexible of viewpoint, was pushed toward an opposite thought:

Most love was biological and social, to better insure the survival of whatever it valued. In this sense, even a mother turtle, hiding her eggs, could love. *So, were these little birds trying to defend this pathetic human as they would defend their fledged but still almost flightless offspring?*

This last notion was so absurd that it made Destin smile broadly, though he also felt an eerie tingle in his hide. He responded less from training and logic than from just being himself.

His smile widened further. He was medium-sized, with good features, sandy hair and whiskers, and blue eyes. Clad now in a checkered shirt, threadbare jeans, and old boots, he hardly looked like a professional man.

"Hi, friend," he greeted mildly. "The birds seem to like you. That makes you quite a person."

Dr. Destin's kindly intentions seemed to get across.

The glare of those pale eyes dipped and wavered for the small fragment of time needed to make the seizure.

This treachery was Destin's only in that he wasn't quick enough to stop the trained, hair-triggered, and concerted actions of those with him.

The police and attendants were braced for an immediate struggle before they grabbed the boy. A needle, loaded with a potent sedative, was jabbed into his thigh as an automatic part of the swift, smooth-flowing capture. The boy relaxed into a stupor almost at once.

Destin wasn't in charge. Besides, the action was probably just right. Yet now he was angry.

"I wish you hadn't done any of that quite so fast!" he said sharply. "Those damaged joints. And how do we know he's in good enough shape to take heavy sedation, Fred? We could destroy something."

"Sorry, Doctor."

The muscular, middle-aged attendant's smile was rather smug and patronizing. He still held the spent throwaway syringe.

A folded stretcher was being hurried up from the police van, which had been parked in a rutted area at the bottom of the slope. Destin knelt beside the now snoring captive and began a quick examination.

"We'll take him to County General," the senior trooper said.

"You shouldn't, Lieutenant," Destin found himself disagreeing firmly. "Spruce Crest has much better facilities for this sort of case, which can be delicate. This guy seemed to be riding on the thin edge of total crack-up. I'd like to check him over carefully. I know you want to question him. But whether you can do that at all will depend on how lucid and steady we can make him. Anything even inadvertently suggestive of rough inquiry, especially at first, would not only compromise his rights but might also be totally counterproductive."

Destin realized how pompously pedantic his words must sound, but they seemed to impress the trooper.

"Very well, Doctor," he sighed heavily. "I may get chewed out by my chief, but you win. Just so our people

can ask this guy about those bikers real soon.”

Destin had begun to wonder whether he himself was in for a chewing-out from his boss. Dr. Reginald Archmere, director of Spruce Crest, though a genial type outwardly, wasn't too eager to receive scruffy patients who were on public welfare.

He might have to argue with Archie, Destin thought, but he'd stick to his decision. Now he reviewed—and wondered—just why he had done it this way. Sympathy, almost sentimentality—sure. But what else that was deeper? Curiosity about vague hints at things strange, new, and interesting. Signs more substantive than the bit about the birds. Where had they gone, by the way? He didn't see them anymore. But then he heard what could be them still chirping complaints somewhere among the nearby conifers.

Riding in the enclosed compartment of the police vehicle, alone with the patient—with the stretcher, there was hardly room for anybody else—Destin continued his examination. He used the little vital-parameters indicator he had taken from the case at his belt. Pulse, heartbeat, and respiration all strong, yet oddly slow. Temperature elevated one degree Celsius above norm. A luminous, green-line encephalograph display of brain waves showed some erratic peaks and dips—peculiar ones.

His attention returned to the scabbed wounds. Yes, all healing with no sign of infection, in spite of the dirt. He felt of the right elbow, shoulder, and wrist. Still much edema—swelling—as from three dislocations which had been returned accurately to place, crudely held so by those bark strips. Strange indeed.

The riddles did not end there. Could this emaciated, confused young wreck possibly have killed two vigorous men, bare-handed, in a single encounter? Were the public and the police jumping to a stupid conclusion that this could be a killer, through prejudice against the disoriented?

And yet it was well authenticated that there were occasional instances in which such people, in a state of manic excitement, sent such furious, driving nerve impulses to their muscles that their strength was multiplied enough even to tear the tissues and pull bones from their sockets.

So it might have been. Further, this fellow had had the dislocations. He could have struck as hard as that!

Destin replaced the bark-strip binding with a sling from the vehicle's first-aid kit. As he did this, he noticed the boy's long, ragged fingernails. Did they seem unusually narrow and thick, with a tendency to come to sharp points? Oh, hell, he was imagining things. But his skin tingled, as if from a dark force.

The Mad Boy snored on. There was no chance at all to communicate with him past the massive sedation. Yet, perhaps to express a misplaced sympathy, Destin abstractly patted the boy's uninjured arm and murmured, "I'll look after you, friend."

Destin was startled more than ever when those pale, defensive eyes opened, blinked, lost their blankness, then their wolf-glare.

Next came whispered, halting words, only a little blurred.

"Friend? Yes. I feel that you are . . . more friend than most. And it is my time to try to do . . . I have cancelled the drug. Don't tell anything to anybody bad—please."

"Eh?" Destin grunted.

His heart was suddenly pounding. His confused excitement seemed to spread in concentric rings of color against the dark lids of his briefly closed eyes. Cancel that powerful sedative? Without an antidote? Impossible!

"Guess I'm dense, friend," he managed to respond. "Maybe you could explain more about some of that?"

But the youth was snoring again. No mild nudging aroused him.

Upon the arrival of the van and a second police car at Spruce Crest, Dr. Archmere, the director, did appear at once.

"We brought the man here on the insistance of your Dr. Destin, Doctor," the State Police lieutenant explained.

Archmere threw a scowl in Destin's direction, but then grasped the officer's hand and grinned cordially.

"Of course, sir. Anything to help you people," Archmere declared. "We'll look him over for you promptly."

Dr. Archmere's eminence in his field was well deserved. But, like others of his level, he was overburdened and overextended. Also, being human, he wasn't impervious to the inflations of success. Here Destin's judgments of his chief fell into a hazy area in which admiration and irritation were mixed; he was a man himself.

Anyway, the admission of this patient was working out with less argument and trouble than he had expected.

Archmere gave the lad a going-over in maybe thirty seconds, with quick, perceptive eyes and fingers.

"Interesting how those injuries are clearing up. Good sign, though," he said. "Oh—odd nails. Lax, underarm skin. Oh, well."

"Then maybe we can talk to him tomorrow, Doctor?" the trooper asked.

"We'll see, Lieutenant."

Destin dared to butt in. "I think later than that. He's weak, battered, and surely very mixed up. Also a rather unusual case."

Archmere worked a scowl for Destin in among his smiles.

Once the police had left, except for one guard for the prisoner, Archmere turned to his subordinate.

"All right, Destin," he said in an undertone. "Your decision, your baby. Put him through the works thor-

oughly. Spruce Crest has a reputation to maintain. Though who knows how much of our bill will be paid."

Archmere was known for picking competent aides, and knowing to whom to delegate various tasks. So Destin felt complimented. Besides that, he knew just why he was so relieved that his boss hadn't asked him any questions about this particular patient.

Because of mistrust. And protective sympathy. Keeping the poor slob, who had made an urgent appeal for caution, shielded from even unintentional abuse. Beyond that, Destin's motives got nebulous, but stronger, scary, and tainted by the unknown. There was an intimation that he was somehow lucky enough to be onto something quite extraordinary in medical annals. Not only did this appeal to his ego as a possible discoverer, urging him to keep quiet till he knew just what he had found, and could get full credit, but for a reason less selfish: what was here might be so fine-textured that it must be handled with the utmost delicacy, lest it be destroyed forever, before it could be studied and understood. He wasn't immune to error himself. Yet at least he'd be extremely careful, and would hope to find equally careful colleagues.

Another factor lingered with him like a blurred, instinctive unease in his gut. How might the jittery world react to a being so odd in its powers that its effect on everyone around it could be profound? Particularly if reports were scattered bluntly, raw and undigested? Must he, Destin, also try to probe the nature of any threat first, thus protecting the public not only from what might be there but from its own panic as well. Nuts! He couldn't complete the wild, secretive, presumptuous thought. Still . . . Ah, let it go!

Urging gentleness, Destin reluctantly left the lad with the lab crew. They would only run tests, and make multi-mode tissue scans. It wasn't their job to interpret the data they collected.

Hoping that the boy wouldn't meanwhile offer any

more startling remarks from supposedly deep sedation, Destin hurried to the small office he shared with Dr. Linda Abbott. Since the beginning of this contact, they had fallen in love in a rather quiet way. She wasn't at her desk just now; she was probably with the small Bartolli girl, who, as a shock effect of her father's accidental death, had gone mute.

Ted Destin was usually delighted to be with Linda Abbott, who was a lovely blonde, poised, companionable in serious matters, and fun for mild kidding around. Though they did get tangled in each other's hair now and then, particularly about details of personal philosophy.

Dr. Destin's recent student years had been studied with the usual amount of feminine socializing, most of which had been unimportant. Except one, with a third cousin of his named Cara Webber, a vigorous member of distaff humanity, whose other passions were adventurous sports, wilderness, and wildlife, about all of which she had become quite practically expert as a writer and lecturer. Cara Webber was a reckless, capable sort, ready without much coaxing for just about anything. Destin liked her a lot. She liked him also, but she was just too much for his sedate personality. At present she lived and carried on her activities in Canada.

Linda Abbott was much more his kind. All the same, he was sort of glad that she was out of the office just now, because he had a task to start, and he wasn't sure that he wanted even her intrusion into its arcane aspects right away.

His hand held a label pulled from inside the neck of the captive's denim shirt. It bore the name and town of the institution where the fellow must last have been a patient. The State Police had this information too; but as a matter of routine, Archmere would expect him to gather medical records in detail.

Destin got on the phone, punched out numbers for guidance, and contacted that most recent refuge. He

identified himself and Spruce Crest, stated that a probable inmate of their facility had been picked up, learned that one who fitted the description had slipped away, and then requested that all records about the man be telecommmed immediately, since they would surely help in the diagnosis and treatment of the boy's now worsened condition. And did they know in what other institutions the patient might previously have been?

Except for brief waits, Destin got prompt cooperation. Transfer-of-data systems had become pretty good. Within half an hour he had the phone numbers of seven institutions, scattered around the country, where this Lance Tolliver had spent time. They went back in steps, through the years, to his infancy.

Destin had phoned his way through five of the hospitals and refuges and the tele-copier in the corner was already whirring intermittently when Dr. Abbott returned to the office.

"Hi, Ted," she greeted. "I've heard the gossip. So spill your version. The ones pushed at me so far are apt to be garbled."

Her tone was light, but there was something suddenly grave behind her cheerful expression.

"Oh-oh, Ted,—you look funny—all tightened up," she added. "I'm listening—if you want to share."

Destin got over the last of his hesitation about telling her the whole thing.

"Lind," he urged, "I'm going to ask you a favor that may seem very silly. To keep whatever we say about this case a casual but closemouthed topic, for a few hours, anyway till I find out better what's with this kid. It's scary-weird."

"Um—woof!" she answered, her brows crinkling. "Goes without mention, though—physician's ethic of confidentiality—even to other physicians. Or should I remark that a secret between two is no longer a secret?"

Destin smirked wryly. "All right, Lind. When you spout adages, I ought to clam up altogether; otherwise I

might be made out a tattling louse. But no—I have to share this thing with somebody, and who have I got besides you? Also, I could need solidier help very soon.”

“Then give, Ted.”

“Uh-huh, Lind—folks with peculiar tastes and talents are right up our crooked little path. Eating raw meat like a dog rates rather low for differentness. But hear this: *Our guy was needled out cold; yet while we were on the way here, he came right through that, spoke very rationally, agreed that I might be his friend, and asked me not to ‘tell anything to anybody bad—please.’*”

Destin noticed that Dr. Linda Abbott seemed less impressed than he had been.

“So you feel specially bound to honor his request for secrecy,” she commented. “Well, I don’t think I’m so very ‘bad,’ do you?”

“Certainly not, Lind. That’s part of my point. But there’s more about him. His injuries are healing too remarkably fast. Look, Linda, I’ve got to hurry; I’ll tell you the rest later. I’ve still got two places to phone for his records. And I see that some of the stuff is coming through on the tele-copier in addition to our own fresh lab data. He’s probably been moved into his room by now, and I should be with him. I need a couple of minutes to finish this job. Then I have to run. I’m trying to keep ahead of the impatient cops. And the kid himself said something about time. His name, by the way, is Lance Tolliver.”

“You’re a fair con artist, Dr. Teddy,” Linda Abbott chuckled. “Trying private-eye tricks too? You? All right, give me the numbers and I’ll finish your chore.”

Destin gathered up the reproduced microfiches and a portable viewer. He pecked at Linda Abbott’s cheek.

“Thanks, angel,” he breathed with honest fervor. “Come up to 519 as soon as you can.”

CHAPTER 3

Destin rode the elevator to the top floor, then went briskly along a neat, pastel blue corridor, with pictures, bolted-down benches, and large, rather high windows. The prisonlike aspect of older institutions was avoided at Spruce Crest. Even 519, one of the few maximum-confinement rooms, had no steel bars; thick, shatter-proof glass served just as well.

The state trooper guard nodded agreeably as Destin keyed his way inside.

Destin found everything in good order at first glance. The youth, flat on the bed, was breathing quietly now, as if in normal sleep; there were light, restraining bands across his middle; an IV tube seeped much-needed nutrients into the bloodstream of his wasted flesh; various vital-parameters monitor contacts were in place.

Destin still checked in detail. He even pulled back one of the prisoner's eyelids, to observe pupil dilation—

more a ritual bow to traditional procedure than for solid purpose, since the monitor display told him all he could otherwise learn.

Another physician, not knowing the case, would have judged from present evidence that the boy was still heavily sedated. Well, let the poor lad sleep, if just sleep it was—he surely needed it. It was probably too soon to attempt to probe his mind directly. Better, anyhow, to catch up on other available data, first.

Destin set up the microfiche viewer on a stand in a corner of the room and fed in the plastic strips. Then he sat, hunched and avid, reading them. He started with the fresh lab material—visuals from the most advanced state-of-the-art tomographic probings. There were arc-shaped shadows around the healing joints that had been dislocated, and, more puzzling, a curious thickening—strengthening—of the hard outer shells of the bones of the right leg, left arm, and left eye orbit and jaw—as if extensive, spontaneous correction of birth defects had somehow gone on there. Improvement, though incomplete. Still, how?

He switched to blood data. Cell counts high. Some mineral levels currently low. Proteins? Glycerides? Destin skipped back to the visuals, jumping furiously from one bit of information to another, trying to get it all to come together for some kind of tentative assessment.

The guard tapped on the door, and when Destin opened it, he handed him an envelope.

“This came up the pneumo for you, Doc,” he said. “The floor desk says this is about all of the tele-repros there’ll be.”

Destin’s regret that Linda hadn’t brought the material herself, was promptly submerged in his fascination with the data he now had. It cost him effort to put the hodgepodge of microfiches into date-and-place order. But at last he located the top, the oldest bit—the image of an antique, typed card:

Municipal Hospital, Armorsville, Pa., Jan. 7, 1994. Male foundling, age about 7 days, wt. 2.1 kilos. Left near hosp. entrance in blue pastic infant carrier. Name (on paper pinned to blue blanket) Lance Tolliver. Severe attenuation of left arm and right leg. Severe, congenital malformation of bone and muscle structures of left side of face. Subject shows deep muscle spasms. Probably mentally retarded. Authorities attempting to locate parents.

Then another card image, showing even the two puncture dots where attaching staples had been:

Jan. 9, 1994. Mother, Marie Tolliver, found, a suicide (sleeping pills—Seconal?) in a rooming house. Her disjointed note admits parenthood. Gives explanations. Father, Glen Tolliver, killed in traffic accident, Dec. 5, 1993. Both parents were employed in nuclear-fuel plant in Idaho for 5 yrs. (dates not specified). She blames poor safeguards against radioactivity for genetic damage to child. Child's condition fairly stable, though spasms continue. If it somehow survives 10 days more, seek transfer to more appropriate facility.

Destin's sympathies hovered over vivid imaginings of the scared and hysterical mother's tribulations. Husband suddenly dead. Then, a hideous infant, hard to love or find comfort in. Feeling all alone, too. Retreating from, rather than seeking, help. And blaming. To her distorted, incomplete view, no refuge except to die.

Ted Destin pushed on in his explorations. Advancing dates and places. Transferrals. Seeing the information from many sources and minds, and in various formats, gave it a random, disjointed aspect. Old charts. Old skeletal and bodily visuals. More notes, some cryptic, some bluntly decisive:

Lance Tolliver, now three years and two months old, according to information supplied. Sleeps very much. While awake, shows deep withdrawal and characteristic repetitive movements. Intrinsic mental deficiency questionable. Speaks a few words, but attention span poor. Almost oblivious to psychotherapy. Will be sent to center for autistic children in Chicago.

Mixed in, probably by accident, there was even a large bill for hospital costs and treatment, charged to an insurance company.

Here and there, a real jewel of information turned up, like in the next microfiche that Destin studied. Remarkably enough, it was the reproduction of a comment written in pen, in a big, square hand, evidently by a pediatrics nurse:

For Dr. Chandon: Lance is a puzzling little guy, now and then quite alert and focused. Has a bigger vocabulary than we realized. But there are other matters. Today he said, almost clearly, "Nurse Anne—little specks?" I asked him what specks. So he said, "You know—little live specks inside me. Inside you—in your blood—too? Good specks eat bad ones. What are they?" I told him he shouldn't play make-believe so much. So he frowned, and slipped back into withdrawal. However, this afternoon he was alert again. He said, "You got a thing in that pocket—it pulls." I reached into my pocket and took out a short pencil I'd just picked up on a table in the cafeteria, one that you can stick up anywhere on a steel partition. I showed him how it worked. "There's this little magnet in its top that—you're right—sort of pulls—sticks," I explained. He took the pencil and held it against his head. "M-m-magnet?" he lisped, in that way he has. I asked him how he knew. But then a bird that some-

times comes landed on the outside windowsill. Lance dropped the pencil and hopped on his good leg toward the bird. He likes birds. I tried to reach him again this evening, but, do you know, it's so frustrating; he just slips away, and doesn't even come back to usual subjects. I wanted to bring these observations to your special attention, Dr. Chandon, so I'm writing this out. They may mean something. Especially the one about the magnetized pencil. Sincerely, Anne Olmer.

Destin searched furiously for some follow-up about this note, but found nothing. He began to wonder how many persons had had most of the data that was now in his possession in their hands in the past. The records weren't bad; the rapid transmission of them had become very good. But how many people, having gathered them, had given them truly close study? In Tolliver's case, at least. It was an old problem. Specialists, particularly the most earnest, were inevitably overworked. And there was also a tendency to try to treat a specific medical condition immediately present, to the exclusion of possibly significant indications in the past. Flashes of compassionate insight got buried in the muddle of human inattentions and inconsistencies. For common medical problems, it might all work out fairly okay. But in very special instances, like Tolliver's? . . .

Destin wondered ruefully whether, lacking his first dramatic contacts with the boy, he would have noticed his uniqueness any better?

The next piece of really pertinent information came from a hospital in another city. Ironically, the note had little to do with the specialty of the place—orthopedics:

April 7, 2000. Re: Lance Tolliver, autistic male child, sent here for further evaluation of marked congenital malformations of right leg and left arm.

Present illness began as apparent mild cold. There have been no extensions of respiratory symptoms except uneven breathing. But extraordinarily high fever—41.7 C, 107 degrees F. Heart fibrillates at intervals, near failure. No viral or other infections, nor any significant allergies or other causes of sickness in evidence. Heart stimulation unit at standby.

Then a second note, dated the following day:

Patient seems completely out of danger, in spite of yesterday's moribund indications. One of those things with children? We are maintaining continuous monitoring. Patient very hungry.

Next there was a worried comment from the same hospital, though probably made by another physician:

September 5, 2001. 7½-year-old Lance Tolliver has had several episodes of high fever and edema, particularly of his affected limbs and facial structures. Cause, indeterminable here, except probably an underlying phase of his congenital pathology. Very cautiously we had been applying Balfour's hormonal therapy (mild injections at three-day intervals, with vitamin- and mineral-rich nutrition), hoping to start deficient-tissue regeneration as claimed. Such previous treatment of other patients, while not yielding appreciable, positive results, has not caused any dangerous side effects. We doubt that there is any relationship between these procedures and the subject's attacks. However, we have discontinued the controversial Balfour's Method. Still there have been recurrences of lesser intensity, from which the patient emerges in extreme exhaustion and withdrawal, dehydrated, and with later compulsive spasms of hunger. Further, we consider that the subject's general congenital condition

(beyond improved braces for his affected limbs) exceeds the scope of an orthopedic facility. His need is largely caretaking. Therefore we are seeking his transfer. —Dr. Bruce Hillman, Orth. Assoc.

His pulse pounding with excitement, Ted Destin re-read this note. Pay dirt? Anyhow, there were suggestive implications: a hospital's worry about lawsuits for the "adverse effects" of their use of the now long discredited Balfour's Method, and so, wanting to be rid of Tolliver? Thus missing entirely, perhaps through fear of this responsibility—had they been blind?—a unique quality about him?

For there had been gradual improvements of his deformed arm and leg, adding up to a great deal. Comparing today's tomography of his bones with ones from fifteen years ago proved this beyond question. He was nowhere near as crippled as he had once been.

Yet how could it have happened, except by some unprecedented regenerative agency within himself?

The young psychiatrist kept hurrying, with intense attention, through the remaining records. Thoughts of a minute ago dimmed behind a welter of comments from another facility:

Claims of ability to recognize simple printed words not borne out. Efforts to break through frequent profound schizoid retreat, either by suggestive means or by medication, largely ineffective. Occasional seizures and fever. Tolliver unable to learn, beyond the most basic. Can manage spoon awkwardly, while eating. Shows occasional, inordinate appetite, which must then be restrained to avoid gorging. Almost speechless now. Regression? Sleeps as much as 18 hours a day. When awake, stares at nothing, rocks torso, engages in repetitive autistic behavior. Turns pages of old books and magazines endlessly. Appears intrigued by the tex-

ture and rustle—and perhaps the smell—of printed paper. We humor him in this, providing him with newer samples.

There followed a long gap in which nothing was presented except the parameters of regular physical checkups over several years. But finally there was a kind of summary:

Jan. 2, 2011. Lance Tolliver, now 17, is ready for removal to an adult refuge. Condition stable, except for minor fevers. Otherwise, general health good; no history here even of common cold, though postinfective cold antibodies present in blood. Also seems to have outgrown physical birth defects to a considerable extent. We don't have equipment to investigate such matters thoroughly. Tolliver is by all evidence a permanent though tractable—even good-natured—incompetent.

Beyond the notation of Tolliver's admission, made at that adult home itself, Destin ran into another gap of just routine data. Then, like a neglected afterthought, came another small summing-up of the Mad Boy's condition:

Feb. 3, 2014. Lance Tolliver—no change. Plays with various objects, especially discarded books. Sleeps much. Often seems not to recognize own name. Is permitted some controlled freedom to move about the grounds. Mutters to himself, perhaps in imitation of speech. Innocuous, docile, and bemused. To date, his sexual maturity has not presented any aggressive impulses. However, he has shown some slight resistance reactions to restraint—clenching of fists—though nothing overt. Though thin, he is quite strong. Caution.

Then, the final notation, of two months ago:

March 17, 2014. No refuge of humanitarian intent can be absolutely escape proof. Inmate, Lance Tolliver, somehow slipped away at dusk (March 16). Police were notified at once. Tolliver is incapable of survival alone, and with his peculiarities of habit can't get far unnoticed.

Dr. Ted Destin glanced almost furtively at his wristwatch. It was 3:32 P.M. He had spent more than three hours just scanning this mass of records, when time was so limited.

Where now might he retrace his way for useful evidence? He spun the controls of the microfiche viewer back to the visuals taken today. He spent many minutes studying the thinly sectioned tissue laminae shown in the pictures. Were the hairlike lines of nerve channels radiating from the spinal cord, to transmit sensation and to command action—the wriggling of a finger or the release of gastric juice in the stomach—just slightly less tenuous, more developed, with ganglia a bit larger, in Tolliver's body than was usual in other people? Yes, it seemed so. Destin knew he wouldn't have noticed this if, on a dim hunch, he hadn't been looking for it. It was no gross variation at all. But then, it mightn't take much.

Destin resented the light tap on the door, and the need to get up and answer it. But when the intruder turned out to be Linda Abbott, he was glad.

"You probably aren't even aware yet that you skipped lunch," she remarked as she entered the room. "So here's a belated sandwich and coffee. I didn't come up sooner because I wanted to be free for this all evening. So what's up?"

He began munching and sipping with absentminded alacrity.

"A few things," he answered between mouthfuls,

shrugging in faked belittlement. "Since they happen to be displayed, examine these nerve filaments first. What's different about them?"

"Prominent," she decided after a minute.

"Yuh, Lind. Now turn to the marked places."

He finished his snack.

"Your Tolliver's deformities *did* decrease," she mused at last. "Plain enough to see by comparing old and new visuals. The phony Balfour injections couldn't have done that, could they?"

"Doubtful, Lind. And if they didn't?"

"Give me another minute to think this all out, Ted. You've had more time at it than I. The little specks inside himself that he asked the nurse about—good eating bad?—sounds like the defending leukocytes—the white blood cells—destroying disease microorganisms. You mean he could somehow sense this happening? That's crazy! And knowing the magnetized pencil was there? The nurse who wrote up those bits must have been hallucinating."

"Was she, Lind? I almost thought so too. Our getting the same idea separately, though . . . Disregard the magnetic pencil. There's enough without that."

Doctors Abbott and Destin looked at each other with eyes of different shades of blue, his darker ones challenging, hers groping and wondering.

"If this boy could somehow tell us," she mused. "Ah, that can't be. Even if it was possible, it would require a complete rewiring of the nervous system."

"Would it? Consider. All the basic sensory channels are there, in rudimentary form, in all of us. For feeling heat, cold, pain, hunger, sick—yes—horny, too. And if a relatively small change—or advancement—happened through a benign mutation . . . You saw those larger nerve filaments."

He waited while she pondered.

"Then too," she began haltingly, "if no external treatment reduced those birth defects, it had to happen

by itself. Or, well, it's a very old notion that a mental wish and attitude or belief—optimistically held—can help cure any disease or adverse physical condition. We shrinks, in our soul-treating business, recognize the truth of this. With practice, many persons can alter their pulse rate, blood pressure, and temperature. This also is rudimentary conscious manipulation. And if someone was born with a bit better nerve linkages, not only sensory but motor . . .”

“Yes, Linda. We know there've been persons claiming such capabilities, in a small way. Though not as developed as this, I think. Kind of awesome to tangle with, eh?”

Their eyes turned to the figure on the bed. Their quiet, intense voices seemed not to have disturbed its apparent slumber.

“You haven't tried to speak to Tolliver again?” Linda asked.

“No. But he should be ready. He could talk past all that sedation even hours ago.”

“I'd best leave, Ted. He knows you. I'd distract him.”

“Uh-uh, Lind. Just stay back. Come close if it turns out okay.”

Destin approached the bed. With the window louvers partly closed, the room was in sunset twilight. Soothing. Because it was a rule while interviewing a patient, Destin activated the sound recorder. This troubled him some now. But if speech was kept very soft . . .

He bent close over Tolliver, the enigma, and spoke ramblingly:

“Asleep or awake . . . It doesn't matter . . . But always at ease . . . Float . . . Drift . . . Feel free . . . Hear me if you wish . . . I am your friend . . . Drift . . . No effort at all . . . That way, you'll find me. I am Ted Destin. I'm easy, very easy and comfortable to talk to.”

Destin's coaxing and suggesting, as mild and near pressureless as a stir of gentle air, needed to go no fur-

ther than that. But he wasn't at first so very startled when Tolliver began to whisper halting, slurred, word-searching phrases, yet in ordinary language, as common in hospitals as elsewhere, though there was a medical slant:

"Hypnotism, Doc? They always try that on me. A waste. I just slip away. Not necessary now, either. Because it's *time*. I shouldn't have to play dummy anymore. I feel you're a right one—more than most. I guess, so is—Lind? Sure I've been listening. I've got good ears. I can't talk well yet, because I haven't been saying the words aloud very much—only practicing, inside. I'm not a real schizo at all. You prob'ly figured that out? I'm lots more. And I need help—for what I have to try and find out. Important! You guys—shrinks—always ask questions. So what's the first?"

Destin's excitement had mounted so much that now he seemed the fumble-witted one. He kept his visible poise, but what he asked won him no prize for brightness:

"You're Lance Tolliver?"

"They call me that, Doc. But I'm—just I."

"You can read, too, Lance?" A more sensible query.

"Some. From old books they gave me to play with. Not very well, though. I was much too busy learning from way down inside me. So much more there."

"Inside you, Lance? Try to make us understand."

Tolliver's pale eyes were open, and they took on a shine of impatience—almost fury. Then he gave his first explanation of what he was. As if he had rehearsed it often, his words, though still a little blurred, were no longer halting:

"I'm different. I can 'see' down into my body, including microscopic stuff, and smaller—cells, you call them—flesh, bone, blood, brain. And viruses, and littler things. Call it an introspective sense. When I was small I thought everybody had it. But when I asked a nurse some questions, she didn't even know what I was

talking about. I guess you're like all the others, Doctor—a smart-ass Mind imagining it's boss of your carcass, but just getting a free ride through life inside a Body that it half despises as only a hulk, though it knows far more and can't trust how dumb you are. So, to be safe, it doesn't tell you much. But with me, somehow . . . Besides, with some special knacks, sort of making up for disadvantages—and a lot of trying and practice—I have considerable control of what happens down there. Cell growth. Fixing what went wrong."

All this sounded like boastful schizoid fantasies, but Destin felt no urge to scoff.

"We sort of guessed, Lance, so say more," he urged.

"Sure, Doc. I couldn't get such hard things across to anybody else without thinking a long while how. Yes, through your motor nerves your Mind commands your face to smile, or your feet to walk. So what you want happens. But do you feel—do you have any idea how many muscles your Body must make work smoothly together for such—it seems—simple actions to take place? Even to think a pleasant or unpleasant thought is also action. Your Mind believes without question that its thoughts are its own. But Mind is substanceless—less than a bubble floating in the brain, which is part of Body. Mind doesn't know—of itself—how it works. A fine paradox—I believe the word is. Only by round-about experiment and research, done by specialists, does your Mind, in your Bodily brain, know a little of how it is constructed and functions and exists in its all but weightless way, like a flame, among the innumerable, intricate connections and switching points, activated by complex chemistry, which make up the soft stuff inside your skull.

"But in me, because of a small difference, Body has opened itself up much more to Mind. For study of all it knows . . . Though still not entirely without suspicion . . . Like that I've learned a lot . . . Only a very little of what is there . . . From the swarm of it—that con-

fuses—though it is not confused . . . I still don't find any very good words for telling anybody who has never experienced that much of what being Inside is like . . . Because there *aren't* any . . . But from as far back as I can remember, it has always been more interesting than the Outside. Only now . . .”

The gaunt shape on the hospital bed stopped its guarded, intense murmuring, which Ted Destin—and Linda Abbott bending close now too—had to strain to grasp.

“We don't disbelieve you, Lance,” Destin said calmly. “You see, Dr. Abbott and I have found indications in your records. Say that we have seen proof, before knowing what it proved. And you must read better than you said, to speak so well. You know the word ‘mutation’?”

“Of course, Doc. Long ago I picked it out of a dictionary they gave me. Mutation, or mutant. What I am. Oh, I read well enough. But I could be better, faster. If I hadn't had to keep photo memories of whole pages in my head for later reading, so nobody would guess.”

“And ‘genius’?”

“A wrong term, Doctor, if it means extreme intelligence. I'm no smarter there than you—or Lind, as you call her—or lots of others—yet.”

“But in a truer way, Lance Tolliver?” Linda challenged. “Someone who might do great good. What did you mean when you said, *‘It's time’*?”

Tolliver closed his eyes, not answering at once. His black, wavy hair, cleared of woodland burrs and washed and combed by the attendants who had cleaned him up, lay on the pillow around his head. His aspect indicated contrasting racial origins. His narrow, bearded face was almost handsome in a cadaverous way on its right half, but still somewhat crooked on its left. In the waning daylight he seemed to have slipped back into sleep or inner study, or even to have died. Just then he looked like the corpse of a wild, driven young ascetic or

prophet who had struggled to cope with vast riddles.

But then his wounded cheek and his lips quivered with some deep emotion or thought. When he spoke, his words reverted to stumbling:

"Time—a sense of *when*, Doctors. A drive. Like birds sensing seasonal rhythms, star positions, the Earth's magnetic field—so knowing when to migrate. That—but a bigger question. Time—to try to find out. Am I a benefit—useful? Or a mistake of Nature? More likely to cause disaster among people by being both too much believed in and feared? My Body's knowledge doesn't reassure. It only insists that I must still test for truth. The proof of biology—survival or extinction. Live to be an effective new step in advancing evolution, or sink back into the ground, or Mother Ocean, in small salvage as food for microorganisms or fish. I think the negative now, since meeting the raw Outside—blundering cross-country for many nights. Because, being always busy with inner searching and learning, I had little chance for Outer things before. If you hadn't come, Dr. Destin, I might have commanded my heart to stop. For greater reasons, again I wonder. The way the outer world is now constructed, I might cause a lot more trouble than good. Nor would I fit there myself—as myself. When I wish I could blend with everybody."

Doctors Abbott and Destin looked at each other as these remarks faded to a pause. Both wondered whether they had to attempt to lead this weird person, like just another patient, by reasoned steps of psychiatry through the maze of his depression to some light beyond. But such thoughts, if applicable at all, were premature.

"Lance," Linda Abbott urged. "We're here, Ted and I. You're not so alone. You can't think of throwing what you are away."

Tolliver answered at once, with more firmness:

"Oh—I didn't mean that I'm finished. Not yet. Life

fight to live and do—till it dies—fails.”

“We’ll help you to live, Lance,” Destin declared.

Again Tolliver replied immediately:

“I think you two might. Though even putting up with how I am won’t be easy. But I can’t handle the Outside by myself. How will you help?”

“You must help us first,” Linda told him warily.

“We have to know more about you, Lance. To begin with, could you describe more clearly what being in what you call ‘Inside’ is like so we have a better idea?”

Perhaps Tolliver sensed that she had dodged his question a little by posing an important one of her own. He looked up at her intently.

“That’ll be tough to do, Doctor—Linda,” he answered her. “Because you don’t have anything very good to compare the sensations with. But I’ll try. Could I rest a while first, though? I’m tired. And hungry. I’m slipping back down Inside. I need protein. Meat. Not cooked. To build with.”

“I’ll be right back with some, Lance,” Destin said.

He went to the cafeteria kitchens on the second floor, initialed a chit, and helped himself directly from the refrigerator. Around here, doctors often made peculiar requests, so his didn’t cause any stir. However, while returning to room 519, he kept the defrosted package under his smock, out of the guard’s sight.

So Tolliver was unstrapped and allowed to sit up in bed to devour a large, raw steak, fat and all, down to gnawing the bone. Destin and Abbott watched this avid process with the wry, attentive, and even benevolent detachment of their profession. As he was finishing, Tolliver mumbled:

“I think you two have things to discuss. By yourselves.”

Then he slumped and snored.

Destin refastened the straps. Abbott tidied the patient with tissues and rechecked the medical attachments.

Destin replaced the tiny record module of the sound recorder with a fresh one and slipped the used module into his pocket.

"To give to Archmere," he murmured. "He'll want it as part of my first report about Tolliver. He probably won't bother to play it back unless I urge him to. Even if he does, Lind, he'll have to listen hard to hear much, because everybody spoke very low. Maybe you begin to feel now why something warns me to be secretive."

"Um-hm, Ted—Sort of."

Destin stepped back to bedside and leaned close to that slightly lopsided face. "Maybe you're still aware, Lance," he said. "Stay put. Remember you're still supposed to be under sedation. We won't be gone long."

Down the corridor, well past the guard, Linda began the necessary, quiet conversation with some dry comments:

"Tolliver's not very civilized at table, is he? And we didn't even ask him if he did Bossiter and Arbow in. Guess asking that wouldn't have been appropriate. Also, such stuff isn't the main point."

"So what *is* the main point?" Destin prompted.

"Like you hinted, Ted. That Lance, this 'Mad Boy'—so designated in the night before last's radio-alert about those two violent deaths—represents some mighty big stuff, if we aren't hallucinating up some pretty convincing evidence already. Anyhow, when he insists that our bodies know much more than our conscious minds, you have to realize that he's certainly right, if you think about it at all seriously. Ever since the first dab of living substance was brewed up in the amino-acid-tainted soups of azoic oceans on our primordial Earth, and the first simple prototypes of the double-helix DNA molecules of heredity appeared, biological forms have been becoming more complex—learning, acquiring more know-how. Till at least from the time of the dinosaurs, and down into modern creatures and humans, those forms must have accumulated applications of almost

every imaginable science over the ages: mechanics in the design and function of muscles and bones; multiphase hormonal chemistry; the intricate ion physics of nerve- and brain-cell function; mathematics infinitely more profound than just that needed to allot the correct number of toes to infant animals and human babies. Maybe even involvements with subatomic structures. And who knows what besides? Medical knowledge, of course; the bodies of beasts were successfully fighting off lesser relatives of theirs—disease germs—incalculable aeons before human investigators such as Pasteur discovered them. Very soon any attempt to comprehend the whole picture becomes overwhelming. *Life—biology—is a wondrous, much-encompassing phenomenon, requiring tremendous knowledge for it merely to exist.*” Linda Abbott’s awed and groping words trailed off thinly. Her eyes looked startled and a little dazed.

Destin found that his own mood and feelings closely matched hers.

“U-huh, Lind,” he murmured. “We both get it the same. Of course the implications are plain. If Tolliver really has conscious access to so much, plus—as he says, and as seems obvious—some capability to guide even growth within his flesh and skeleton—through some strengthening of his motor nerves, as in his sensory nerves, then he has inside himself an unprecedented research laboratory and library. And what amounts to a superior place for learning. We might as well call it a school. First a play region for a small child. Later, a singular and stupendous sort of university—not of spoken language, lectures, and printed texts, but of direct and intimate contact with raw fundamentals. Like that, by the same random genetic forces of Nature that warped his shape otherwise, Tolliver has been compensated, and he should be able to accomplish remarkable things. Or am I jumping ahead much too fast, Linda? Dreaming too wildly? Am I?”

Destin's voice had taken on a definite quaver of wonder, excitement, eagerness, and doubt.

Linda Abbott's emotions had steadied somewhat. She grew thoughtful. "What you've just said makes sense, Ted," she offered. "It sounds as though it might be. But how can I give an instant opinion? Right now I'm trying to picture just part of what you suggest: Tolliver as a child, down there inside himself with his own thoughts and imaginings, where all kids often go. Still, different for him—real. Under the circumstances, mightn't it have been a dangerous play place? Yet with so much within himself to grab and hold his interest, is it any wonder that he was so often withdrawn and apparently asleep?"

Destin sighed heavily. He and Abbott had paused in their sauntering pace along the corridor.

"Yeah," he breathed in fervent agreement. "We're both getting closer to grasping what we've got. But there are some touchy, pragmatic questions. First, how would our chief, Dr. Archmere, respond to it all?"

"He'd catch on real quick, Ted. If he happened to notice. Or if we showed him."

"Sure. Then what, with the police eager to get at the boy?"

"Um—Archie would be as accommodating as possible, I'm fairly certain. He's a stickler for law. Also he likes publicity."

"Yes. And how would the police, and their psychiatrists, deal with our lad? When they're probably already as certain as we are that he somehow killed those two bikers?"

"Well, by being as considerate as they deem reasonable, I suppose. While applying some pressure."

"Yes, Lind—aside from what the hungry news media, and the sensation-fascinated and panicky populace might add to that. And that worries me a lot, Lind. You've answered all of my queries so far just about as I've answered them to myself. Now, a larger, general

question. Do such probabilities bother you at all?"

"As a matter of fact, they do," she admitted.

"Me too, Linda. But you must also have noticed that though there's a toughness in Tolliver, there's something breakable. It's not only in what he said about ending himself; it's down behind that wolf-glare of his. Even if he had just an ordinary crack-up and lived, some delicate quality might be damaged or wiped out. I'm not thinking so much about him as about what he evidently is. Something wonderful and totally new, as far as we know. Just for a starter, if he can half correct his own physical deformities, what means might be found in him to smooth out birth defects in others? Lind, I hate like hell to think of whatever he's got that's different and marvelous being risked even slightly. Talk about protecting endangered species—since there's even a hint of a next, human, evolutionary step—how about a species, maybe the most gifted of them all, that hasn't yet had its chance to be?"

"I follow what you state with such passion, Ted. But what can you do?" Linda Abbott smirked a little sadly, displaying a dimple in one cheek. But did she also show a hard, personal worry of her own?

"Maybe I won't do anything. No, with time crowding us, I'm still going to fight for as much time as we can get—for further study and thought. Through tomorrow, at least. I'd better go see Archie right now. Then, could you join me in the cafeteria?"

The director of Spruce Crest was in his ground-floor office, dictating memos into an autotyper. He scowled at the interruption, then smiled, as Destin entered.

"Lousy but necessary nonsense, this stuff," he deprecated airily. "Glad to see you, Ted. So how are you doing with this Tolliver?"

Destin, who hadn't had much experience lying, now lied blandly:

"Not too well, Dr. Archmere. Though well enough, considering. Of course he's exhausted. Also, the little I

could get from him was a hash of confused words. I need at least a week."

"Nary a chance, fella. Besides the State Police, there were several relatives and friends of those two deceased youths here after Tolliver's blood. Aggressive types. Security had to put them out. I don't like that sort of thing around Spruce Crest. I want Tolliver out of here no later than the day after tomorrow. So you're on notice."

Destin placed the record module on Archmere's desk.

"All that came from the boy," Destin said. "He's still in no shape to answer questions. Play it through, and see what I mean."

He hoped—still with faith—that his chief wouldn't bother.

Now he hurried to the cafeteria to have an early supper with Linda.

"So maybe the boy is ready to take us down 'Inside'," he murmured at last.

With unobtrusive briskness, they returned to room 519.

CHAPTER 4

As others usually had, this benign pair called him "Lance" or "Tolliver" when he was He. If they didn't know the difference, it didn't matter much, any more than their not knowing about his deeper, hazier perceptions of the rhythms, forces, and patterns of the universe. Now he caused his consciousness to float in an optimum region, mostly Inside, but with the Outside perceptible. He hardly saw the two faces above him; but he could hear their voices if they spoke. He reflected back their felt benevolence almost to the point of weeping. His major intent now, however, was to tell them as best he could all that they might need to know if they were to help him in the deep Outside, where, having been so busy learning other things, he was still so blundering. He proceeded, though still with a spark of wariness, rather like that of his own uniquely permissive Body to his Mind. His well-planned phrases stumbled less than previously.

“Thirst, sleepiness, contentment. With such sensations, not in words but more clearly, your flesh speaks to you a little about itself. You know of these things. With me it is the same, though my inner perception is expanded far beyond yours. Seeing with eyes, hearing with ears—these are also Body-to-Mind language, which you have, and understand, as well as I. But about this inward-turned sense—compared to me—it seems that you others are almost blind, or deaf. How can you fully grasp what you’ve never had? Thus, there is only clumsy, vocal speech to give you a slight idea.

“This inner perception is a little like sight, though unlike it. Anyhow, it shows the form of things. And shape and size, down to smallness beyond what any microscope can show. There are what are comparable to colors, too. Beautiful. Also, there are what resembles sounds. A rustling, a roaring. A music of many tones. A rhythm, like drums.

“So when I’m down inside my Body, it resembles being in the middle of a swarm . . . Of ants? Yes, I have stepped in a great nest of angry ants—while I was wandering on the Outside. Still a very poor comparison—a nothing to the swarming hugeness, the numbers of busy cells. Motion, slight or swift, that seems confused but is not confused. It bewilders and overwhelms. I understood nothing at first. Though now, after years of attention, my Mind has learned a very little of what my Body has always known. I’m not smart enough for much more. Still, what I have is a lot compared to what other persons have found out.

“My Mind—the I—wanders there, Inside. I have a helpful advantage to give to my Body—one that it would otherwise lack: a sharper consciousness, and a more flexible will toward changes from procedures so long established. So, for example, I discover threats of disease invasion sooner than my slower-reacting flesh might of itself. And, to match my inner sense, I also have some command: I push defensive forces into

quicker responses. Glands are alerted. Hormone signals flow. Excited leukocytes in my blood are sent hurrying to danger points. I test, judge, cause the right antibodies to form. I organize better and sooner. What might have been a bad sickness is stopped before it can take hold. Thus the bubble of Mind in my brain takes on another beneficial function for my Body.

“That much is almost a small matter compared to other things that can be done: the searching out of what crippled me before my birth. It took a long while to work out the means to fix the flaws in my carcass, with my carcass’s help. It is too much to try to explain the method now. But I think you saw, in the visuals, that it was begun, and carried on, by a similar massing of forces and materials. Restarting what had stopped. Shaping and rebuilding.

“More is possible. The adding of details beyond how the human form is commonly constructed. Dr. Destin—and Dr. Abbott—have you noticed my fingernails? Thicker than most, and pointed. I caused them to begin growing that way for defense. Though people don’t ordinarily have real claws, as I might. It was a foolishness, I guess. But I was afraid. And I didn’t know what I needed. Furthermore, there is something which you may have thought only another, slighter deformity. A small looseness of skin along the bottoms of my arms? This is my doing too. An even bigger foolishness, perhaps to be discontinued. Especially when any such meddling with the flesh is in itself dangerous. I remember how I nearly died while becoming immune to the common cold. There’s always a price.

“But should one forget simpler matters, that could be different by similar means? Taking away the accumulated rubbish of living so that nobody need grow old? Or helping otherwise toward adaptation to strange environments, now that the sky—space—is opening up?

“I hope I’ve explained enough for right now. Because

I and the whole of it are being tested, in the usual, natural way of life, by reality. To work—or be rejected. My present need, though large, is small, contrasted with the stakes. And time pushes. You feel it too? I should get away quickly—far to the Outside for a while. To some lonesome region. To prepare good things. And to learn, from what you know of the bigger world. So as not to be noticed there too soon.

“Now I’m pulled Inward, to refresh. The next is up to you, Ted and Linda. You must consider. Will you do something? Or nothing? If the first, just what? When here—or wherever others might take me—I think I would be trapped. You should have time to yourselves to decide. And maybe plan. Hard enough, eh? I won’t trouble you. So—good night.”

Ted Destin broke up the encroaching dusk by turning on a small lamp in a corner of the room. This didn’t stop the fire wheels that gyrated within his weary and excited head. The vital parameters readout display indicated that Tolliver was now in normal, quiet sleep. If he could trust standard evidence about so unstandard a person.

He fingered the slackness of skin under the fellow’s upper arms. It might almost be from weight loss. But no. The word “membrane” touched Destin’s thoughts fleetingly; he had more to be concerned about than such mental doodling. Now, after he had shut off the recorder, Linda and he stepped away to confer quietly.

“What he told us fits the other evidence, if I can bend my wits enough to follow,” Dr. Abbott said. “He even tried to blackmail us into irrational activity—poor slob.”

“Yuh—Lind. Only—slob? Since he seems so much more.”

“I know, Ted. Maybe also extremely dangerous—on a wide scale. But the big question—What are you gonna do?”

"Uh-huh—what? Not one entirely sensible notion has come my way so far. Though Tolliver could be the most significant event in the last fifty millennia."

"So we'll have to risk telling Dr. Archmere, Ted. He's surely bright enough to grasp the implications if he gets his scattered attention together. He could shield Tolliver from rough fumbling from police shrinks; insist Tolliver is completely non compos mentis. Keep him here safe."

"Hmm-m—sure. But it's not just the idea of the cops ripping through a worn-thin spot in Tolliver's soul and maybe wrecking the best part of him for keeps that bothers me, Lind; it's as much Archie, our chief. He's well-meaning enough in his own way, but you've hinted it yourself: I'm scared he couldn't keep still about our—*his*—Great Discovery. Maybe sooner than the police and courts, the news hucksters would have it—blowing it up hugely around this taut, jittery little planet: 'Super-killer . . . Great benefits for mankind in prospect . . . Is this mutant to sire a superior species replacing us?' Stuff like that, Linda. Tolliver could easily become the cause of a very dangerous controversy—just as he suggested. Affecting everybody. What he is surely deserves a chance. It's complicated, and no possible course of action seems quite right. I hate the risks. Before anyone even studies out all the truth."

Linda Abbott regarded Destin gravely. But her smile appeared, hovering uncertainly at the ragged edges of humor, kidding, and fright.

"You're an idealist, Ted."

"So are you. Though we have limits."

"Whew! I'm glad to hear that! So back to that question: What are you gonna do?"

"Let me fantasize, Lind. I know what I'd sort of *like* to do: just what Tolliver asked for. Take him far away—to some wilderness where nobody would interfere. Help him. Watch him develop whatever it is he believes he must. Study him, learn."

"So I'm an altruist too, Ted. A protector of the downtrodden. Within a certain range, that is."

"I'm no higher a type than you, Dr. Abbott."

"Perhaps you're like Dr. Archmere, Teddy. Selfishly fame-hungry."

"Again, somewhat, Lind. Though not to an overwhelming extent. Hey, let's be half serious, give the idea some solid shape: suppose we *did* go kiting off somewhere with this Lance Tolliver? Don't worry, I'm still joshing."

If Linda Abbott tried again to smile, she didn't quite succeed.

"Oh, sure—dummy! Aiding and abetting the escape of somebody almost certain to be indicted for double murder. When for all we know he may be a broad danger in ways we can't even imagine. Not to mention tossing aside fine careers as psychiatrists forever and winding up in jail."

"Let's do it, Lind."

Destin said it before he believed that he would. So he also was startled. But during the last minute the urge, and the reasons for it, had been firming up in him.

"Ted, why do you have this perverse streak?" Linda asked plaintively. "Just to bug me? Or are you frustrated in some tiresome way? Don't we have plans? Nice house, kids? Ordinary, yes. But pleasant. Much better than going blundering off on some impractical piece of melodrama."

He snorted good-humoredly.

"Are you speaking to me as a *patient*? Is that how it is, Lind? Or are we just talking shop? Honestly, sweetie, I *like* home and children. Okay, the wish for adventure is also common. Still, my chosen profession is just right for me. Only . . ."

"Only what?"

"Psychiatry extends beyond having a nice monetary gain, a good work atmosphere, agreeable colleagues, and fairly interesting patients to try to straighten out. So maybe once in a while something comes along to make

such desirable details expendable. Damn it, Lind, don't you see? There's a *much-more* here that's *truly* important. If I walk past what Tolliver represents—the splendor, the unheard-of-ness, the evolutionary rightness of it—and something goes wrong so that it gets damaged or destroyed or doesn't have the best chance to be, then I'll be kicking myself forever. Yes I know that would be just my guilt, regret, anger. But I wouldn't care about such ordinary feelings. It would be the fact behind them that counted, the permanent and general loss."

"Damn, but you put yourself in a lofty place, don't you, Ted?" Linda pointed out tiredly. "Thinking nobody could look after Tolliver as well as you might?"

"Could be. A good principle? I guess I trust me first."

"Hypothetical query, Ted: How would you go about doing what he wants? Even if you were an especially athletic, outdoorsy sort?"

"I haven't a glimmer."

"So you won't be crazy and reckless after all."

"I suppose not."

Still, ten seconds later, Destin was compelled to qualify this last remark:

"I'm going to think about it, though, Linda. We probably have only hours to decide."

For an interval of many heartbeats, she said nothing. Slowly her wide-eyed consternation became a glare. When she spoke, her voice remained low and restrained. Yet what more effective tone was there for expressing total fury?

"You bastard! I go along with all of your reasons, on a moral basis, but not to the point of psychosis. I swear, Tolliver has got you bewitched. You'd throw everything away for this notion, including me. So if you're 'going to think about it' and decide, you'll do it alone. I've had enough of you!"

"Ah, Lind, for chrissakes! . . . But don't tell anybody—please!"

He didn't attempt to stop her, as, with controlled

quietness, she let herself out of the room.

His right fist made a sharp movement downward, striking at nothing. A gesture of futility. He sighed heavily, hissed between his teeth, ran his fingers through his sandy hair. Then he went back beside the bed and looked down at the gently breathing shape lying there in the subdued illumination. Hell, did this lopsided scarecrow, this mystery and miracle—whatever he should be referred to as—have any adequate conception of what a nuisance he was? Particularly in what he had asked for? He with his inward-turned sense and powers, so unaware of the simplicities of ordinary living—how to eat in a civilized manner for instance, as if such trifles didn't deserve his attention, though his crudity would obviously make him stand out in a crowd. Even that was a problem.

And was he, Destin, ready to offer his neck, defy the cops, dump his career, lose his girl, become an outlaw for what was here?

Funny—his answer remained the same affirmative. Toward the one biggest thing that had come crashing into his staid, ordinary life! A duty, a matter of honor, a fantastic bit of personal good fortune—how many parts of probability in a billion that he would be the person most closely involved out of Earth's huge population? How could he ever relinquish a will to do his best about his contact with a major ripple in the planet's long biohistory and the many-stepped annals of human development and continue to be himself? To defend the miracle, or even to defend against it if matters turned out that way.

Now Destin's thoughts shifted a little. He saw more clearly how Tolliver's very special qualities had missed discovery in the past. Though the boy had now and then displayed puzzling traits, his superficial aspect had favored repeated snap judgments that he was just a rather ordinary unfortunate.

So, suffering the fate of everything common—hence

not very interesting—Tolliver had often received cursory examinations by hurried specialists, with scant attention being paid to the notes of earlier observers in previous places, and with regretful shrugs.

Destin felt anger again for such neglect and oversight. But it cooled quickly as he realized better the advantage that had resulted. Secrecy had probably been wisest over all those years of Tolliver's growth. Tolliver had plainly felt this way himself, and so had augmented his outward appearance of incompetence by consciously playing the muddle-witted fool.

Shadows of workable plans for all he must soon try to accomplish now began to form in Destin's head. But first he would have to find out better what channels for action were open.

CHAPTER 5

He nudged Tolliver, bluntly this time. The boy stirred, opened his eyes, muttered:

"W-what? Oh, Dr. Destin. See—I caused trouble already. To you . . . and Lind. I heard . . . just a little."

"Never mind that," Destin responded. "Look, Lance. You want to go far away. Have you any thoughts about where?"

The reply lagged a second while those pale eyes closed briefly.

"Yes. Following the Earth's magnetic force lines . . . and the northern stars. Up the curve of the world."

Destin felt an eerie tingle. Truly this guy was as strange as if he had come from another planet. With a different kind of mentality, maybe impossible for a man like himself to follow, in its enigmas and convolutions. Childlike, yet tuned to natural, guiding fields, rhythms, and timing. Was it even entirely conscious?

"Good enough for a start. Now, will you always obey my orders? Not about anything bad, of course. And do

you mind how you'll travel?

"I'll obey. I've been shipped around in planes, buses, cars. And you know I've walked."

"Fine, Lance. I had to be sure."

Destin didn't want whatever plan he made to be snagged by any neurotic phobias. And with this character it might go further than that. In any case, there'd be enough uncertainties to handle.

"Progress, fella," Destin stated. "I can't promise anything yet, or maybe ever. I think I'll have to be away from you for a while this evening. So I want you to be very untalkative and passive, so nobody who comes into this room can louse anything up. Got it?"

Destin removed the second record module from the sound recorder. The first, which he had necessarily turned over to Archmere, was hazard enough. He pocketed the second module.

He didn't find his chief in his office. His location display showed "Room 323." Destin considered phoning him there, but Archmere interdicted all intrusions when he was with a patient, "except for extreme emergency." Nuts! Though maybe it was just as well that he couldn't talk to his chief now, Destin decided. When all he wanted to do was to be a little surer of a reasonable interval—a day and a half. Destin wrote quickly on the note-pad on the desk:

To Dr. Archmere, re occupant of 519: Still recommend more time. Patient slightly less confused when conscious. Needs further rest. Earliest permission for questioning, and perhaps release, might be in 36 hours. Destin. 20:40 04/28/14

Now a really critical step. Destin wondered if he should drive into the village to make the long-distance call. A bit safer? Like other young professional staff members, he had his quarters here at Spruce Crest. But during off-hours, he quite frequently went to town, often on institutional errands. Still, if he drove back and

forth too much now . . . Ah, what the hell! There were the phones in Linda's and his office, and likely she was up in her tiny apartment.

His fingers scrambled through the pages of the little book from his wallet. He punched out the number, then counted through ten rings. No answer, except spaced signal beeps. If he spoke now, leaving a message, this call would be logged as completed—date, time, and source—traceable clues, along with whatever he said. And little compensating gain. Destin hung up.

Would he have to play out this whole Tolliver business alone? Well, maybe. He was a fathead and a dreamer, to presume on any assistance from others. And by himself the prognosis for any success was poor, considering his lack of experience in very pertinent areas.

He supposed that Linda was in her quarters, very sore at him. Hardly her way, though, to be sulking, or in tears. Maybe writing letters to old friends? Should he go to her and try to patch up their rift? Nope. No good. They got along fine—usually. Then, bam! They weren't quite emotionally or philosophically, suited. This time, the end—and forget.

He'd best get in a couple of hours of regular duty, to make up for those with Tolliver. He didn't have to, but it would look good. Besides, he couldn't just hang around unscrewing his thumbs. He could stew and scheme while he worked.

As he went through the lobby, where there were still several visitors, a lean, hard-faced man of middle years loomed up from a divan and strode aggressively forward.

"You're Destin," he accused in a gravelly voice. "I'm Lon Bossiter. Somebody said you're the shrink in charge of that bent piece of crud that butchered my son and his buddy. This Tolliver's not going to dodge the new capital-punishment laws by having you declare him incompetent. I've been waiting here, nice and quiet, for you to come through again."

Oops! An extra hunk of trouble that he might have avoided, Destin thought. But he smiled in wry and genuine sympathy.

"It's good to meet you, Mr. Bossiter."

The man didn't take his offered hand, but Destin kept talking, almost as if to a known companion.

"I was sorry to hear about your son and his buddy. And I won't declare Tolliver incompetent. The police should have full charge of the case within two days. Don't get me in a scrape by mentioning this around here before then."

Two staff guards were hovering close. Somewhat mollified, but muttering about mealy-mouthed bastards, the elder Bossiter went out the front door.

Destin looked in on his regular patients. Two were nicely asleep. Then, for a while, he held the hand of a third—a rich ninety-two-year-old widow—while she rambled volubly through a senile fantasy. Later, he helped Ketterer, a night-duty colleague, quiet down a screaming man.

Just after midnight, Destin tried the office phone again. Fifteen rings. Nothing. Damn!

On his next visit to room 519, he drew two cups from the coffee maker in the corridor, and offered one to the trooper sitting on guard at the door. The favor was accepted with a genial grin.

At Tolliver's bedside, Destin whispered, "Just hold steady, Lance. Nothing sure yet, but in about another day."

Now Destin lay down on the hard floor. The vial of sleeping pills he had scrounged from a drawer in his office was unopened in his pocket. He knew very well how to auto-suggest away his tensions: his wondering about all that could go wrong. And the bleak, shamed isolation of one who has always been an orderly member of society, when suddenly pushed into that lonesome region of connivance, lying, and sneaking. Yet there was bent humor in this. He chuckled a bit, and drifted off to the sleep he needed, on an imaginary cloud.

CHAPTER 6

Very early, Destin went to his quarters to clean himself up.

At breakfast in the cafeteria, Linda Abbott greeted him with a cheerful "Hi, Ted!" though she didn't sit at his table. But as they were leaving, she seemed inclined to fall into step beside him in the corridor. So he warned her off, murmuring, "I'm poison, Lind. Stay away. Don't mix with criminals. Before this hour tomorrow, there might be inquiries."

Her expression hardened, and she lagged quickly behind him. He wondered if she might expose his intentions. He didn't think so. Still, he had just put a terrible burden on her.

He returned to Tolliver for a few minutes. Unaccountably, it took some firm shakings to get his attention.

"I'll be gone again for a while, Lance," Destin said. "Stay impassive. I'll leave the intravenous feeding hooked up. You don't need it, but it bluffs that you're

still sick. And it'll keep you from getting too hungry. No more raw meat, now. Too noticeable a habit. Think you can last through the day?"

"Of course, Doc."

"Excellent! I'll leave orders to change your bedding and clean the room. To bring you regular food, too, if you want it. Okay? You might even be messy with it, which'll look good and incapable."

"Yes." This with the ghost of a grin.

"Fine, Lance. But damn you if you go foggy on me tonight, when there's liable to be action."

Destin went briefly to his quarters and took some items down to his car, which was parked in the staff lot.

He drove, not to the nearby village, but to the nearest small city. Another no-answer on a public phone. He couldn't use his car phone because its numbered short-wave signal could become a tracing hazard for his movements.

At a bank he drew out most of his savings—quite a hefty sum.

"How do you want it?" the teller asked, then looked startled when he answered, grinning:

"I'm starting a small business. I need cash to operate."

She, being more used to fund transfers to checking accounts, credit-card banking, and the purchase of traveler's checks, mouthed a slight smile. What he was asking was rather unusual. Well, she could take his explanation or leave it. He was already facing risks, and cash at least didn't show the owner's name.

Now he fueled his car and then stocked it with a number of purchases, including three rucksacks. Among these activities, he got on the phone twice again. But at the second additional failure to connect, he spoke a message:

"Your cousin here, Cara. I need a big hand—a real, oversized favor. Urgent! Guess you don't get home much—huh? That's fine—have a happy life! My blessings. Only, I wish I knew where to reach you. No, *don't*

call me! Just hang close to your place once in a while, so I can call you from someplace during the next few days! I luv yuh—need yuh!”

He didn't give his name, but she'd know his voice. If that darned character ever cut her amorous-and-other activities enough to hear it, that is! At his latest phone contact with her, maybe ten days back, she hadn't mentioned any trips, so she ought to be within reach. Nuts! No use phoning anymore today. He was bleakly on his own—at least to start the operation.

Before returning to Spruce Crest, Destin sat in his car for a bit, studying road maps and otherwise getting clearly in his head just how the steps were supposed to go. Melodramatic but necessary. Though he felt both amateur and fool.

Back at Spruce, he parked in his usual slot. Then he hurried to 519. Tolliver met his questioning scrutiny with alert eyes.

“Your boss-shrink was here,” he said.

“So what happened?” Destin demanded.

“He poked around for a minute. Asked me how I was. I said, ‘Hello, Baba,’ and floated away.”

Worriedly, Destin went down to see Archmere, who was at his desk, doing more correspondence. His heavy-featured face took on a critical smirk.

“Ah, the Mad Boy's mentor, Doctor Ted,” he remarked with some sarcasm. “Evidently he's coming around—in your opinion—since you were away from him for at least two hours this morning. Your privilege, of course—though when I visited him, he didn't seem . . . well, no matter. Glad your note suggests his release to the authorities by tomorrow morning—wouldn't it be? I've informed them. His condition will be their problem.”

Under other circumstances Destin might have resented his chief's making the release time final without consulting him for a possible change in his guarded opinion. But now he should feel fortunate instead. Also slyly proud that he had been able to foresee Archmere's

probable reactions, and use them.

"Well, Destin?" Archmere challenged as his subordinate lingered.

To further support his make-believe, Destin almost stammered, "I'd hoped for a couple of days more. Still, I suppose . . ."

"Yes, Ted, everybody hopes for more something or other," Archmere replied paternally. "Anyhow, the psychiatrist the cops usually call in is pretty good—Dr. Rolf Hoffmann. I know him. Now get out of here, and on with your busy life, and let me finish this junk."

In several visits to room 519, Destin smuggled in a few articles under his smock. Otherwise, he normalized his active and varied day. No one would see that anything was very different.

The third-shift guard came on at 23:00—eleven P.M. Destin had noticed the night before that shortly after his arrival he would accept a second cup of coffee. While the guy was having his first, which he had fetched for himself on the way to his post, Destin was inside the room, getting Tolliver into some poorly fitting but adequate street clothes.

Destin came out of the room. "I'll bring you another cup too," he said as he started along the corridor. The guard nodded.

Five minutes later the guard took the offering and groped in his pants pocket. "You're all right, Doctor," he said. "I'll pay for us both."

Destin shrugged and took the money. The least he could do, under the circumstances, was not to insult the man's honor.

Destin entered the room, shut the door, and got Tolliver on his feet.

"Well wait about half an hour, Lance," Destin whispered. "Then move easy, smooth, and quiet. Are you ready for that?"

"Yes."

The word came out a bit thickly. Tolliver was sort of lopy—half off to his "Inside" again. Darn! He might be

hard to manage. Destin began leading him up and down the room.

"Keep at it, Lance. To limber up."

The young psychiatrist sat down and began to sip his coffee. Soon, though, he thought he felt a bit vague. Panic hit him. Cripes! Had he gotten those two cups mixed up? Nope—couldn't be. It was just the strain. Slowly he drank the rest of the coffee. It should help keep him alert. The minutes dragged.

Destin opened the door a crack. The guard—poor chap—was slumped in his chair, snoring softly. The corridor was empty.

In a way, Destin found Tolliver amazing, even now. In spite of the slight gimp, he moved with an even, controlled, almost graceful alacrity. They went along the side corridor and down the back stairwell. Everything was working out so easily. From good planning.

Near the bottom of the stairs, though, Destin felt less cheered. Things were going so well that it was an anticlimax. Was all of his scheming rather absurd? Spruce Crest was hardly a prison. It didn't need to be, beyond keeping its mostly quite harmless inmates within bounds. And who could imagine that one of the staff doctors would even think of making off with one of them? Drugging an on-duty state trooper to do it, too! The whole act looked like unequaled, exaggerated stupidity.

Yet he'd better keep recognizing the fact that the purpose was imperative enough to demand much more than this, and stay watchful and determined. And thankful that the very incredibility of his actions favored their intention.

On reaching ground level with Tolliver, he peered through the little window set in the back door. As was to be expected this late in the evening, nobody was around in the staff parking area. Ten paces away was his small, ordinary-looking car. He led Tolliver to it, unlocked it, got the boy to crouch down in the leg space of the back

seat, and pulled a blanket over him. Then he went around to the driver's side.

He wasn't clear of possibly dangerous surprises—yet. In front of him, in the vehicle's shadow, a figure rose from where it had been huddled. Its head came into the subdued glow of the fluorescent lighting.

Destin gasped—like an evildoer caught at his worst deed.

His grim-faced interceptor was Dr. Linda Abbott.

“Aw, Lind!” Destin muttered, protesting.

Her voice rustled: “Shut up! Raise the count of fools to two.”

She darted around to open the car's right door, knelt on the front upholstery to fling a small case on the back seat, turned about, sat down, and fastened the safety belt.

“So, Destin,” she said further, “you want to know why I'm here. Well, more thought—same reasons as yours, otherwise. I said I agreed with them morally, didn't I? And when you mentioned inquiries ‘tomorrow,’ it wasn't hard to figure what you'd do, or when. Now let's get on with whatever happens next. When there's an opportunity, you might outline the intended procedural details. You're a very bright guy in many ways, Ted. If I didn't think so, I wouldn't be along. But goof up, and I'm liable to just scream and turn you in.”

Destin waited another moment to steady his thoughts. Linda's presence could cause complications. Still, he said earnestly and honestly, “I'm glad you're helping, Lind. There'll be plenty of who-knows-what to handle. Not to mention our big losses right from the start. I hope I won't feel sorry for us both.”

As he started the car, she reached back behind the seat, to touch and reassure Tolliver, who she knew was hiding there; she'd seen him crawl in.

CHAPTER 7

Getting past the gate watchman of Spruce Crest was as easy as on other nights when Doctors Destin and Abbott had gone out together for a late drive—a knowing, grinning wave-through. Almost embarrassing now.

Destin drove east, toward the village.

“From there, south, to the freeway, Lind. Then west for a long stretch. I don’t think anybody will be looking for us for a while; so making the hours count in distance is better than the evasive action of changing roads a lot. Now about the stuff you missed . . .”

His drugging the guard made her furious.

“That was rotten and *dumb*, Ted!” she accused. “What psychiatrist ever would? That poor man! He might be dismissed.”

“He might,” Destin agreed soberly. “Only I couldn’t think of any way as sure and less harmful to keep him from interfering with what had to be done. Can you?”

“Well, not right offhand.”

“And we could be up against the whole country. Even

the world. We might have to do more drastic things."

They said nothing else till after they had gotten onto the westward freeway. The small car hummed through the dim, cool night mist at a steady 135 kilometers per hour. Something began to lift Destin's and Abbott's spirits. Nor were they alone in this. From behind them, they heard Tolliver's muffled, halting speech:

"Just now . . . I'm confident . . . Free to do . . . Maybe we needn't be . . . sorry."

"Could be, Lance," Destin agreed. "You can sit up now, on the seat for a while—like anybody. Here on the road, no one will know who you are."

Tolliver's perverse response came from under his covering blanket: "I'm comfortable where I am. Talking with my Body."

Linda Abbott touched Destin's arm in silent communication. He glanced at her in the gloom and knew that her emotions and thoughts were like his own: excited, eager, inspired, defiant. They were a pair of rebels on a fantastic adventure. They were aware of something colossal in the weird creature who preferred to stay huddled, cocooned like some great, maturing moth—or diabolical monster—in the back seat leg space of the car; they were perhaps carrying human destiny in to its next, abrupt phase. All without general consent or knowledge. It could be a huge benefit; yet popular fears and enthusiasms—plus still unknown factors—could well distort it into the opposite. Linda and Ted—especially Ted—felt like subversives, with whom millions might disagree emphatically. To them, though, this accidental wrinkle in mankind's genetics must have a fair shake toward viable survival; nothing that wonderful should be exposed to the hazards of unreasoned destruction.

Destin's spine tingled. His hands tightened on the wheel of the car. As the night-shadowed countryside sped past, his gaze lifted in quick glances. Through the windshield he saw a pale spark creeping across the sky. It was a prototype cylinder world, being built in Earth orbit. When completed, it would be made to orbit the

sun as a tiny planet. Rotation would provide centrifugal gravity on its inner curves, where several hundred innovative inhabitants would try to farm their own food and manufacture the things they needed in the trial of a new way of life.

Far beyond this artificial glint, where the air cleared above the faint mist of the highway and the headlamp-shine of passing traffic, the remote stars shone. Tolliver seemed more linked to them than to that mere fabricated progression, Destin thought.

As if his own body spoke to him some, too, in a darker way, Destin felt an uneasiness in his gut and head. For a fleeting instant, he wished he had a handgun. At some yet unseen point, might he himself want to kill the phenomenon he now so much valued? This vagary passed, but it left a dim trace, a slight ambivalence of view that he had to live with. Because both the light and the darkness in it gripped him with an aliveness that he hadn't known before in his plodding, earnest existence.

And his feelings prompted him to say something not quite irrelevant to the girl beside him:

"I love you, Lind."

She was calmer, and a bit mordant, in her response:

"I suppose you do, Teddy—in your fashion. That I love you too is a fair fraction of why I'm along on this escapade. By the way, when you get tired of driving, I'll take over for a bit."

"Thanks, dear heart," he answered. "Since I'm sitting where I am, give me another hour before we switch. If you want coffee, there's a big thermos under the seat."

"Later, Ted. I'm as awake as a nervous owl. Lance, do you want some coffee?"

Her question to Tolliver, as she reached back and nudged him, amused Destin; considering the boy's oddness, it seemed incongruous—as was his muffled answer:

"Yes, Lind."

She handed the partly filled cup back to him as he squirmed to receive it. Then they heard his slurping, which emphasized a difficulty—even in diners along the road, his beastlike inattention to custom would betray him and them.

"More!" Tolliver urged, proffering the empty thermoplastic cup. "I'm not so thirsty, but my Body will need liquid. And I've been smelling steak."

"On the seat beside you, Lance," Destin answered. "I meant to tell you."

Linda's effort to reach back and help the mutant was too slow. There were sounds of a package being ripped, then of a greedy chomping. Linda's only service was to refill the cup.

Ted whispered an aside to her. "So when necessary, we can bring hamburgers out to the car for him. No problem. Besides, I've got more grub in the trunk."

They drove on. As dawn was breaking, Tolliver spoke up. "Hey! I needn't embarrass you at all! While you go to breakfast, or later. Stop somewhere where people in cars won't see. Make a little space in the trunk. I'll slow my Body's heartbeat and breathing. That way, you could leave me for weeks. Like hibernation. I'll be no trouble. Soon I'll learn what seemed unimportant."

So it was done like that. Linda, who was driving then, continued on until they reached an emergency area by a stretch of woods. Destin led Tolliver among the trees for a minute. Then some items were moved from the trunk to the rear seat.

"I've got another steak, Lance—thermos-packed," Destin offered.

"I mustn't eat or drink any more now," Tolliver slurred.

Destin noticed again that the mutant had gone tottery and vague. His thin face was flushed above his black beard. Destin reached out and touched the narrow cheek. It was burning hot.

"Lance, should you be shut in the trunk when you have such fever?"

"I know—what I do!" Tolliver burred truculently. "I'll be fine! I can't keep—Outside attention—much longer. Don't worry about me! Go on doing—what you must do."

With a last quick effort, Tolliver swung himself into the prepared space and huddled in fetal position.

Destin slammed down the lid. Linda Abbott and he shrugged, grimaced, sighed, grinned tiredly, wonderingly—which seemed to say some of what otherwise would have been hard to express.

They stopped at the next town to fuel up. They also dared to have a good breakfast—possibly their last hot meal for a while.

"Before some photos of us get on TV, and somebody notices that we might be us," Destin remarked wryly. "And maybe divines how big a deal all this is."

Covering distance quickly still seemed important. So, driving or dozing alternately, they kept on through the morning and into the afternoon. They had turned on the car radio, but it wasn't till they had swung north, onto lesser roads, that they heard anything pertinent. It came, faint and suddenly, as a portion of a newscast from some eastern city. Only a few words registered in their heads:

"... of staff personnel. The inmate was held ... Spruce Crest ..."

Presently they had more of it, from a nearer source: that a disturbed youth named Lance Tolliver, suspected of double homicide, was at large. That two psychiatrists were unaccounted for. That a police officer had been slugged—or drugged? That authorities were on the lookout over a wide radius.

Keeping her cool, Abbott eyed Destin.

"I guess you should have tried phoning from somewhere before now," she said. "To contact your 'cousin.' " Linda's tiny touch of sarcasm put the quotes around that final word. "I don't know this Cara Webber," she added, "but she'll have to be minus something, or plus an awful lot, to let you talk her into

helping us now—with just a brief phone conversation, Ted.”

Destin was almost tense enough to fail to notice the digs.

“I know,” he responded heavily. “Though she does have some individualistic pluses. But if she doesn’t show us charity, we’ve got some very rough and chancy alternatives coming up. I’ll give her a buzz at the next phone booth we find. So pray.”

At the first town they came to after that, he let the rings count up to twenty. Zilch.

Thirty kilometers farther on, in a crossroads sort of place, he located probably the only public phone there was, at the back of a bar, next to the rest rooms.

But after the third jingling, there came a husky “Hello?”

“It’s me. Hi!” he said.

His cousin, Cara Webber, chuckled. “I practically just walked in the door. Though I’ve had time to listen to the message you left. I often wonder why I bother with this apartment. Your ‘oversized favor’ and what I’ve been getting on the news are, of course, connected?”

“Maybe,” he admitted lightly. But since at last he had to risk leaving possible clues, he spoke on with furious earnestness.

“Cara, you go around the roughest regions everywhere, filming and writing up details of wildlife or anything different or especially interesting. You’re in demand. Well, look, here’s an opportunity beyond anything you’ve ever done before. Beyond Sasquatch! Besides, I’ll pay you whatever I can scrape together. Cara, you know I’m not stupid. And, no, I haven’t gone out of my skull in this. Nor am I involved in anything you wouldn’t defend—though there’s an area of disapproval. And it’s got to be absolutely hush-hush. Look, Cara, there are three of us, and we’ve got to get across the line and find a long privacy. We’ll need transportation. And supplies.”

Destin's rush of words faltered here, because he could imagine how another person might judge what he had just said: frightened, incomprehensible raving. Loony stuff, from a lunatic to stay away from.

So, in desperation, he steadied his voice and added mildly, "Cara, if you're still listening . . . If, when you've seen us and know the entire setup yourself, you still don't like all of it, you can take any action that seems right to you. I'd hardly blame you."

There was a long silence before Cara asked simply, "Where are you?"

Destin told her the state, and the names of this crossroads place and of the nearest large town.

"Just a sec, cousin," she said, "while I consult my map and notes." There was a longer pause, and a rustle of paper. "Okay, got it. So go to . . ." Here she named a village. "Twenty kay-ems northeast, there's a stretch of woods that I know. Roadless. Then due north about five—a small river to cross. Then a bit more woods, to a dirt track. I'll try to be along with my camper."

"Thanks—beyond the power of words, Cara. Provision up good for a long stay—I've got the cash. Have a few books—science, literature. I guess that's about all to say? Soon, then."

"Your show, cuz."

Destin hung up the phone, sighed in mighty relief, and grinned at Linda Abbott, who stood at his elbow. She smiled back. Though he guessed she might still have the wistful thought that lingered in his own head: Why couldn't they just drive into Canada by a regular route, like anybody? Tolliver could be sitting in the back seat, seeming close enough to the human norm. No—not wise. Customs formalities meant records, possible identity alerts. And they were smuggling far more than drugs or gold. Worse, they were already hunted.

"I'm very fortunate, Lind, having a relative like Cara Webber," he said. "Who else would or could . . . ?"

Linda Abbott nodded noncommittally.

There was still a lot of road to travel. Late in the

afternoon, they saw a helicopter overhead. Once the beat of its rotor blades was very close. Was it looking for them? This wasn't particularly a season for forest fires. Or was it perhaps patrolling to see how timber and wildlife had come through the winter? Soon the chopper drifted away.

At sundown, a doe bounded across the road ahead of the car. Minutes later, the ghost of a lumbering track Destin was following ended in further vagueness. Before them was thicketed forest.

"Legwork from here on," he said as he stopped the car.

He got out, thumped the trunk lid, then opened it. He shook the shape huddled inside. It no longer felt feverish, but chilly, like that of some beast that had curled up, dormant, during the cold months.

"Lance!" Destin urged.

Tolliver moved sluggishly.

It was lucky, Destin thought, that some hope or subconscious wish had made him buy three rucksacks—not just two. Abbott started to pack them with selectively chosen items while Tolliver stamped his feet to help liven his muscles.

"What'll you do with the car, Ted?" Linda asked.

"It's a hazard to leave, Lind. If there was a deep lake around, I might even drown it."

He drove it deeper into the forest and covered it with brush after he had removed the license plates and buried them at the base of a large tree a hundred meters off.

The critical march began. Tolliver was sluggish at first; his legs worked in slow, sleepwalker motion, though he carried his pack well enough. Soon, though, his stride improved.

Dusk became night—good for concealment, but a grim disadvantage when they had to make their way around or through bramble patches, past trees, and over rocky, uneven ground, even when Destin dared to use his flashlight. Soon, Destin and Abbott were thorn-scratched and weary. Also, from the necessary turnings

to avoid obstacles, they would have gotten completely disoriented except that now and then Tolliver pointed and said, "That's north."

He had begun to lead, halting only when his companions had to rest. For them, the night was a long, blundering, stumbling ordeal, against which they had only the determination of imperative purpose. Their acquaintance with the wilds was limited.

A half hour before first light, they began to hear the river. It was supposed to be a small one, yet it didn't sound small. Its whisper almost roared—softly, sullenly. What had been deep snows farther north were still melting in the vernal warmth, producing a huge runoff.

They came to the shore and peered at the dark, crinkled, hurrying surface. Under the stars, it showed flecks of swirling foam. Both Destin and Abbott could generally handle themselves pretty well in the water.

"How in hell can anybody cross this?" Destin growled. "And Lance—where could he have learned to swim at all?"

"Swim?" Tolliver pronounced, as if he hardly knew the word. "Oh, you mean . . . now. A problem? I will . . . do it."

With no hesitation, he waded into the eddying shallows. Destin followed at once, protectingly.

"Lance, you idiot, you can't!" Destin hissed. "Doubly not, loaded with a pack!"

"With packs too," Tolliver slurred stubbornly. "We will need what we carry."

By now Linda Abbott was also in the shallows, to help Destin restrain the Mad Boy.

"Listen to us, Lance!" she pleaded. "Come back!"

"It isn't . . . needed," he said. "My Body remembers. From its far . . . ancestors. And I can drive it hard. Lind, hold onto my right shoulder. Ted, my left."

They still tried to hold him back. That was how they happened to cling, as he started out. With a detached part of his consciousness Destin tried to identify Tolliver's swimming style. It needed a new name. There was

more than the even rhythm of arms and legs. An undulation, too, like a seal or dolphin—or of remoter creatures, more broadly progenital. Destin lost the thought in his own struggles to survive and breathe in the rushing, smothering chaos of water. He even forgot to wonder how Tolliver's thin, attenuated muscles—especially with his right arm joints so recently damaged—could ever summon up all that steady, furious, maniacal power. Not only to propel himself and his burden, but to haul two others with him.

Destin and Abbott helped considerably. Once, in an instinctive urge for independence, Destin let go of Tolliver's shoulder. But he quickly grabbed it again.

Distance and time seemed magnified. At last the three got to the far shore. They lay there panting, Tolliver with great, deep gasps; his vast effort was not without its price. Until daylight diluted the dark, nobody spoke.

"We're in Canada," Destin said. "Now, a few kilometers more. We must have drier clothes in our packs. We'd best change."

It was still early morning when they reached the dirt track that Cara Webber must have meant. They crouched down in the fringe of woods and waited. Linda passed around cookies that had kept dry inside their plastic wrapper. Tolliver gulped two with the thoughtless quickness of a dog. Destin gave him the steak he had brought along; it was still frosty in its thermo-pac.

The passing minutes built up to an hour, during which Destin's tensions mounted. But Cara had to drive all the way from Winnipeg, besides doing so much else. Of course a lot of what was needed was part of her regular equipment. Still, it would be quite a compliment to her if there wasn't some delay.

CHAPTER 8

The three fugitives piled into the green camper, to take places among utility fold-aways—Destin up front with his cousin, while he spoke the names: “Cara—Linda—Dr. Linda Abbott, my colleague. And our Lance Tolliver.” Tolliver’s bobbing, awkward nod, as he hunched down in a back-corner seat, for the instant almost forgotten, as the two women greeted each other.

They were alike in blond coloring, except for Cara’s tawnniness. Both with a different vigor—Linda’s, quiet, intellectual, controlled, introverted; Cara’s, flamboyant, thrust outward—except for that wait-and-see guardedness, now—behind a wide and friendly grin; Cara belonging so much more easily into the rough, woodsy costumes both wore.

But then—Destin sensed it—Cara’s sparklike leap, past any woman-to-woman considerations, and back, in a fragment of a second, to a deeper assessment of Tolliver, the scrawny, slightly misshapen figure scrunched in the farthest seat.

Briefly she looked over her shoulder to study him, meeting his pale-eyed beast-glare in a mutual appraisal. There was an ambi-lateral intensity in this; persons much less sensitive than Destin couldn't have helped noticing. He read more of its details in the quick-flickering changes in her expression, the downward droop of one end of her grin, the corrugations of her brow—distaste, and what-in-hell-have-we-here? inquiry, perhaps balanced by a this-can't-be-all-from-what-Teddy-said warping; and in this last piece of curiosity, the focus of her attention lingered and brightened, like a tiny yet superheated flame. As for Tolliver, his glare stayed and sharpened, though its quality couldn't be analyzed; it was too strange.

Cara Webber turned her gaze ahead and drove on.

"Sandwiches, soft drinks, et cetera up in the number-one locker, folks," she said in her husky voice. "Also a liter of Scotch. Don't relax too much, but you may as well start making yourselves at home. Meanwhile somebody better tell me plainly what this is all about."

Destin began, and Abbott assisted. Tolliver remained silent. Sometimes he watched the passing scene alertly while he tried to consume colas and potato chips with a degree of propriety that wouldn't disgrace a three-year-old. As often, he seemed to stare cataleptically at nothing. Later he huddled down on the floor, with a blanket covering even his face.

They were on good highways again, going north and somewhat east, traversing open flatness that in a couple of months would be a wind-rippled sea of grain crops. Through the day, Destin and Abbott took their turns at driving and caught up on sleep. In the evening, when the roads roughened and narrowed, Cara Webber took the wheel once more; she was the one who knew the way. Later, she parked and dozed.

There was another dawn; forests of boreal conifers were passing all around. Tolliver had come out of his lethargic withdrawal.

"I need . . . a lake," he insisted.

"There is one—where we're going," Cara Webber told him.

They arrived in mid-afternoon. A slow, sodden rain had begun. There was a decaying log shack, probably built by trappers, which hadn't been used for years. The lakeshore was fifty meters away.

"Will this spot do, Tolliver?" Cara challenged coldly.

He almost smiled. "I think it is—just right," he said at once, while his eyes roved and his nostrils dilated, sniffing. "Here I can finish fixing—my Body. I will not be defective—or weak! I'll become stronger than anybody! And I'll try—more than that! Maybe I'll become useful—not make a mess. Besides, I'll learn—ordinary stuff."

Linda Abbott also examined her surroundings. She peered into that dismal shack. Their home for a considerable time, it seemed. Her spirits sank, then lifted, as pride and humor nudged them upward. Clean it up—fix. There was a fireplace, a table, several boxes for chairs, two tiers of bunks full of squirrel litter and dead leaves.

Cara looked at Linda knowingly.

"Tomorrow, Dr. Abbott," she said. "Now we'll cook a good supper, and then have a solid sleep—both things in the camper."

For the moment, attention to Tolliver had been dropped. He began to move toward the lake. On the way, as if as a concession to common practices, he started to undress. At the shore he laid down his jacket and shirt. By then the others saw what he was doing. He got out of his heavy shoes, dungarees, underpants, and socks, and rushed—not dove—into the icy water—there were still patches of old snow in the woods.

Cara Webber watched with particular interest.

Tolliver didn't surface for a good two minutes—well out on the lake, and with a large and wriggling fish gripped in his teeth. Treading water, he tore it apart and ate it, while his guardians watched. He ducked out of

sight again for several minutes. A second fish was disposed of like the first.

Dr. Linda Abbott looked solemn. Ted Destin's attention was clinically intent. But Cara Webber chuckled in amazed delight.

"Teddy-love," she exclaimed, "you weren't kidding about this character, were you!"

Tolliver undulated his way to shore. He brought with him a third finish—a big lake trout.

"Enough for your suppers?" he asked flatly—with no show of fisherman's pride. In curious fact, it wasn't just lake water on his cheeks but tears, too, streaming from his eyes.

"We must all eat," he said. "Though something . . . must die. That is biological law. And I need the flesh, protein . . . Bone, minerals, too. To try . . . build . . . as I must."

As if suddenly remembering, he climbed back into his clothes, while Destin gripped the still-flopping fish.

Somewhere nearby in the forest, birds twittered excitedly. Tolliver ran a palm over his distended belly. His pale eyes were going dreamy. For a long moment, he looked at Cara Webber.

"Lots to do . . . make better," he slurred.

He reached out hesitantly, as if to convince himself of some nebulous fact. Then he sighed heavily, folded himself down on the rain-damp pine needles, and was snoring lightly almost at once.

"We should carry him in out of the wet," Cara urged.

Destin shrugged. "Probably not necessary," he said. "I think he knows what he's doing. But for our own convenience and comfort, while watching him. There's stuff I've got to see. Take this fish."

Tolliver's long, stringy form hung across his arms as Ted lugged him into the camper. Destin was fairly husky—still, with memories in mind, there was a startling—even touching—lightness.

He put his burden down on a fold-out bunk, then

hurried to dig out his miniaturized vital-parameters monitor, which, in its watertight case, and well padded in the middle of his rucksack, hadn't been damaged during the river crossing. He removed Tolliver's shirt.

Now Destin was all avid, controlled scientist. He attached contacts to Tolliver's arms, head, and chest, and with Linda Abbott joining in, studied the unique read-outs: rapidly mounting temperature; quickened and then slightly staggered heart rhythm; odd, excited peaks and dips in the brain waves. Other symptoms were directly apparent: deep, ragged breathing, and a pinkness that spread over all of Tolliver's hide—particularly along the the underarm areas.

"He's down Inside," Linda said. "Employing what his body let him know, and using his inner control. Marshaling leukocytes, materials, and who knows what to improve what he is. Driving the whole system far beyond what has always been, in other people. He could easily kill himself."

Destin grunted. "Though I think he's learned how far he can go—where to stop. I hope so, anyhow."

"If, in our judgment as physicians, the indications get too critical, what do we do then, Ted?" Linda asked.

"Uh-huh—a good question," he answered. "Maybe nothing. With this kind of patient, the best of us medics would be out of our depth. He's running a war—his physical self against its own deficiencies—and, with his intimate contact with the bio-knowledge in his flesh, he has to understand the hows and whys and risks much better than we can."

Cara came closer. "Hey," she said. "I know you explained to me before what's going on. But would you two run through the hard parts again, please?"

So they did.

Meanwhile, Tolliver's symptoms became more pronounced.

"There's increased, congestive swelling," Linda remarked. "Particularly in the left half of his face and in his right leg and left arm. As we'd expect."

"And now he's writhing," Cara offered. "Some kind of convulsion?"

"Seems so," Destin answered with helpless calm. "His heart rate is more uneven too. He's right at the edge."

"Ted—a stimulant?" Linda suggested urgently.

"I don't believe we should risk such intrusion."

Tolliver moaned. He shuddered violently, and his tattered breathing hissed between his clenched teeth.

"Right now, it must be hell down there in his *inside*!" Cara said.

"Yes, I'm sure it is," Ted agreed.

Tolliver's agonized squirmings and moans quieted after a couple of hours. He slept quietly, and his hot flesh cooled. The others, exhausted by their tense ordeal of watching, relaxed. After a bit Cara stood up and stepped toward the little propane-fueled cookstove.

"I'd better fix us this fish he caught," she remarked. Then: "Funny—he's still part child, isn't he? But, damn it—what else besides?"

Dimly awake now and then, Tolliver spent almost all of the next day bunked in the camper.

The others, with Cara as the practical-experience source, started refurbishing the shack. All three labored hard. Linda enjoyed the novel situation and activity. The sky was sunny and cloud-flecked now; no worrisome signs of search showed there. The lake rippled and glinted. The surrounding woods whispered in the breeze, brooded and chirped in their ageless, springtime way. There was an illusion of peace.

Cara Webber was in her most-favored element. Yet in her own restless soul, no scene, by itself, was ever quite complete.

More days passed. The four moved into the shack. Fire could burn in the fireplace. Cara smiled at how routines—or at least periodically recurring sequences—were set up around this freakish Lance Tolliver's idiosyncrasies: his swimming out into the cold lake, his huge

gluttony for live fish—which never ceased to make Abbott look grim. His fevers, swellings, agonies, and spasms—till you thought he must die; his long periods of sleep, or catalepsy. Then his intervals of intense, alert wakefulness, and of rest from what he was attempting to do with his own flesh—while he busied himself with other aims which he considered important:

“I’m talking better and better—am I not? Also I am glad you brought books, Cara. I always had books, but my attention to them had to be limited—as matters were. Now I will notice more what your science books say—especially to get the terms and—concepts?—together with what I know from myself. Besides, though I must continue to eat as I do, still I am learning with fork and knife like everybody.”

Cara encouraged and helped Tolliver in these minor aims of his, as Linda and Ted did—though such restraint was not her regular way. It was not that she was being falsely demure or coy; rather, her motive was caution. She remembered her fantasies as a small girl—to become a trainer of tigers, huge grizzlies. Such dreams had pushed her toward her career in the northern wilderness. But even back then, fantasizing with serious intent, she had realized that one must learn as much as possible about the temperaments and likely responses to various stimuli that could be expected from dangerous beasts. Of course one could never be certain of safety and therein lay the thrill—the spark of real living!

From her first sight of Lance Tolliver—the ugly, stringy, slightly askew travesty of a youth—something came from him to her, while an equal drawing force darted from her to him. She had sensed enough of what he was, and what it meant to them both, in the fierceness of his light yellow eyes and the set of his slightly crooked mouth. It involved both of them—savage to savage. There was arrogance in the knowledge that she was half of such a pair. Linda Abbott’s and Cousin Ted’s accounts of his capabilities added more enigma and wonder to the attraction. Incongruous, too—he

could weep soft-heartedly at giving pain and death, even to fish! She had seen it happen. And should she—worldly wise—laugh, shrug, or what at that? Of course, all higher animals knew sorrow, she reminded herself.

Beast to beast—all right—go so far as to call him and her that! Yet, in the wild, beasts were careful around what they were still not sure of. So she played along for several more days, becoming surer and bolder.

As for him, he was showing other rapid and more evident improvements than just in speech and voice tone—all of which she recorded surreptitiously with her little audio-visual camera, thinking perhaps of a remarkable public presentation of him she might someday make, as she did professionally, about topics of interest from the sparsely inhabited north.

After his first couple of fish gobblings, and the agonies and long sleeps which followed, his long, cadaverous form—in ill-fitting wilderness attire from the lockers of her camper—was already filling out with more muscle, as it straightened. And he had longer intervals of outward observation and activity. Cousin Ted and his girlfriend, Linda, with their constant note-taking and applications of their medical instruments, were not the only ones to be fascinated by the changes. Under it all, Tolliver was becoming more and more intensely yet quietly alive.

Though his voice deepened and richened and lost its slur and most of its groping for words, he didn't become garrulous. In subtle ways he remained guarded and inscrutable. Darkly dangerous? Cara, herself, could smile invisibly. Nothing even remotely like this had come her way before, even in her rather vivid career. She waited.

After the early days of setting up camp and of getting activities in sync with Tolliver's vital rhythms and foibles, there was more leisure.

So there came a particular moment, near a bright, springtime sundown. Linda and Ted were in the shack, cleaning up after dinner. Lance, who had eaten with the others in a fairly normal manner, and with scarcely

more gusto than a famished lumberjack, wandered toward the lake. Cara followed at a distance. When he stopped, she stopped and observed.

Even before he made small, trilling sounds, little birds were around him, hovering, fluttering, and giving forth with similar excited notes. She had noticed the phenomenon before. The birds were Parulidae—warblers—and one of the most widely migrant species.

After a minute, Tolliver waved a hand gently. The birds retreated somewhat, but still lingered near, among the trees.

Cara Webber approached Tolliver.

"You don't even feed them, Lance," she remarked. "They wouldn't come to me. Yet they come to you. I don't get that. Is it some kind of invisible attraction? By telepathy?"

He turned and stared at her, as if angered by an intrusion into a reverie that nobody else could follow. But his pale eyes softened at once. Just then he spoke with some of his old, groping hesitation.

"Telepathy? No, it isn't that. I don't know whether I can explain. It goes very far back—and ahead. It's a sensing of *alike*ness—me to them, and them to me. Far past—and future. It's partly almost the same—identity? A blending into a kind of universal consciousness? I don't understand it much myself. But, like me, they feel the magnetic lines of the curving Earth. They follow those lines in their twice-a-year trips of thousands of kilometers—though they are so little and, in many ways, not clever. But as I do, they feel time—seconds and ages. And like me, they see the stars in a certain way, and are led by them, as much as by the magnetism, in their long flights. I think if they could, if there was air in space, they would try to fly all the way to the stars. Because that is the nature of biology—life—to reach out and expand as far as it can. That is its intended destiny. Though in many forms it may be wiped out on the way. These are among the things which my body hints to me—in feeling. For it holds much of what biology is

—start to whatever ending.”

The crinkles of thought and interest roughened Cara Webber's smooth brow again, and a dimple showed in her right cheek. She was surely intelligent enough to follow what this fantastic man had told her, as far as it went. She was even able to project its meanings a bit further on her own. Also, it was very pleasant to listen to the new, rough timbre of his voice. And as for the young, untried, but feral light in those pale eyes of his, when he studied her . . . um—well—soon.

“Lots of things tug at me, Lance,” she offered. “I look at mountains, trees, wildflowers—and they pull. I look at the stars and yearn. I see an eagle soaring—way up—and I wish with all my heart that I could fly—not in an aircraft, but by myself!”

His shaggy head swung toward her. From momentary absentmindedness, his stare sharpened to total alertness.

“Yearning!” he pronounced eagerly. “See, Cara Webber? That is part of how bodies speak to minds, telling them the course! You have some of this too—as must everyone! It is bio-language. However, in me, it comes much stronger, clearer, going beyond what has been called—a poor word—instinct. How many people have yearned to fly, not only in machines, but as you say? There, too, I am linked closer to the birds! Also, though I am far from sure I can—it may be a foolishness—I have a means—in my growth-control. So I *might* accomplish this! Wait—I'll show you!”

Tolliver pulled off his rough shirt, raised both his arms, then fingered the looseness of skin on the underside of one, and then of its mate. Now Cara saw that the oddity had the look of rudimentary—membranes? The condition had advanced beyond what it had been, faster, even, than his muscle growth. Cara's wits groped.

“Ted said something about this,” she remarked, so as not to seem too impressed. “Well—so it is. *But no feathers?*” The question slipped from her tongue. In her

head, it implied no mockery but was as simple and innocent as a child's.

Yet Tolliver, in his lack of sophistication, was not even aware of such a fine point of civilized chatter, much less being offended.

"Feathers? No," he answered. "Those I couldn't command. Or not easily. Since birds are of a somewhat different order of life, and with different structuring. Bats are closer to us, though not enough in form. Yet my body remembers—far back, and dimly—even to chains of evolution aside from its own direct ancestry. For biology can leave some mark—in whatever flesh—not only of what was, but of what might have been. Once, when there were dinosaurs, there were flying creatures, large and small. Pterodactyls. It seems that the name means wing-finger. *One* finger, extended, to form the spar, and support the stretched skin. Simpler, from which to copy design. Look! I am causing my Body to go beyond repairing its defects and strengthening itself! To try to build what its kind never had! But it protests to me with pain and depression, insisting to my Mind that the idea won't work!"

Here, Tolliver displayed his two hands together, showing how the fifth—the little—fingers, had already grown almost as long as the fourth fingers, and with a suggestion of thin extensions at the outer edges.

Cara Webber was further amazed and wondering, surer of his capabilities and dreams, even though this one was maybe naive in its intent. Though wouldn't it be rather fine to soar into the sky—with equipment that was part of one's self?

"It's marvelous, and—do you know?—*you* are rather marvelous," she declared, and meant it.

"Marvelous," he repeated. "I like the meaning—if it doesn't become too much, and keep me alone. I've always been alone."

She took one of his narrow hands, with its pointed fingernails.

"You aren't so very different," she told him. "You are Lance. And not by yourself anymore, with Ted and Linda here, and me, liking you very much."

Tolliver had pulled his hand away from her, warily, or as if from shyness, or because of a contact that, to him, seemed to have an intrinsic denial conditioned into it. At the home for defectives where he had long been confined, touching of the few young female personnel had been discouraged, nor had any of them been inclined toward friendship with him. What he had wanted had been forbidden; thus an intense conflict was created. It lingered now like recklessly dumped explosives, exposed to circumstances for ignition. Nor did he have the least experience with girls by which to recognize elusive limitations. He had only those pent-up and ageless male drives.

Cara Webber became bolder still. She took Tolliver's resisting arm and nestled her own inside its elbow.

"This is nicer, isn't it?"

She led him along the lake a ways, and then drew him to a halt. She cuddled close and, lifting her head, kissed him lightly.

"I think I love you, Lance," she told him.

She became aware that he smelled very much of fish, though in a fresh, agreeable, exciting way.

Tolliver was very good indeed at some phases of self-control. So it couldn't properly be said that he lost it now. But the indications were plain and startling that all barriers were down. His body spoke to him, not with the intricate intimacy that was unique to him, but with the emotional emphasis that everybody knows. Nor had he learned any superficial, civilized inhibitions to balance the reaction. Something was let go like a savage hunter releases a tautly-drawn bowstring. He wheeled and gripped her. There was nothing gentle; there was only a stark, primal urge, too long damned up and unmelodized.

Cara Webber tried to stop him, at first with stock,

feminine phrases of protest. Even as she did, she realized how silly and out of place it all sounded. Had the alternative occurred to her sooner, she might have hurled him into the lake; she was vigorous enough, and, more particularly, she was well skilled in self-defense. But matters had gotten out of hand.

His mouth and whiskers crushed against her face. His claw-tipped fingers dug at her shapely, muscular rump, and began tearing away her clothes. She struck and clawed back at him, but primitively—not in a calculated, scientific manner.

It was not in her nature to scream—for help, or for any other reason. Shouting and vituperations, however, were a different matter.

“You stinking, stupid son of a bitch! You misshapen maggot in a rotting hyena!”

He hurled her down by the lake’s edge. His hard knees butted against hers, prying them apart. Yet, since the hungers in her psyche were of a certain sort, soon there was a flip-over in her rage; it turned into something else, incandescent and beautiful. She groaned, and her thighs opened wider. He took her, then, like a rutting bull. But after the first few moments, though his fierce thrusts kept on, his tears were falling on her face—as something tender reached him belately, more, perhaps, from his own basic interior than from any dimly recollected awareness of cultural decorum.

He stroked her head clumsily. His growls gentled to a croon: “Cara. Beautiful Cara. I didn’t mean . . . to hurt . . .”

That was how Doctors Destin and Abbott, responding in alarm to her earlier shouts, found them.

Cara Webber was entirely unabashed. She grinned up at them from bruised and bloodied lips, and with one slightly swollen eye. Her experience with men was quite extensive and varied; but this evening, with this particular one, she was learning things about herself that she had not known. It wasn’t that she particularly enjoyed being roughed up by apish males—far from it!

But here there was an eerie and wild naturalness, a mystery and power.

"Get lost, you two bushwhackers," she said quite cheerfully.

They obeyed.

"Cripes!" Destin grated as they walked away. He didn't know in what proportions exasperation, anger, humor, and awe were mixed in that single expletive. Maybe there was even a splinter of envy.

Doctors Destin and Abbott were quite knowledgeable in erotic matters, which were an important facet of their profession. They were never shocked.

"To recoin an old phrase, though," Linda remarked, more like some ancestral housewife than a psychiatrist, "I'm afraid your cousin is going to wrap our innocent boy around her little finger."

"Could be," Ted murmured, without suggesting any countermeasures.

They waited till Cara and Lance reappeared at the shack, muddled, bruised, marked up, and tattered, but obviously content.

Cara scorned offers of medication, saying she had Band-aids of her own. As for Lance, with his healing powers, his various scratches weren't even worth noticing.

Then Ted and Linda also took a walk. They had, of course, been making love regularly, even back at Spruce Crest. Still, Linda commented, "Certainly few women want violence—regardless of what a lot of ignorant males think. You know that's fact, Ted."

"I do, sweetie," he agreed.

"However," she amended, "just maybe our jobs make us—well—too clinical? And reserved? As if we did this bit sort of spiritlessly—like brushing our teeth?"

Destin wanted to burst out laughing. But that mightn't be quite diplomatic at this point. So he settled for a small chuckle.

" 'Like brushing our teeth?' " he quoted. "Wow—

what a crummy put-down! You mean I'm *that* bad, Lind? That we ought to borrow a fragment from what that pair managed at first try?"

Linda wrinkled her nose at him. "My fault, too," she said.

"So let's stroll along a little farther, darlin'," he responded, pinching her bottom. "Give me a chance to get over the rankling inhibition of that toothpaste imagery. Then, let's find out just how hectic we can be—hey?"

They ambled on, flesh touching flesh. During recent weeks, their orderly lives had been utterly blasted. That they were wanted criminals could seem petty beside the fact of huge, imponderable significance, perhaps to the destiny of their species, with which they had become involved. Behind the good-humored fronts they maintained, they were bleakly, timorously scared.

Yet now the moon, just past full, had risen. A timber wolf sang, far off. The lake lapped, and there were shadows of trees on its glitter. These two didn't mind the chill. The universe spoke to their bodies, and their bodies spoke to them. In lusty harmony, they lunged together, groped, clung, and rhythmized. Their fears dimmed in comforting aliveness. Had they expected to die in the next minute, it wouldn't have mattered.

Disheveled, they retraced their steps. Destin's flashlight beam groped. There were no partitions dividing the shack's small interior. Nobody here had considered such separations necessary. Yet each person had had, till now, a separate bunk. The light, in its briefest flicker, revealed that this was no longer so. Out of what had been only Cara's couch now protruded a large, unfeminine foot.

Ted and Linda's suppressed, whispery chuckles were, just then, purest, comradely benevolence, including the comedy.

"More to emulate—eh, love?" Linda breathed.

CHAPTER 9

The days moved on deep into almost nightless, high-latitude summer. Great antlered beasts bellowed in the forest. Mosquitoes, black flies, and wood ticks had appeared. A few may have bitten Tolliver without being harmed; later, others that tried perished in the act, poisoned. Thereafter, their kind were warned away from him, possibly by some subtle odor. Cara Webber knew how to live with the pests with minimal discomfort; besides, in her frequent close contact with her mate, some of his protective effluvium must have rubbed off on her.

Destin had shown Tolliver how to saw and chop firewood; then there was scant chance of the supply ever running out. After each of Tolliver's gluttonies of raw and flopping fish, and his subsequent dippings into agony and recuperative sleep, he emerged straighter and more muscular than before. The two physicians kept recording his vital parameters and noting changes in his

habits. His periods of outward awareness continued to lengthen. During them, he was usually in excellent spirits. He not only spoke more and more naturally, he even learned to hum tunes. He studied the few but various books again and again.

Of course there were some semi-private conversations about him, like one that began between Ted Destin and Cara Webber while from a little distance they watched him swing an ax to break up a rotting log. At each rhythmic motion, the narrow, bandlike phenomenon along the undersides of his now massive arms tautened to thin translucence, through which the sunlight came, pinked by capillaries, but with a soft blue surface tint.

Destin began the talk with an oblique tease: "Let's see, cuz—when were you born?"

"September fifth—I'm pushing twenty-seven," she stated with her usual blunt frankness. "Why? Oh, I get it. Lance is twenty, and I'm a kid-snatching crone—hey?"

Ted sniffed in feigned hurt. "Making me out not only nineteenth-century conventional, but a breathing, bleeding fossil?" he riposted. "When I only meant to suggest that if he can grow wings maybe he can figure out how to keep you both young."

"Hmm—Ted—damn how you brought the topic up, though! Lance told me. For himself it would be quite simple—even to reverse the bio-clock. And he might find means to transfer some of this to others. But who cares, right now? I'm still far from doddering. About the wings, he's not so sure."

"Uh-huh, Cara. The human form is probably too far off balance for aerodynamics. It would need some pretty drastic redesign. But those webs *are* growing. They're not much yet, but I measured them yesterday—ten centimeters wide at the widest. That's a centimeter of increase in a day. And all along his arms. Though—glory!—what's he doing to himself otherwise? Look at those arms and legs, every time that ax thuds down!

Becoming an actual Paul Bunyan or Hercules? A corny hero for kids? Did you ever see such a plain case of overcompensation for having been a scrawny, deformed misfit?"

Just then Linda came out of the shack to hang up some wash—the banalities of existence had to go on.

"I heard the last of that, dear heart." She chuckled. "No, I never saw. On the other hand, do I detect in you an even more tiresome instance of simple male envy?"

"Could be, since I'm in the category," Destin answered cheerfully. "Now, take Lance—he probably hears anything he wants—if he bothers. And I used to think him dangerously sensitive. Me—why do I keep getting put down?"

"For fun," Linda told him, going to the cord she had strung as a clothesline.

Fun, Destin pondered. Sparks of humor, always helpful. While they all tried to look into the darkly hidden future with optimism. Watching the sky, listening to pocket radios, and occasionally turning on the small TV set in the camper—bringing down whatever newscasts from the relay satellite that swung in synchronous, orbital turn with the Earth's rotation, nearly forty-thousand kilometers above. Nothing about an escaped killer Mad Boy anymore. Too small a matter to linger in the constant flood of much publicized human unrest. Unless the search had gone stealthy. Had anybody yet guessed the awesome truth?

Sometime, being here where they four were had to end, Destin thought. But just how and when would it happen, and with what effect? Throwing such a bomb of vast promise and conceivable threat into what had become an endemically tense, nervous, and controversy-habitized society.

Destin broke away from these musings when Cara brought up a more immediate topic: "Pretty soon I've got to drive to the nearest settlement, Ted, convert some of your Stateside cash, and restock on things. Maybe

even warmer clothes—because who can tell?”

“It’s a hundred and fifty difficult kilometers—twice. But Linda or I can go along,” he suggested.

To this, he got what seemed to him a peculiar answer—and maybe he could figure why—with considerable concern: “Nope, cuz. Safer if I do it all by myself. Somebody might spot either of you. Some things I like to handle alone. I’ll take a couple of days. But maybe next time.”

She left the following morning.

Toward the hour when the sun dipped briefly below the northern horizon on the second day, Destin stood looking along the old timber track, even unsure that she hadn’t bugged off for keeps. This, though Tolliver had just told him that she’d show within ten minutes and then had ambled unconcernedly toward the lake.

Partly to shorten the time drag, Destin had his pocket radio on again, listening for news, as he so often did. But what he was getting was a standard spiel about a projected scheme: to convert a cylinder-world prototype into a true spaceship to be sent out to orbit Mars and shuttle-land a load of settlers who would start settlement on that bleak planet. Safer if the human race was dispersed, the speaker declared, repeating a long-standing thesis. Destin didn’t bother to change the station.

The camper appeared. Tolliver was beside it in a bound. Linda came from the shack. Cara, seeming a trifle bemused under her practicality, handed out boxes of items for everybody to carry.

After that, she took quite a little while to get to the subject foremost in her head.

“I’ve got my special stake in whatever comes,” she announced, grinning, from in front of the smoldering fireplace.

“*Beautiful*, cousin!” Destin smirked back at her. “Especially with the implications. But with a pair of not-so-dumb and observant medicos at hand? We ought to feel slighted.”

"Sometimes a stranger-physician is a psychological help to a woman," Linda defended. "Besides getting the word by the regular tests, to be certain . . ."

Cara Webber was not miffed at all.

"Okay, I've got my private quirks," she admitted lightly. "Even though Lance knew before I could seriously suspect. See how solemn he looks? Anyhow I'm a success—and a *first*. I'm pregnant."

CHAPTER 10

Dr. Reginald Archmere of Spruce Crest handled his brief session with the authorities smoothly.

“Our facility recognizes some moral responsibility for the escape of your prisoner, gentlemen. However, we are not police, and there was always a man of yours on duty. That one of them failed to be properly cautious is out of our province. If, as he claims, he was drugged by one of our staff, that is beyond our knowledge, and considerably beyond belief. Dr. Destin and Dr. Abbott were always totally dedicated professionals. That they disappeared at the same time as your prisoner may be due to some coercion on the latter’s part. Again, this is your responsibility much more than ours. Though, be assured that, about them, I am quite personally concerned. Please find out what has happened to them.”

Dr. Archmere had not spoken with entire frankness. Though he turned over copies of Tolliver’s immediate medical records, originating at Spruce Crest, to the

police, he withheld certain items for his own examination first. Among them, the recording of Destin's original interview with Tolliver. Angrily, he wished he'd taken time to run it through for himself before.

Now he did so, late at night, in the small quarters he kept at Spruce Crest, though he had a fine country house just a few kilometers away. The recording was studiously poor—very faint. But, by precise tuning of his equipment and careful listening, he could get every word.

More and more, something that he thought he should have perceived at once became clearer to him. True, Destin and Abbott were young and idealistic. Yet they certainly weren't fools. They wouldn't wreck careers that they loved for nothing. There had to be an intense motivation.

Reginald Archmere did have a penetrating intellect—when he applied it fully. From that recording, he got more than shadows of the purpose behind the absence of his young subordinates. Also, he had drawn from computer storage microfiche copies of Tolliver's medical history from other institutions; anything that came in was routinely stored there for possible duplication; Destin had no doubt made off with his microfiches, but these others had been easy to print up. Archmere scrutinized them carefully. His comprehension and anger mounted, much of the latter against himself.

For he was face to face with an old flaw in his personality that had tripped him up even in his student days. Not that, broadly, it hadn't benefited him. For the public loved the appearances of success. In fact, for the most part, such appearances *were* success. But solid fame came more leanly, with less show and more earnest dedication. And was he, Reg Archmere, too much a pompous ass? Indeed, he had always worked hard, and with compassion; yet was he, at core, lazy, and too ready to bask in his own prominence, taking this second-rate reward when he might have had much more?

He delegated too many things to others, while inhibiting his own creative imagination. Oh, sure—wanting to become monumented forever in medical history was maybe of the same selfish, puffed-up texture.

Also, here *he* was—a loser, a second-guesser. In the most gigantic of opportunities. A chance that had slipped quietly past him, due to his airy lack of alertness. Damn it, those clever twerps, Destin and Abbott, had scooped him!

However, his rage over these circumstances was shrinking. For behind them lay possibilities and mysteries more conducive to awe and terror. He was grasping some of Destin and Abbott's viewpoint.

Archmere kept himself busy with his usual activities for a couple of days while he brooded uncertainly, wondering what to do.

Indecision was a bad bind to get into. So, early on the third evening, when he got to his house, he phoned Dr. Rolf Hoffmann, the psychiatrist who was occasionally called in by the State Police, for opinions about persons in trouble with the law. This was the same Dr. Hoffmann who was to have examined Tolliver. Archmere and Hoffmann were friends and neighbors. Archmere had great respect for Hoffman's keenness and wide range of up-to-the-minute knowledge, including fields outside their own. He liked the gnomish, lively little man.

"Listen, Rolf," he urged. "I want to talk to you about something. But privately."

"Personal, Reg? I'm a doctor too."

"Yes and no. It's about this Tolliver."

"Um—I don't know that I ever want to be indicted for withholding evidence. Of course, he's not in custody now, so my direct commitment has evaporated. Up to a point, I'm a tight-mouthed, oath-bound medic again. If we're talking about the same thing."

"Another yes and no, Rolf. I don't think it goes as far as withholding evidence—if challenged. It's just that

I need you to examine some stuff I've got right in front of me—to see if we come up with the same rather remarkable impressions. So can we get together? And how soon?"

"This evening, if you like, Reg. Your place or mine?"

"Over here would be better, if you don't mind. I'm all set up."

So the two men sat together in Archmere's study.

Out of the recording, Lance Tolliver's strange voice burbled again, faint but clear enough: "I can 'see' down into my body, including microscopic stuff, and smaller. You're like all the others, Doctor—a smart-ass mind getting a free ride through life inside a body that it half despises . . . though it knows far more, and can't trust how dumb you are. But me, somehow . . . Besides, I have considerable . . . control . . . down there."

After a while, Archmere said, "Now let's go back to several points in the microfiches that I showed you first, Rolf. Disregard the statement that, as a small boy, Tolliver could sense the presence of a magnet, though, considering clear indications of more remarkable capabilities, I have no reason to doubt that. Here, let's look again at these successive visuals. That radical an improvement of very deficient bone-and-muscle structures just couldn't happen by itself. You can even see how the bones were strengthened—by a thickening of their walls. So aren't we almost forced to take Tolliver at his word? We know, also, that a few people have limited powers for healing themselves—though hardly to this extent! Note too, again—here—a certain small but noticeable exaggeration from the norm in the channels of the entire nervous system, which might give Tolliver both the inward-turned sense and the 'control' he boasts of. Growth control seems included, by evidence and implication. Well, what do you think, Rolf?"

Little Dr. Hoffmann leaned back in his chair, away from the microfiche viewer, and made a steeple of his slender fingers.

"Uh—yes," he grunted. "No radical change in the basic human nerve schematic—just a bit more of it. Like somebody being born with an extremely large nose. That almost amounts to how little it takes to make all the difference between this Tolliver and the rest of us. I'm beginning to buy this whole thing, Reg."

Hoffmann scratched his prominent chin.

"A rarity—the benign mutation," he mused. "Yet a curious circumstance bugs me. In the long course of our human history, why didn't this simple change happen before? By the impact of some stray, radioactive particle—numerous enough in nature, without any agency of Man—on some gene? Or by the effects of some natural chemical in the soil somewhere? Or just by the random drift of genetic molecules? You'd think . . . Wait a sec, though! Maybe it *has* happened occasionally, but got exed out by an intrinsic self-destruct factor. Bodies, in their huge accumulation of vital know-how and wisdom, have good reason to mistrust the small minds they support. Imagine an infant monkey being born with Tolliver's gifts—and I see no reason why this couldn't happen. Sooner or later—probably quite soon—the small critter, fooling around uncomprehendingly with the controls of his vitals—behaving as he surely would if turned loose in a laboratory of delicate equipment—would likely kill himself, thus canceling his unusual faculties along with any chance to produce descendants to inherit them. Proceeding from this analogy, I'd conclude that certain minimum levels of intelligence and restraint are required in the individual on whom these gifts are bestowed, to make them a survivable and viable part of the onward-moving evolutionary mainstream. Nor need one go as far down the scale of mental development as monkeys are to find the same limiting factor working. You've shown me indications, here in Tolliver's medical history, Reg, that even he was fortunate to have lived through his early childhood experiments on himself."

Maybe twenty seconds of thoughtful silence went by, until Archmere spoke up with an uncharacteristic admission. "I missed realizing, for myself, some of what you've just suggested, Rolf. But it sounds logical and enlightening. Though my concerns were toward more immediate considerations—one reason why I called you into this. You're in contact with genetic-engineering people."

"A few, Reg. They of the still somewhat restricted black art, frowned on, with some justification, by persons who think that tampering with even the genetic structures of fairly innocuous viruses might produce terrible new plagues. Uh—I begin to get what you're driving at: Tolliver is a much larger instance—a macro-example, if you will—of much the same sort of alteration, with the added difference that he came about by nobody's intended design. So what are your own thoughts, from there on?"

"Mainly this, Rolf: *It looks as though he can conduct genetic engineering entirely within himself, with no outside aids at all. And if, by the insight he declares he has, he can draw on all the knowledge—technology, I might almost say—that the human form has been accumulating over innumerable generations, just to keep surviving, what do you think his potentials might be?*"

Dr. Hoffmann squinted his deep-set eyes.

"Umhhh—I'm right with you," he said. "I imagine Tolliver would be—is—capable of quite a lot, much of it beneficial. Though saying this much may be an understatement."

"Beneficial—yes," Archmere countered quickly. "Just the same, I'm not at all sure that I want such a creature running around somewhere loose. So I'm wondering what should be done."

Hoffmann studied his friend with mild cynicism.

"What can we do?" he asked. "The police are looking for Tolliver and your young renegades. So far, it seems, with not a clue. Of course we could build an

extra fire of urgency under the authorities by taking all this data and explaining its various bright and shadowy implications to them—while maybe calling in genetic engineers as well, to make matters plainer.”

“There are bad defects in that approach, Rolf.”

“Could be,” Hoffmann agreed. “Tell the cops and a few others and pretty soon there’d be leaks. Then hollers about every citizen’s right to know—surely correct in principle, but panicky in effect, when proper reassurance can’t also be supplied, or ever *believed* by some folks, even if it were totally valid. Then, of course, there’d be the opposite factions, ecstatically pro-Tolliver. Yes, I’d say he’d be the center of a very dangerous disagreement—probably the biggest ever.”

With this many of his own reservations bleakly confirmed, and no vaguely hoped for, clever plan of action that he could accept with enthusiasm offered, Archmere felt his wish for further contact with Hoffmann slipping away.

“Yes, quite a large mess,” he breathed. “Look, Rolf, I don’t think much of this should get out yet. Though, as you say, we could build a fire—a small one—a few intriguing hints—so that the authorities—in whatever areas—will keep looking hard. And quietly. I’d just like to know where my runaways—and Tolliver—have gone.”

Hoffmann shrugged in his elfinly tolerant way.

“Your initiative, Reg. Myself—I’d just as soon remain a detached sideliners—letting matters take their natural, intricately convoluted course, and not adding any incompletely informed and perhaps misguided action of my own to the confusion. But I’ll go this far: Call a fella named Godwin—he’s with the Federal Bureau. I’ll give you his number. You could probably reach him this minute.”

Archmere masked himself behind a smile that was colder than his usual genial one.

"No, Rolf. Tomorrow. I want to be sure of what I'll say."

Soon, Hoffmann left him.

Next evening, Archmere contacted Godwin, some hundreds of kilometers distant, using the visual attachment of his home phone so that there could be no mistakes of identity on either side. Godwin, a man of about fifty years, was deferential to him.

Archmere made his cautious pitch smoothly: "I would like to be certain that the Tolliver case continues to be pursued with diligence, Mr. Godwin. Two of my young colleagues are missing. Further, there is evidence that this Tolliver is not only a mentally retarded psychopath, but possibly a much more widely dangerous genetic aberration. From the sketchy data available, I can't be more specific. Yet, with the idea of offering my services to your department, I would appreciate your informing me at once of any clues suggesting the whereabouts of my colleagues. Of course I understand that it may be best to operate in confidence."

"The medical data I think you refer to has been forwarded to us by your State Police, Dr. Archmere," Godwin responded in a low-pitched drawl. "It has been examined to the extent that it can be useful in doing our job. We accept your emphasis on urgency but leave your personal reasons to you. It could be that we will accept your kind offer to help. Meanwhile, be assured that we will keep on doing our best. And, yes, if there is any break we'll let you know."

For the next quarter hour, Archmere sat staring at the now darkened screen attached to the phone in his study. He felt guiltily tense and insecure. He thought he had impressed Godwin, yet how could he be sure? Beside what he had given them, how much of Tolliver's medical history might the State Police have gathered on their own? Now, by Godwin's unsolicited statement, it was all in the hands of the Federal Bureau. Archmere

guessed that nobody there—with enough understanding of medical matters—would examine it too closely; it wasn't their area of concern. Yet how could he know? They surely had experts—very good ones.

Damn! Why was he so bent on secrecy, anyhow? Now he sank deep into his own conflicting tangle of thoughts, motives, dreads, and drives. Should a psychiatrist try to sort *himself* out? Certainly! An old, wry concession—a student's earliest practicing efforts were within his own mind. But was he becoming slightly paranoid? Haw! . . . He didn't want this Tolliver situation to upset the world too much; in this, he was being earnestly, fearfully protective. And he didn't want the miracle to be spoiled or wiped out—at least not until he got his merited piece of its awesome significance! Even a psychiatrist was allowed that much human pride! Nor did he trust others—not even that damned Destin and his girlfriend, Abbott—not to ruin the whole thing! Most of all, he wanted to be where the hidden action was.

He—taking an active part? Was the event big enough to propel him *that* much? He smiled in his genial way; on this occasion, since he was alone, this was entirely honest—not half intended for its theatrical impact on others. With nothing coldly definite yet in prospect, the notion charmed him. A quest, too—a getting away. Likely, just what he needed.

He worked with his patients as usual for the next three weeks, but began to fume inside when there was no word from Godwin.

But then a phone call reached him at Spruce Crest, not from Godwin himself, but from a girl who said she was his secretary. She told Archmere that Dr. Destin's car had been located in dense woods, very close to the Canadian border—a metal detector had located the identifying license plates. She identified the nearest town and asked if Mr. Godwin should call when he

returned to the office. Though nothing else was yet known.

"That won't be necessary," Archmere responded. "Unless more turns up. Though I should phone him myself and say thanks. And thanks to you."

The truth was that Archmere was wary of further official investigation, Canadian or Stateside, and he hoped that the effort was wearing out. Sure—that was where those three would have headed—toward lonely, concealing forests, near to the Arctic Circle.

There was a sourness of abrupt lifestyle-and-attitude change in Archmere's stomach, like a shock effect. Yet, as if he were on a track of inevitability, he kept making preparations that scarcely seemed part of his personality at all: calling in a university classmate to run Spruce Crest for an indefinite period, with no explanation except that he needed a rest. Converting securities into a mass of more liquid funds. Buying rough-country garb. Guides, equipment, weapons, and helpers he could no doubt hire closer to the scene.

Occasionally he thought with acid humor of the wife who had left him because she said he was too busy treating other people's soul problems even to notice her. And of a son and daughter who had grown and gone their own ways. Well, at least he was left free.

His initial excitement was too massive and wearing to be exactly joyful. But by practicing suggestion on himself, he calmed his nerves and viewed what he had become in a wryly dreamy and legendary manner: Was he like some antique Boston shopkeeper, stricken with the 1849 California gold-rush fever? Or an even more antique Spanish nobleman, seeking El Dorado? Or like a Galahad in pursuit of the Holy Grail? Or like Ponce de León, hunting for the Fountain of Youth? Or was he—*not like but actually*—a contemporary hero, defending his world?

All of these self-imageries had a certain bleakly

laughable incongruity—yet a flawed and inspiring grandeur. They were even weak comparisons with what he was attempting. He was more than a Peary or Amundsen reaching for Earth's poles. More than a Pasteur, tracking the cause of diseases to their micro-biological lair. More than a Freud, pioneering the convoluted shadows of the human psyche. More than an Apollo crew member, bound for that first Moon landing.

No—his aim exceeded such fine examples. He wasn't just trying to find Destin and Abbott, or even only the vessel of an evolutionary miracle, and the tremendous hopes and threats it presented—Tolliver himself. Rather, he was in pursuit of the core of the wonder—*the accumulated and at last opened up wisdom of living life*. In it was likely contained the destiny of Man. Archmere was sure that there had never been any quest equal to this one. Though he might have to share, he must belong. For purer reasons than glory.

Actually, because of trivial demands on him, and small indecisions and fumbings, he didn't start out until well into August. There had been no further clues as to the exact whereabouts of the trio he had to find. After that, there seemed no end to nerve-wracking uncertainties and exasperations. It had seemed so easy to make an educated divination of likely areas from maps showing surface cover, but he hadn't quite realized how large the north country was!

Deep in September, with light snow already in the woods, he plodded on aching feet encased in heavy boots, behind a Franco-Amerindian guide. Around him were five other similar locals, with tranquilizer dart guns at ready in their hands. Three had insisted on carrying more lethal rifles as well—in case some beast . . .

Archmere was hoping once more. But after several hours, with chilly dusk settling, he shrugged. He and his bunch might as well tramp back to their vehicle.

Another rumor had proven empty. Promise and threat still eluded him.

Just then he seemed confronted by his own dismal reality: amateurish, not fat, but not rugged either. Old fool, completely out of his depth. Chasing an elusive will-o'-the-wisp. Why didn't he stop being a silly romantic and go back where he belonged?

Only he couldn't quit. That much of an innovator, explorer, and believer Reginald Archmere was.

He'd have to hire a helicopter again, for another search of the region.

CHAPTER II

This morning, Tolliver had supplemented his anemic pancake breakfast with just one small fish. When he emerged, dripping, from the lake, he flapped his bizarrely fringed arms in the frosty air to shake off most of the water. Though there had already been some snow, a number of small birds still chorused their flocking chirps among the conifers. And overhead, in scrawly V-formation, geese honked southward.

Tolliver puffed out his cheeks, first at Destin, then up at the passing migrants.

"Sorry, friends up there," he gruffed. "I can't go along. I admit it's final. These webs make good swim fins. But wings—never. Not on me."

In a ritual concession to civilized custom, he patted himself sketchily with a crumpled towel and climbed back into his shorts and pants.

He flapped his arms again to dry their membraneous amendments, but also—it appeared to Destin—to make

yet another attempt to grab hold of the atmosphere effectively. Yet, to begin with, the surface provided—it was only twenty centimeters across at the armpit-widest, and tapering down almost to points at the somewhat extended fifth-finger tips—was far from sufficient.

However, these design additions to the regular human form looked rather dramatic, Destin decided for the umpteenth time—fully outspread, with the sunlight shining through them, as through living parchment, made rosy by networks of fine blood vessels. Or even draped—when the arms and shoulders were relaxed—like a small cape, with a satiny, grayish-blue surface cast. Beautiful, in a way. Though like part of the theatrical costume of an over-splendidly physiqued man, playing the role of a mythical demon or a pinioned demigod in some opera. Destin's reactions were a mixture of mild hero worship and sophisticated distaste toward banal too-muchness. This huge, trim shape with the sonorous voice—operatic potential hinted at here as well! Yet under the great, black beard there remained the tiniest suggestion of facial asymmetry that might never leave Tolliver. Or did this minute, residual flaw add an oblique and individual touch to his handsomeness? Destin wondered with humor, though almost with resentment.

Cara, who had herself given up swimming in the chill of the advancing season, now came close. In affectionate insolence, she slapped her man on his massive and webbed biceps.

"Put on your shirt, you overgrown dodo-bat, and quit showing off!" She laughed. "Another generation is already started. Our kid may soar away, even though you can't!"

"Yes—perhaps," Tolliver muttered absently.

He made a playful lunge toward Cara, but when she darted out of range, he didn't follow through. He shrugged, and his mood solemnized. He turned to Destin.

"You want to go back to the States," he declared

flatly. "Lind keeps saying such things too."

Destin had to cough. But then he kept his reply even-toned: "At least we shouldn't stay here, Lance. Full winter will come swooping in any day. Yes—I'm repeating reasons. From the start, I thought it was understood we'd go back when you had prepared yourself to meet the world. But your getting ready doesn't appear to have any clearly defined ending."

Tolliver's response came—quick, terse, and hard: "You know most of why."

"I do, Lance. You've told me. Or hinted. In fact, your biggest reasons are the same as mine, and they do scare hell out of me. But we've got to buck through and see what happens. To make your 'test'—like you used to say."

Just then Linda Abbott, hearing voices that touched on an all-important topic, stopped trying to contrive a menu change for midday dinner from a limited range of staples—silly how she'd gotten into this petty preoccupation, as if it were an anchor to civilized rightness—and hurried out of the shack to reiterate her own exhortations.

"Lance—it can't be so bad! We might slip back across the border and hide you awhile! Anyhow, in the right clothes, covering the wings, who'd know who you are? Except that you're—uh—impressive—you've adapted enough to mingle most anywhere. And even if there is discovery, a trial, and open publicity about what you are, that's when we need to demonstrate your value to everybody! Not long ago you were a happy man, Lance; you should still be, instead of sometimes turning glum. Maybe most important, Cara is carrying your child. She needs looking after. She shouldn't be caught in the subarctic woods when the snows close in!"

"Linda—you worry about the darnedest things," Cara cut in, eyeing her oddly. "Though, about your

first points—I repeat—there's sense. Particularly for you and Ted."

"I can't go—not yet!" Tolliver growled. "Things are never right out there in the world—for them with me. That hasn't changed. I feel it. You know it too. What good am I if I have to hide? Besides, I'd be found out. That would be worse. But you go—Ted and Lind. I don't like that either. But it's best for you."

Here they were, Destin thought—four personalities, one set apart, all of them fragmented on decisions, though they all understood the doubts. Radio and TV newscasts kept underlining the endemic problem even when the mood was quiet: a huge populace, long self-conditioned to tensions, living in a continuous atmosphere of domestic or international controversy, wishing for a little steady and relaxing sameness or else a sudden euphoric sunburst of all-fixing Utopia—but not believing in either. Right now, there was relative calm out there, which, by its unusualness, suggested ominous waiting. And if something truly big—and several-sidedly questionable—hit?

Tolliver flashed a fragment of a grin, showing again that he hadn't totally lost his recent capacity to be light-hearted. But his expression hardened toward lonely—perhaps shy-wild?—judgments at once. With his great fists clenched, he rumbled through clenched teeth: "I'm just not smart enough as I am to figure this out. I have to try something else first. But you've helped enough, Linda and Ted. Go home. Maybe that would be as well for you too, Cara."

Cara Webber ignored her man's last suggestion.

"Yes—I can drive the pair of you to the settlement, where you could get a bush pilot to fly you out. We'd best do it first thing tomorrow. Have a good rest today, cuz. The camper might be more comfortable—turn on the propane heater. Try to knock that cold you've got—or whatever it is."

Linda Abbott started some protest: "But . . ."

Destin took her arm and drew her away. It wouldn't be any good to further reiterate points that could only lead to anger.

He contained his compulsion to cough until they got inside the camper. Then he had a real gut-buster spasm. Doggoned bronchitis! Infections were supposedly rare wherever there weren't many people to be exposed to. He must have picked up the bug when he'd been to the settlement with Cara for supplies. Besides, his vitality had been eroding somewhat for quite a while. Linda's, too—though less so. They had been bitten by black flies and mosquito swarms, in spite of repellants—thank whatever Powers that the insects were frozen out now! Also Linda and he were poorly attuned temperamentally for any extended stay in the wilderness. Worst of all, they were afflicted by a creeping conviction of personal futility.

Ted took another swig of cough suppressant but didn't add an antibiotic—likely he'd overdone that already; the old adage was that any physician who treated himself was a fool.

He plopped down on the bunk that Linda folded out for him. She sat on its edge.

"Ted . . ."

"Shh—h!" he urged lightly. "Who's arguing anything now, sweets? Let's you and I just float free and easy and detached from any rush for a bit, and just drift. Maybe we'll even get a more complete slant on the whole situation. Mind if I start?"

"Well—okay, Teddy." She seemed to join his rambling mood.

"We aren't much good around here anymore, are we, Lind?" he said ruefully. "Just doing household chores, fishing, wandering in the woods, or listening to the radio for signs that we're still being hunted, though they never come. Some TV to watch, here in the camper—though we have to conserve its power. And what's the

point in taking Lance's vital parameters now? It irks him. We've found a relationship between, for instance, his varying brain-wave forms and whatever he's doing inside himself; but our little monitor isn't sophisticated enough to carry our research any further. As for taking notes—till recently, even when he had to hunt for words, he always tried to explain in detail. But in the last week he's gotten more laconic in answering our questions. So what's the use? Hey, though. Since we've got time, let's skim through some of our more interesting entries. Where's our current notebook?"

"Here," Linda said, pulling it out of a thigh pocket of her rough-country coverall.

Destin swung his feet to the floor, and Linda and he sat with their heads together, flipping pages. They came to an entry in his angular script:

Sept. 1. Lance had science books opened and spread out on the table in the camper again today: Showing an evolutionary, comparative skeletal picturing—fish, dinosaur, bird, ape, Australopithecine, Modern Man. A drawstring of the dual-spiral molecular structure of the genes of heredity. Representations of atoms and their structures, and how everything is linked together to form molecules. Math and chemical formulas. Drawings showing electron stasis and flow in electronics.

Lance is certainly far more intimately aware than Linda and I are that a tremendous amount of scientific truth has to come together in biology just for it to live. Obviously so, since any living creature is a natural, chemical machine. Many vital processes—nerve action for instance—are intricately involved with electricity. Precise math has its place too, since live tissues have to deal with vast numbers and their interrelationships and exact, though constantly changing, atom counts.

Still, Lance's fascination with basic texts puzzled

us. With his remarkable insights into raw reality, why did he bother with them so much? So we asked him again if he was really learning anything from those common books?

"Some," he reiterated patiently. "Terms—what to call things." Then he went on to repeat that it wasn't so much learning but getting what was printed coordinated with the clearer, more complete knowledge direct from his body, and thus understanding the ordinary human concepts better—when, in wordless, inner communication, he hadn't needed such stuff before.

Yes—twisting the clumsy though mostly accurate book thoughts around to fit a simpler or more complex reality presents problems for him, too. But it is nothing like as difficult as it is for us to grasp his view, since we haven't experienced perceptions sufficiently like what he has. Though he has tried harder to explain to Cara, she doesn't do much better.

We thought Lance looked as though he wanted us to leave him alone then. He had shifted his attention to a star chart, and to a schematic of a spaceship's propulsion system, as if we weren't there.

But Linda asked, "Is even space flight within the range of your Body's knowledge?"

His attention to us came sharply back. "Why not?" he demanded. "Any longing, in beasts or people, is a bio-signal—a drive—extending ahead into Time. This includes a longing for distance—even interstellar distance. And much of the needed technology—chemical, ionic, subatomic, and time spatial, are embedded in the vital processes of flesh for any Mind, intimate enough with its Body, to locate and use. A Natural course."

"But a spaceship isn't natural!" I protested. "It's a device!"

"You believe that, Ted?" Lance challenged.

“When a Natural human Body has a Natural Mind? *Then the Natural Mind becomes merely a tool of Nature in whatever it invents—doesn’t it?* So shouldn’t houses, cars, computers, spacecraft—any artifact—necessarily be considered Natural phenomena too?” Lance sank back into his studies, and we left him.

When Destin and Abbott had skimmed through and relived this entry, Linda Abbott turned several pages.

“Here’s the bit I like best, Ted,” she offered, **“though I wrote it up myself. Even more strange and charming—if those are the right adjectives.”** The writing was in her precise, rounded hand:

September 16. All four of us were admiring the fiery sunset. Tolliver seemed withdrawn—halfway Inside, and almost sullen. Suddenly, though, he began to drawl out something startling, which I’ll try to quote verbatim, as far as my memory allows:

“I’ve been getting this a little for quite a while—very dimly. Ancestral memory, from my Body. There was somebody like me, once. Almost another self. I can’t match my Time sense with the history-book scale very well. Sixty thousand years ago? Glacial ice along ocean beaches. A small tribe of Shaggy Folk, very primitive. He was born among them, with my gift. From the middle of a weak, warped, despised differentness—by a balancing of hate, love, fear, awe, and chance—he survived to become strong and rule. He was a firm and hard ruler, benefiting the tribe. But he felt alone, and he believed he could accomplish far more. He drove the tribe into doing some wild, new thing, which he was sure would help them all. Only he miscalculated somewhere. Most of them died—froze. Later, feeling depressed and a total failure, he swam out into Mother Ocean, canceling all he

was. Still, it seems, the loss may not have been complete. As if there was a slow, important change. I get none of this very clearly, though I wish I could. It might be useful now."

This recounting of Tolliver's thoughts, as Linda had written them, ended there. She and Destin hardly read the words. A glance was enough to remind them of their content. Nor did she turn to the next page, where she had made her comments. Tolliver had avoided questioning, saying that he knew no more.

"A legend, sort of—hey?" Destin now remarked, trying for humor.

"So where are you and I right now, Ted? The immediate question."

"Still right at the center of a bigger and bigger unknown and uncertainty. But with any luck, bugging out tomorrow. To face whatever unpleasantness there'll be at home. I hate to let go—I feel split—sympathetic to Lance for his worry about how to be accepted in the public world, yet scared I'm running away from where disaster might start—failing to continue keeping watch—since we still don't truly know him. But we've become pretty useless. What real good can we do—either way—staying? He's surely able enough for this region. And as for Cara . . . Here, those two outclass us. Though at home we could be useful. You want to leave too, don't you, Lind?"

"Yes! Especially since you're sick, Ted. But I don't like to quit, either. Though his significance frightens me, I'm still for Tolliver all the way. He's earnest, honest, well-intentioned. There can't be much mistake about that. Yet he has said things that bother me a good deal now that I think about them."

"What?"

"That he's not smart enough as he is. That he has to try something else—before he goes back. While sounding desperate, too. When you realize that he has been

partly successful at growing wings, what does that suggest? Unless my imagination is overactive."

"Finish the thought, Linda. I'm listening."

"Okay. Does he mean to *improve—tamper with—his brain*? It's a kind of paradox—a mind monkeying with its own base. Could he try such a stunt without destroying himself or changing his whole character so that no friend could recognize him?"

Destin's snort almost started another coughing fit. "Funny, Lind—that's how I get it too," he said. "But we're out of our depth. Whatever he may try in such a direction in the near future, he'll know what he's doing a lot better than we can. Calculated risk—his and ours. Right now I think we should concentrate on ourselves. I suppose I should sleep awhile."

"Right, Teddy. The latest weather report suggests a bright, cold day tomorrow. If the damp, low-pressure system from the south stays west, and doesn't veer to meet the cold-front . . . Well—rest . . ."

She kissed him lightly, and left.

Destin did sleep awhile. He awoke in the late afternoon, feeling lousier than before, his chest getting tight. It seemed hot inside the camper. He didn't want to keep using up the heater's propane. He went to the shack, to his regular bunk near the fireplace. Linda was there, gathering his and her sketchy baggage together. Tolliver wasn't around.

Linda was urging Cara again: "You should go back with us—as Lance himself suggests. I don't like the idea of your staying here through the winter—considering."

"Ah—come on—don't be soapy-sentimental, Lind," Cara Webber growled. "I know this country, and my man. Besides, you and I haven't been all that friendly before now. You and cuz just might not be going anyplace either. Worry about that, instead."

Destin dozed miserably for a few minutes, then got up to go outside for a hard spasm of coughing. The sun had sunk into murk and curls of rosy wool. It couldn't

be very cold for around here, yet—only raw. But he quaked and tottered back to his bunk, to huddle, shivering, hot and chilled to the bone simultaneously, under the covers. He lost himself in confused consciousness fogs after that—Linda's hands touching him—jabbing him with a needle—more antibiotic. Somewhere in the long night of wandering, homeless among smeared physical and mental impressions, he seemed to hear the whispery kitten-paw sounds of great snowflakes on the shack's roof. But the rising wind broke the quiet, and the falling and blowing snow hissed, and the cold plunged. . . .

At first leaden light of morning, Destin heard Cara Webber state: "Looks like I'm not driving anybody to any settlement today."

CHAPTER 12

Destin lapsed into misery-blunting stupor. Later, in a brief lucid moment, he heard a clatter, fairly close. A patrolling helicopter? Destin wanted to shout, but could not. It seemed that Linda got past the snow-obstructed door to wave, but was too late. Was it the persistent need for secrecy that had inhibited Tolliver and Cara? Well—maybe they were right, Destin thought. Then, sourly, he considered those coinciding circumstances that often pile up to plague people and block what they intend to do. The damnable perversity of things! Like now—Linda and he meaning to leave. So, a pre-winter storm, and his stupid relapse.

These wry ruminations were Destin's last bits of lucidity in his illness. He felt himself spinning on a frosted spit over red roasting coals, sledgehammers thudding unevenly inside his skull, iron bands tightening around his chest. Breathing was an ordeal. So his

struggling body took pity on his mind and blacked it out.

At about noon the snowfall and wind resumed in earnest. While Lance and Cara built up the fire in the fireplace, Linda kept track of Destin's vital parameters with the monitor. Physical illnesses were far from her specialty, but anybody could see how congested his lungs were. Besides, the bird-quick beat of his heart was staggering toward fibrillation. Lacking facilities for making lab tests, she had to fall back on guesswork. Feeling bitterly inadequate, she tried another broad-spectrum antibiotic, antiviral combination on him. Plus a stimulant.

Night fell, with the blizzard hissing softly, mightily over the forest. It found the little chinks that they hadn't located and plugged in the shack walls; miniature, convoluted snowdrifts formed in corners. Snow melted, sizzling, in the drafty fireplace chimney; mostly there was only the ruddy firelight, because the lamp's battery charge had to be hoarded. When Lance pulled the door open for a moment to grab up an armful of cut firewood from just outside, the blackness there changed to an inward-swishing rush of white darkness and frigid wind. No help could get through that!

Dr. Abbott, in love with her patient, exhausted and unwell herself and feeling utterly helpless, was having a terrible night. And what in bloody hell were she and poor Ted—noble fool!—doing up here in this subarctic region, where they couldn't adapt in the first place? She resented Cara's bluntly practical solicitudes, bringing her hot coffee which she didn't want, but drank greedily anyhow. Cara scarcely seemed to mind the storm itself; she was used to such things.

That huge, black-bearded man, resembling a lumberjack in his rough attire—he, the mutant, the changeling, standing around useless, his wolf eyes solemn—he was the cause of all the disarrangement and misfortunes! Though Linda had no strength left to hate him, she felt

no sympathy. As firelight flickered redly on his eyeballs, she wondered how she could ever have considered this alien being a friend.

As midnight passed, Ted's indications became desperate. Linda Abbott's professional self—detached from her love-inspired fears—knew that unless Ted Destin was somehow helped soon, he would die.

"We should have oxygen for him, Cara," she said suddenly. "But even then . . . Look—somebody has got to get out to the camper—the radio transmitter—to send a distress call. Though, even if assistance could reach us . . . Still, we have to try!"

Her words had fumbled out. With some lost fragment of her old, uninvolved intellectual cynicism, she thought—classical melodrama? A shock that it must sometimes be real? Anguishedly aware of Ted's struggling gasps for breath, she looked at Cara, who held a cup of coffee from which she had been sipping. But Cara nodded to Tolliver.

"Your show, I think, Lance," she said. "Tell Lind."

He came forward almost hesitantly and touched Destin's burning cheeks then the center of his chest with the full flat of his palm. He cocked his great head, as if in some way to listen.

"Calling would be a waste," he gruffed at last. "But I can try a trick, Linda. I didn't want to. It's uncertain. An experiment. It'll be the first time for me, in just this way. Get your hypodermic. No—don't squander any seconds sterilizing it—that won't matter. Draw it about a quarter full of blood from him."

Dr. Linda Abbott found herself obeying.

"Now shoot it into me."

"Where?" she asked vaguely.

"Where?" Tolliver growled with impatience. "Anywhere. How about the usual place—my butt?" He dropped his corduroys and shorts.

"No blood-type matching?"

"It doesn't make any difference—I'll take care of

that," he stated coldly. "Just do it. Or I will myself."

She obeyed.

"Give me about half an hour," he said. "Lab procedure—sort of."

He went to his bunk and sat down. His eyes glazed, then closed. Sweat ran down his reddened forehead from the scalp under his thick hair and into his black beard. She knew his consciousness was away in that intra-bodily world of his. Cara sat beside him and steadied his swaying shoulders.

Linda Abbott felt numb. She thought of witchcraft. That wasn't the right term; still, there seemed to be ritual similarities. She hoped for, and expected, nothing. She blinked back tears. Yet, as her all-but-unconscious Ted fought audibly and horribly for air, she clutched his fingers, as if by the effort of willing and wishing she could help him breathe. She knew her toes were curled within her boots with the strain of trying.

At last, Tolliver's hugeness was beside her once more, his long, massive arm, with the weird, blue-gray fringing that was part of it, presented for what he told her to do next:

"My blood—fill up your syringe!" His speech was a bit slurred from the daze of where his wits had just been. "Shoot all of it into a vein inside his elbow. Now refill the syringe—all the way! For his other arm. Now the same—another time—both arms. Then we'll wait a quarter hour and repeat."

The trick didn't seem to work at all. Then it appeared to operate in reverse, as if a venom had been administered. Destin writhed, clutched at his throat and chest, couldn't seem to gasp anymore, half rose from his bunk as in a strangling death spasm more terrible than the storm.

If Linda hadn't been so intent on trying to assist Ted, and not so physically and spiritually worn out, she was sure she would have hurled herself, clawing and screaming, at Tolliver, the demon. That was a wrong, supersti-

tious word; but she remembered seeing those thickened, curved, and somewhat pointed fingernails again, while she had drawn his blood. Now he stood stonily apart.

Destin continued to strain in his seizure. Till he achieved one croaking, terrible cough. A massive wad of bloody phlegm jetted from his mouth. He sank back, able to get a little air. But seconds later he was coughing horribly again.

Near dawn, he dropped into sleep that was more like coma. His fever plummeted, as at the approach of death. His heartbeat, as displayed by the monitor, was a tenuous but now even wave. Reassured somewhat, Linda Abbott fell asleep, kneeling on the floor, her head on her arms, which were crossed on the edge of his bunk.

Nobody had said very much for hours. Cara also slept. Tolliver stoked up the fire. Once he tilted his head, as if to listen to the slightly lessened blizzard, or to something beyond it. Then he put on the heavy parka that Cara had bought him. After that, he half dozed.

CHAPTER 13

Linda awoke to dismal daylight filtering through the frost-rimed window. Was it almost noon? She had dreamed that hundreds of men had rescued them. But now, that joy was untrue. Her attention leapt to Ted. His breath still rasped, yet it was quite regular. Just then, she would have liked to be a believer, humbly thanking some vast, amorphous presence for Ted's improvement.

Tolliver spoke from close behind her shoulder, his tone, curiously, making her think of some large, tired bird:

"Yes, Lind. I felt your hating me—when I was in pain for him too. You and he were the friends who gave me my chance. I was uncertain that what I did last night would work, but I tried hard. Now I'm sure he'll be all right."

At first, Linda warmed to these earnest remarks.

Then, because of the still frayed state of her nerves, they began to strike her all wrong. She had the disturbing thought that Tolliver could sense her feelings far better than any normal person. It was an invasion of herself—a kind of rape—by a distorted fiend. It was—obscene!

Next it seemed that all she wanted to do was weep—find that ordinary, permissible relief. It didn't work either. The conditioned poise of her profession wouldn't grant her even this much.

Cara came to her and hugged her like a sister.

"Yes—please, Car—but thanks," Dr. Linda Abbott heard herself say calmly. "I'm still tacked together."

The snowfall had stopped. The sky turned pearl color, as if it would clear. But, in spite of the fire, the wind bit through the shack with fangs of deep-cold air. Far off, a wolf howled.

Destin roused briefly, touched Linda's hand, smiled a little, then croaked out a few phrases, though not to her:

"Thank you, Lance. Sometimes I was slightly aware. Enough to guess now what you accomplished. Controlled, intra-bodily analysis of someone else's sickness. And the devising there of a specific treatment. The first trial of what you might do widely. The start of a tremendous leap in all sciences."

Destin was totally lucid. Linda brought him the water he asked for. But after drinking, he slipped back into sleep.

There were feeble glimpses of the low, ice-hazed sun. Talk was suppressed. Linda was still far too tired for much joy. She dozed intermittently, as did Cara. Neither of them had any notion of how close they were to a shift in events. That their location was now pinpointed, that another encampment was only a few kilometers away. That the unfavorable weather, by its false assurances, offered an ideal opportunity for a surprise approach and a quick ending.

Tolliver couldn't have had much of an idea either.

Except, perhaps, for when he sensed once a small electromagnetic disturbance as of the ignition system of some vehicle?

Explosive developments came when the brief daylight had begun to wane. The start was as sudden and shattering to Linda Abbott as any inventive simile could have described. Tolliver's rising to his feet before that—he had kept his parka on—seemed no part of it.

Yet it began with his furious burst of motion. He catapulted to the door, unlatched it in a blur that was like sleight of hand, dashed out, and rocketed away into the renewed storm and the forest, as nothing human had ever been able to do. Even Cara had not found time to cry out.

A few heart beats later, there were pops of dart guns, and the crash and whistle of high-powered rifle shots, mixed with the shouts of men engaged in a chase.

Linda and Cara saw only one man, with his face mask pulled up; a bearish but tired figure with snow in his beard, his brows, and on his eyelashes. He was here in the shack, with a weapon—only a tranquilizer dart gun, though Linda hardly realized this—held at the ready, pointed toward them.

Linda didn't move. Cara was quicker by nature. Besides, unlike Linda, she had never seen this person before.

"Hey—what in hell are you trying to do, mister?" she snapped. "Damned old fool!" She had grabbed up her rifle from a corner.

Linda's eyes groped. Something familiar here, behind all the inconceivable incongruities. Way back in her memory—in another, calmer, warmer, far different setting.

"It couldn't be," she quavered. "Dr. Archmere?"

"Hello, Dr. Abbott . . . Linda."

There was no anger or accusation in his tone. None.

Instead, an embarrassment. Even warmth.

Nobody had shut the outside door. Snow and wind were blowing into the shack. No one seemed to notice.

Destin spoke up in a scratchy croak:

"Dr. Archmere . . . Without Tolliver's very unique therapy, I'd be a corpse. Now, if your helpers have—"

From somewhere deep in the woods, more rifle shots cracked and echoed.

Archmere's head jerked toward the door. But Cara didn't need this diversion. And it was still too early in her pregnancy for her physical skills to be much affected. Her arms made quick, sidewise movements. Her rifle butt sent Archmere's dart gun clattering to the floor. Then, with the edge of one free hand, she chopped at him expertly. As he toppled, she kicked him in the crotch, and then stood astride him, looking coldly down at his broad, anguished face.

"I told them no bullets!" he gasped. "It should have been too quick for anybody to get hurt!"

"If he is hurt, or worse, you soft, stupid old scum, I won't just kill you," she hissed at him, "I'll smash you into fox bait!"

She forebore to ram her poised boot heel into Archmere's face. Instead, she kicked him hard in the belly. Then she ran out into the storm, firing shots and yelling, to interrupt any further, overly aggressive action.

After a minute, Archmere got up and, though he groaned with pain, followed her. Destin would have tried to join the search too, except that Linda stopped him.

"It wouldn't help, Teddy," she said.

Archmere, by then well into the woods, though his battered insides still gave him agony, lunged on toward a greater importance. He remembered that great, rushing, fleeing figure he'd glimpsed only minutes ago, just as everything began to get out of hand. Could that have been the same Tolliver—the Mad Boy—the tall, skinny,

still slightly deformed youth he had seen twice, briefly, just months ago? Yes—he knew—had known—that it had to be! The bio-miracle he had pursued with such trouble-laden doggedness! But now his uneven view of all related matters shifted again. More than guilt was on him. With a deep wrench of his basic compassion, he thought of gut-shot bears, moose, tigers, leopards. This would be infinitely worse, if it was so!

Some of Tolliver's trail was easy to follow, even for him, an amateur. Those huge, leaping strides. But the falling, drifting snow was hiding the marks fast. Still, Archmere was guided by the shouts and yells up ahead.

He came to a patch of blood, already almost whited out. He crouched down and brushed at it with his mittens. The color had turned chalk red from freezing. But as if the stuff were precious—containing secrets to be examined lovingly in the laboratory, as it no doubt did—he threw away the contents of a plastic aspirin tube from his thigh pouch and scooped up some of the blood. Then he slogged and wheezed his way onward until he had to stop, worn out. The dusk thickened as he waited.

For a while he heard no voices; then they came again, nearer, through the wind-rustle. So he shouted to give his location.

One of his men came to him.

"This guy—this what-you-wanna-call-um—got away, Doctor," he said. "He was too fast—like a devil! We came to the big stream from the lake—still plenty water running, but very skinny ice. I think, going so quick, he got across, to more trees. But not us—oh no! Too late, too dark, weather no good. Maybe tomorrow. You said too much we gotta catch. So I think Meynard—that crazy one!—what do you say—'winged'—this devil-guy right away."

"Yes—obviously," Archmere stated. "Confound you all—I told you!

Then he stopped his tirade, overwhelmed by the emptiness of scoldings and rage.

Then Cara Webber, returning too from the unsuccessful attempt to reach her mate, was upon him, her rifle muzzle pointed straight at his middle.

"Are you going to shoot me, lady?" Archmere inquired with a no-longer-caring blandness. "There's a small chance it might help you feel better."

The hatred that had hardened Cara Webber's face crumpled. Then, because of the strain she had been under, she showed a very uncharacteristic weakness: she fainted.

Archmere cradled her in his arms as she sagged. He was very gentle. Though this noted specialist might occasionally act like an egocentric idiot, and be out of his depth in some areas of practicality, he lacked, even more, the qualities of a villain.

Regaining her senses back in the shack, Cara shouted out her fears, angers, and determinations:

"Lance isn't immune to dying! Wounded, and in this weather, he can't be left all alone out there through the night! I've got to go looking for him, even if nobody else will! If you all leave, I'll still stay to find him! I've got my camper."

"None of that is very reasonable, Cara," Ted Destin pointed out. "Linda has radioed the Canadian rescue forces. If anybody can find Lance, they can. Also, we know he's pretty rugged. Besides, we should be back in civilization, doing a little cautious advance publicity—a mild preconditioning—so the benefits he can provide won't be too big a jolt."

By then, Cara had regained most of her own cool control. It had injured her somewhat when her man had hinted to her privately, several days ago, that it might be best if he worked and wandered alone for a while. Well—so be it. Separations in life mattered, but never

too much. Truly meaningful links were never quite lost. As for events done and unchangeable, she had a fatalist's acceptance.

So she listened with secret and almost amused patience while Dr. Reginald Archmere also tried to persuade her toward views about which she was already convinced, as he attempted to explain his actions:

"The blunders were all mine, Ms. Webber. I think Lance Tolliver ran because I didn't find a way to assure him I meant no harm. Unfitted to the north woods as I am, I followed him here because of the wonder he is. We know that what Dr. Destin says is right. It seems clear, too, that Lance is very tough indeed. So we believe in him, and relax. Soon we will be doing the very best we can for him—I have so much to make up for. But the real need is that nothing be spoiled! And first you must refresh yourself. Certainly you are very tired. Very, very sleepy . . ."

The old coot's guilt-and-tension raddled face showed no sign of a grudge for her kicks, threats, and invective against him—only a humble concern. Almost reluctantly, she relinquished most of her anger. Pretending, she closed her eyes. She had not only faith in Lance, but knowledge. Her bunk felt quite comfortable . . .

Just after wan daybreak, a police helicopter came to take Webber, Destin, Abbott, and Archmere away. Archmere's men, their wages collected, had tramped the several miles to dig out their snowbound vehicle. Also, no doubt, to avoid involvement in a delicate situation.

To the four, the Canadians were polite but not very friendly. More seriously than having entered the country irregularly, Destin and Abbott were wanted in the States for questioning about the escape of a murder suspect. Further, all four were part of the cause for a costly and troublesome search-and-rescue mission—in police eyes, the product of illegal and reckless damn-foolishness. Choppers were scanning the region; men with dogs were slogging through the forest and explor-

ing the banks of the now firmly frozen stream for signs of a wounded fugitive who, after a frigid night, was surely a congealed, snow-buried corpse for wolves to dig up and eat. The dogs had found nothing.

The survivors were taken to a Canadian city, and thence, after negotiations, to a Stateside one. A day of bleak procedures followed, after which the quartet was lodged in a small house in New York City, borrowed from friends of Archmere's who were presently in Australia.

Charges of aiding and abetting the escape of a dangerous person wanted for double murder had been lodged against Destin and Abbott. Under the legal advisement which Archmere had obtained for them, they had answered some questions truthfully though incompletely, and had fifted-out on others. The causes for evasion seemed morally right even to Linda Abbott; and Archmere had clearly set aside his rigid regard for rules.

The two young doctors had been instructed not to leave their declared address without permission; bail was posted pending further action and/or developments; their psychiatric careers were clouded, but they were at least at liberty.

When Archmere returned from a brief excursion to Spruce Crest, he brought Dr. Rolf Hoffmann with him. The group, now numbering five persons fully informed about Tolliver's potential, gathered one morning in the living room of the house. Upstairs, there was a small medical lab which had just been used. Archmere fed the one microfiche of freshly taken visuals into the viewer.

Five pairs of eyes studied the images avidly. Though perhaps Cara Webber's tight-lipped though wondering scrutiny was a bit more intense than those of the others.

"It's a little soon for firm boy-or-girl divination, without extensive chromosomal testing," Dr. Hoffmann pronounced. "But otherwise a healthy, well-formed embryo. No gross asymmetries. That much

you've got, Cara. My hearty congratulations!"

Gnomish little Hoffmann allowed himself the ghost of a smile.

Cara grinned happily. But her expression sobered at once.

"As the mother, I'm tickled to hear that much, Doctor," she said. "So thanks. Genderwise, I'll take what I get. But there's still that big, scary question. So do you see anything else? You're the best one here to judge."

Now Hoffmann permitted his chilly, unknown-haunted excitement to show on his face.

"I'm still looking," he answered her as he turned the viewer's control dial back through the several visuals again. "Numbers three and four appear to have something. Development isn't advanced enough for certainty. Nobody would pay this any attention without having had previous reason to suspect. Notice, though, the slightest flattening and rippled, symmetrical shadowing of the arm buds? It almost suggests that your Lance contrived to have his attempt to grow wings for himself carry over genetically to his child."

The sudden silence in the room was more emphatic than a shout could have been. But a shout would have failed as a fitting expression for the content of this particularly significant moment.

"If wings, what besides?" Linda Abbott asked at last, almost rhetorically. "And does it change anything that we've already decided?"

Everybody else looked at Cara for hints of any modified thoughts she might have. But her attention lingered on Hoffmann questioningly.

Genially, he spread his hands, palms upward.

"I'm now a pledged, yet still nonvoting, member of this group, Cara," he told her. "A personal preference. Some of these problems are too complex and too full of imponderables for me to feel wholly right about any opinions I might have. That applies to any changes of view which this fresh and clearer data may entail,

though I'll go along with whatever else you others may decide."

"We'd better keep very still about this reemphasized suspicion for a while, I think," Archmere drawled. "Though it might be quite a problem to handle later—if it turns out to be true and becomes generally known. Could there already be a second generation of a new species of *Homo Sapiens*? To keep thinking of Tolliver as a psychological super-bomb—to be handled very, very carefully—while praying."

Under his awed tone, Archmere sounded considerably like his old, self-assured, somewhat pompous self. After an interlude of gloomy legal and other more ordinary difficulties to be accommodated to, events were beginning to move toward positive action about what was most important, and it was Archmere who had accomplished most of the change.

"The strategy we've discussed stands, then," Destin stated with a measure of personal pride, for the idea had originated with him. "We start creating what will seem like another myth, which people will talk and kid about but not take too seriously. Thus we hope to get them ready to accept the hard facts with less of a jolt, when and if the time comes."

Linda Abbott nodded agreement.

"You may as well start phoning the media folks you contacted about the Tolliver mystery, Dr. Archmere," Cara Webber said.

CHAPTER 14

Cara gave the first interview.

A young newsman, Mel Barland, whom Archmere called to the house, was almost unknown in his field; this was part of the low-key strategy of the group; any name commentator would have drawn far too much attention.

Cara met Barland at the door, apologized for the absence of her associates, who, she explained, were all out attending to various matters—which was true, though their absence was also strategic. She offered him refreshments, which he declined politely.

Sitting with her in the living room, Barland gushed about the Tolliver story, so far made public only as a rather second-rate item:

“A real puzzler, Ms. Webber. Two psychiatrists help a supposedly homicidal incompetent to run away, deep into Canada. Then you, a well-known naturalist, become involved. Then another psychiatrist, very promi-

ment. Finally, this Tolliver, though wounded, escapes again, into the snow. And vanishes—so far without a trace.”

“He is—or was—a very remarkable fellow,” Cara declared.

Barland dared to be direct:

“You were in love with him, Ms. Webber?”

Cara was maintaining an uncharacteristic, straight-faced poise.

“Of course. I still am.”

The implication that Lance might no longer be alive wrenched at her opposed conviction more than she would have liked, though she played up to the possibility as if she were being frank.

“If he died, it must have been soon after his dash into the forest,” she added, yet offered no explanation of this thought. “But you are here to learn more about him. I think—some pictures . . .”

“What are those things along his arms?” Barland queried a minute later.

“Whatever you make of them,” she answered a little sadly, as if she would not compound his doubts by insisting that they were anything more—or less—than what he could see and believe.

Subsequently, though she was boastful of Tolliver’s prowess and gentleness, she continued to be vague in her responses to many of Barland’s questions. However, after the hour she allowed him, he seemed fairly well satisfied.

He left, not only with his immediate recordings of her, taken with the small audio-visual camera he had brought along, but with several still photos she had provided. They were far from her best, and none were particularly good: Tolliver swimming mightily—at least she had insisted that the head, showing rather far off, in a churned-up plume of spray, was his. Tolliver with part of both rudimentary wings showing. A viewer could easily see what they were intended to be, and as easily

suspect that they were fakes—though doubt this a bit disturbingly, too. Tolliver fully clad for the north, huge and black-bearded, and with one lengthened fifth-finger fuzzily displayed, on a hand otherwise thrust into a pocket.

If Mel Barland didn't depart a convinced believer—if he suspected that the serious naturalist, Cara Webber, had gone in for a sensational, attention-seeking put-on, at least he knew he had material that would make a good three-minute imagination-teaser-type TV presentation that would go over very well with certain audiences. His interview with Cara Webber was soon shown.

Some people paid it sharp, excited attention. More laughed about those innocent ones. More still, slow to be lifted above preoccupation with their daily routines—hopefully as trouble-free as possible—scarcely noticed—yet . . . But gradually, another topical discussion fad was started.

Meanwhile, in various forms, to be viewed, listened to, or read about in greater depth, other, somewhat connected and more informative items began to appear. Bylines—and name and event linkages of other names—Abbott, Archmere, Destin, and even Hoffmann—to Webber, and ultimately to Tolliver—were not always detected at first. After that initial interview, Cara Webber avoided public contact as much as she could. But her associates carried on the quiet spreading of related scientific information.

There were articles and TV bits about the still restricted field of genetic engineering, and its likenesses to natural—even radical—mutation, from whatever cause, man-made or cosmic. Others pointed out the extensive knowledge—the broad-band, *natural* technology—contained in even the metabolism of the simpler organisms, and speculated about persons who could tap—or even control—it in themselves. Everyone had *some* ability toward bodily insight and biofeedback, some more than others. So a full development of these capabilities was

not impossible. And if it *did* happen? All areas of science might jump forward very swiftly—not only the medical and organic, but others, too. Knowledge of molecular structuring, even subatomics, space-time mathematics, the dynamics of the universe. Vast benefits—somewhat jolting at the start, perhaps, but only emotionally. So why should anyone fear so much good? The whole idea, though by no means impossible, still remained a what-if situation, of course. But something to speculate about. Wouldn't it be a fine adventure?

All such revelations, fact and apparent fancy, constituted a slow-moving, coordinated scheme to present a very serious matter lightly, on the theory that better comprehension would win calmer acceptance, when the truth hit—if Tolliver still lived, and if he reappeared.

Archmere, and occasionally Hoffmann, Ted Destin, and Linda Abbott, assumed the roles of public contact. It brought Destin and Abbott welcome remuneration, compensating for their loss of professional status and their still unresolved difficulties with the law.

Yet even the cautious efforts to inform, without informing too much, produced questions which were hard to evade as popular interest grew and a light topic became heavier—closer to stress. The Tolliver myth was taking on more solid substance.

"Have we overplayed the game, Ted?" Linda asked while she and Destin were taking a winter walk near the suburban house where the group was quartered. "Matters are getting sort of sticky. But if we had done any less, we would hardly have been saying anything helpful at all. As the weeks drag on, it seems to me too that we five are tautening up. Cara particularly—she snaps at Archmere—no sign of Lance yet, so, again, his fault. Can't blame her—besides her gestation nerves! Things are looking good in that department—by the new visuals—if we know what's *good*, that is. Wings—flyable or not, are for sure! Though I keep wondering, Ted, where will the payoff of it all be? Lance might not

turn up, but there'll still be his child. And about our trying to influence popular attitudes toward easier acceptance, are we stirring up trouble prematurely instead? Or are we just banging our heads against the wind?"

Her cheerfully, whimsically plaintive tone and phrasing took hold of Destin's matching mood. He felt very close to her just then.

"It astonishes me how alike you and I sometimes are, Lind," he chuckled in an effort toward levity. "That's good and bad—good, right now, I think. 'Banging our heads against the wind?' Or more like against an immense mass of population—not quite like individual people at all—that in the end will obey some primal law that pertains to such bulky phenomena, regardless of what puny squeakings we may happen to make. So at least we can go on with our efforts without being too concerned that we are doing it all wrong."

Destin had thoughts which he kept to himself. He knew that if not for the mutant's radical approach to medicine, he himself would no longer exist. Yet, for much more than this gratitude, plus a brotherly warmth, Destin hoped that Tolliver still lived.

Even so, Destin experienced an infrequent and momentary vagary again: that the world would be a simpler, less trying place if Tolliver *had* perished—or *would* perish—in the subarctic winter. Shame! But, yes—a man could fear what he loved.

CHAPTER 15

Already shot through the left lung, he expected them to finish him in the next instant. If they got his head squarely—stopped the main action of his controlling consciousness . . . That might be right. He was an unbelonging mistake who had been causing much trouble to his only friends. He had felt, from the wisdom in his flesh, that he would bring turmoil and grief to the yet unknowing billions in the far outside—if what he was was allowed to expand along its full course. Unless . . .

However, the good or bad of it was still unproven. He had to follow events through further—if he could—completing the natural test—to survival and continuance, or erasure. He was glad to be acting alone at last. This was his most comfortable state—untrammelled by considerations for others.

He kept applying his manic motor-nerve drive. It resembled determination but went beyond it. His protesting but still cooperative body complied. He might kill it like that—and himself. But to die thus was prefer-

able to being killed by outside agencies, wasn't it?

His powerful legs plunged and pistoned onward through critical seconds. More bullets gusted past but didn't touch him. His attention sank inward a little. He had to breathe to fuel his numbing, struggling muscles, and, to breathe effectively, he had to stop the flow of blood that was drowning his left lung. Yes—he "looked" into the teeming, emergency-stricken micro-universe of trillions of cells that were his body and located the points of broken function quicker than could have happened in the regular, less sensate way of flesh, and by parallel, deeper means and comprehensions, he caused tissues to tighten and halt the flood. Once, he hawked up and spat out a great mass of obstructing gore; then he continued his effort to escape. The absorption of blood clots and of bone splinters chipped from a rib in his lung he could organize in improved form during the next few minutes—if he could spare the attention and wasn't further damaged.

He got to the stream, and raced light-footed across it, the skin ice creaking and sagging under his great weight. The cold water, of itself, wouldn't have hurt him had he broken through. Yet he would have been slowed down, and another bullet might have hit him. As matters were, the thinly frozen river made an excellent barrier against further pursuit.

His Body screamed at him silently, even through his conscious suppression of most of the pain. Though it threatened to wrest control from him, he continued on at high speed into the woods on the opposite bank for another hour before he stopped to rest. Then, with his pupils dilated to improve his night vision, he hurried on for two more hours, slumping down at last in the deepening snow.

There he remained through the night, and on into the clearing day. He was huddled to shrink his bodily radiating surface, and thus reduce tissue-fuel consumption, while the drift that buried him sheltered and kept him hidden.

Mostly he dozed or slept, but with his senses alert. Once his hyper-keen ears picked up the baying of hounds, but from many kilometers behind him. The sound faded and did not return. Then he let his awareness move again, like an observant guardian, through the swarming, singing-sort-of, roaring-sort-of, flashing-sort-of tumults within his tissues, to be sure that everything there was mending as well as could be expected. His temperature was up, but that was a proper part of purifying and healing processes. He made occasional, minor readjustments.

He thought of his friends, Ted and Linda, and more particularly of Cara, his love—for herself, and then for the Second Step she was developing. For the latter, even his Body seemed to chirp at him with tender bio-approval. With those others, matters would probably be okay for a while now.

So he could concentrate on his own next options. He could bury himself in some deep rock chink, cover the entrance with stones and leaves, reduce his breathing, heart rate, and temperature—hibernate as some animals did. With time for more study, he might even learn how to let his tissues freeze almost solid, with prearranged revival.

But no—he shouldn't waste the winter months like that. Not with dangerous circumstances building up and crowding him. Much better to remain active and to prepare himself further for whatever might come. He had learned much about this Outer World but certainly could use more experience. At least he was not so inept, incompetent, and dumb as he had been at his first breaking free from the home. His memories of then included miseries and failure feelings that had almost persuaded him to a willed heart stoppage for his misfit uselessness.

He didn't emerge from the snowdrift till the following nightfall. He felt for his bearings, by the Earth's magnetic field like a migrating bird, acting in seasonal reverse. Inner prompting, plus book learning, urged

him north—toward even less-peopled country—safer for what he had to do. Across several hundred kilometers, he could also feel the steady oscillations of a high-voltage power line running straight north toward some populated center; by keeping the emanations to his left, and at a consistent intensity, he would have this additional guide for some distance.

His querulous Body, its healing still at a fragile, initial stage, protested mightily at its first movement. It would have been best to avoid effort for several days; but he had to get far away from where he was while the snow still fell intermittently, before the sky cleared fully, the sub-zero wind dropped, and the drifting that would erase his tracks ceased.

He turned off most of the pain in his nerves. The sick feelings he could suppress too, and some of his light-headedness. He started out, running when he could, plodding, even stopping momentarily when his damaged flesh complained too much. He felt no hunger. He wouldn't seek food now; digesting it and storing its useful portions in massive quantities, would impose an overload of strain. He wished he hadn't countermanded his Body's natural inclination to put on more fat; it could be right, and he, wrong. Here was humility. And did his physical parts send back grudging forgiveness?

As he put one booted foot ahead of the other in the crusted, crunchy snow, he let part of his alert, external attention drift Inward, and backward and forward, along the past and future biological track, as always, seeking guidance. Thus he relocated that shadowy likeness of himself—largely a failure, but just how?—In a long-gone Ice Age. Earlier images dimmed further with time distance. There were hazy ghosts of beginnings from beyond even the gene-stored memories of true, remote ancestors—here, not what had actually occurred in the human line of descent, but still, its more general, anatomical possibility: the thrill of flying, less as feathered creatures but more as the far remoter, web-winged pterodactyls of the paleontology chapters in

books. The compensating dream he had not been able to fulfill as he was.

Briefly, then, his inner gropings surged ahead, toward things-of-not-yet, seeming, in part, preset, like a destiny or goal. There, the perception was even fainter. The only impressions he received were of vacuum-enormity, shining stars, and of yearned-for shapes, concepts, pleasures, and burdens, which his existing consciousness couldn't expand enough to reach.

The first lengthening nights of hurrying northward passed. For daylight concealment, he burrowed into snowdrifts, disturbing their smoothness as little as he could, for the low sun was now dazzle-bright and revealing. But the wind was still strong enough to quickly rub out his tracks.

Twice, while buried, he heard the clack of a helicopter's rotors, and sensed the electromagnetic pulse of its engine's ignition. So he knew he was being sought, though he had no wish to be found.

He needed nourishment again. Among tundral growths, he came at last to a lake. He tried to chip through its thick ice covering with a sharp stone; but he didn't want to drive his still weak and overtaxed muscles beyond reasonable limits. Matches were obsolete, but he had a lighter in his pockets somewhere. He thought of building a fire to melt through the ice. But he dared not; the smoke and flames would be like a beacon. Besides, even if he got under the ice for fish, would his diminished vitality take exposure to the almost freezing water?

Emotionally depressed, he pushed on into the night, toward the high-hanging polestar.

Soon, though, he was lucky; he spied a lamed caribou cow, alone in the dark. Even in his present condition, he could for a minute or so equal the speed of most large predators. So he made his dash, caught the beast by its muzzle and one ear, and, with a fierce wrench, snapped its neck.

By then he was weeping with apology. He was not

aware of the specialness of this reaction; maybe his uniqueness included higher than common moral sensitivities. Devouring fish, even as they died, was one regret; but this was a creature with more feelings. His exoneration was the Law of Life: to live and fulfill purpose, one must eat.

His strong white teeth bit down, severing the animal's jugular vein with knowing precision. He sucked and drank. Most of his actions were totally, amorally righteous. The civilized manners he had learned from his friends were set aside. Here, away from people, there was no need to blend with others and to seek concealment of what he was, in conformity to custom. Here, basic biological rules reasserted themselves. For in his Body he was in touch with all of Nature, with its non-wasting simplicities. Unified with it, he found peace. His tears were apart—yet part of it all.

Having drunk his fill of blood, he used the small fold-up knife he had, and his own talonlike fingernails, to cut and tear strips of meat from the animal's haunch; even when frozen—and the entire carcass soon would be that—these smaller pieces would be more manageable as quick rations. He continued skinning the beast crudely; he needed the hide for a sack to carry the hams, which he cut and ripped free, since he could not reasonably burden himself with the complete beast in his further traveling.

Shouldering his load, he moved on across the white, treeless expanse for the remainder of the night; then he concealed himself as usual.

He had come far enough so that discovery by men was a somewhat less pressing possibility. He'd already begun to devise what he hoped might be some defense against wolf packs. But he still hurried on. How far should he try to go? To the big, northern islands, where arctic birds nested in summer, and where even now there would be—what were they called?—seals he could hunt for meat?

In any case, time was in short supply, and there was

much to attempt—and maybe fail at. Very soon he must try to accomplish that most dangerous change in his physical self—which would surely affect his mind as well. Yet he had to go on, because there were seemingly simple problems that he was not clever enough to solve as he was; there were answers to find that were of awesome importance, and a better intelligence might help.

For this, too, he had begun a preliminary process, which he knew by his inner sense was progressing. But, as a crude, secondary check, he touched areas of his scalp with his fingers. There were sore spots, but as yet no softness to indicate that the cranial sutures that had closed his babyhood fontanelles, firming his skull into a rigid box of limited volume, were relaxing and opening up.

On the third night after he had killed the caribou, wolves which earlier he had only heard howling in the distance surrounded him. He saw their gray, slinking shapes against the snow, and the glitter of their eyes reflecting the greenish flicker of the aurora. In his lonely and menaced state, his hackles rose as readily as anyone's. Yet he dropped his remaining load of meat and stood straddling it defensively, half hoping that the largest and boldest wolf would find hunger and courage enough to attack him.

It did happen, from his windward side. Results were very quick. He had no thought of his ineffectual little pocketknife; he used only his big, slim hands. One terrible, chopping blow brought a soft thud, a snapping of bone, and a squeaky grunt from the animal. Then he squeezed the wolf's neck vertebrae into separation and flung the carcass down.

But it was not primarily the conquest of their leader that drove the rest of the pack into bristle-backed and scurrying departure. No—there was a stronger force. From the pores of his skin, and on his exhaled breath, suddenly there erupted an increased and terrible demon stench that bore, even to these savage beasts, a sugges-

tion of loathsome and dreadful power, best kept at a respectful distance. It was a defense of his Mind's devising, with the full cooperation of his Body's knowledge.

Though there was something lupine about him, he felt a little less compassion for wolves than for some other creatures; but now some of this kindly emotion reached out to them, too. Yet, simultaneously, he had another thought: he would keep on needing meat. And wolves would be quite easy to attract into striking range by their own hunger. Yes . . .

He picked up the dead pack leader, ripped open its hide as one tears a rag, pulled out its warm liver, and ate. He also consumed some of the hard-muscled flesh. Its flavor was slightly harsh, but this small objection was merely fastidious. Otherwise, this food would serve his needs perfectly. He would continue to carry what was left of the caribou meat along with him, but mainly as wolf bait.

Three nights later—they had lengthened further as the Earth's axial tilt brought the subarctic closer to full winter—he found what he particularly sought: a rocky hill—an outcropping of old lava. Searching here, he located a crevice into which he could creep and wall himself in with stone fragments; here he would be reasonably safe from predators while he was unable to defend himself.

He had been eating hugely. His Body had stored up much material for the rebuilding that he intended. His failure to produce viable wings had been a relatively harmless experiment. Now, however, he would be meddling—without total knowledge—with his brain, the principal seat of the presence that was most himself.

His technique had to be a simple one—as much of it as possible preprogrammed, so that his consciousness, disturbed and pushed into delirium by the blood gorging and fever of the very tissues in which it most dwelt, would not have to exert too constant a control. His intention was merely to expand the frontal lobes of his brain, where much of his intellect was centered; he

would try not to disrupt any basic or acquired structures—those of the synapses and their associated filaments were extremely fragile. But he would cause neuron multiplication, usually arrested during adolescence, to recommence; the new—*axons* and *dendrites* they were called in spoken language—would extend cautiously, so as to leave existing linkages intact—he hoped.

He lay in the dark in his prepared refuge. To his touch, there were only those sore spots on his scalp, but still no palpable skull softening—he had not truly intended that there should be. But he judged by internal sensing that sufficient bone flexibility to allow for a small increase in brain volume without too dangerous a pressure buildup had now been achieved.

He took a deep breath and considered again the uncertainties: just now, there would be only a small, tentative, experimental session—a process of least risk. Yet the hazards remained grave. He could emerge a little cleverer, perhaps more able to assess and manage, or decide about, the worldwide problem that he might become. Or he could come out of this test venture a truly mad monster, or a stumbling, useless, memoryless idiot.

His pause was not true hesitation—only part of getting ready, focusing his wits. He had to find out the extent of his value, or lack of it. Now to proceed!

His conscious perceptions and guiding alertness sank into the teeming swarm of his Body and brain. Let the starting signals leap and quiver their electrochemical way along gossamer threads. Let delicately balanced hormonal fluids flow in their precise combinations to incite exact activity. Let somewhat altered, double-helixed genetic molecules perform as a pattern for reconstructing.

His Mind rode on top of it all, determined to be master craftsman, yet concerned about falling into bewilderment when there were so many tiny parts and bits in this busy, enormous-seeming, never-quite-the-

same, never-resting Inner Universe to coordinate, now that it was swinging reluctantly into forced and radical revisions.

That at first everything seemed quite easy reassured him into brief euphoria—a treachery he must guard against! He hardened himself to be aware of as much detail as he could keep track of. He sensed the increased vital beat, the rising temperature. His Body didn't send him pain protests yet. Rather, there was a slight, tingling, pleasurable numbness, such as others might get from drugs or alcohol. Maybe prearranged processes would go on mostly by themselves from this point. No—he must not fall victim to such silly faith! Hold fast to control! Hold!

Inevitably his congesting, overheating brain jostled and jangled his awareness, forcing it gradually toward such hell as he had never before even approached. His Inner sensory impressions were not of sound or light, yet like them particularly in their hammering, crashing, flashing, screeching, pseudo-multihued-dazzle agonies. This much was intermingled with what seemed spinning, hurtling, crushing motion within his Inner Place, where everything became totally muddled and miserable. A few shapes, swinging past whatever point of view he now had, retained a semblance of normal aspects—some cell structures were recognizable; others were luridly smeared out and distorted. The sensation of pressure mounted; with it came terrible pain, which, by its diverting aspect, soon brought on his complete confusion and loss of control. He knew that his screams were real in the Outside World. But the worst of his Body's complaints to his Mind were conveyed in a feeling of awful depression. Thus his knowing and tortured flesh insisted to his awareness that he was a total failure and a fool. Then, like a recently tolerant instructor who had at last become enraged at the ineptness of his pupil, his Body ripped all chance of further bungling from his Mind by the simple, natural means of smothering its

consciousness in a wave of black, fire-shot agony that ended in Nothing . . .

He had no true impression of awakening; his grasp of Self remained too tenuous for that. For a while, he felt simply miserable in all of the dimness that he had become. Yet in the days that followed, as whatever injuries or disruptions that had happened within his cranium began to correct themselves, he started functioning, outwardly, much as he had before—though in the hazy way of a great predator beast. Slower than before, he continued to move farther north.

It was during this interval that other persons began to be aware of his existence. A party of men, afield on trap lines, brought incredible tales to a settlement: about wolf carcasses ripped open and partly devoured. Of an ominous stink lingering in the brittle, chilled air, particularly near urine stains in the snow. Of a new kind of Bigfoot, Sasquatch—Ogre of the Tundra. They had even seen it once, though it had fled at unbelievable speed. This story reached civilization without at first gaining much credence.

Gradually he regained at least most of what he had lost. In the later stages of his recovery, he was also able to speed up the process. Then he began to notice an increase in one of his powers. He had always been able to sense the presence of magnetism and electromagnetic oscillations—including, of course, the static crackle of the aurora, which glowed and shimmered with lovely colors overhead. But now there was an augmented sharpness and clarity, inadvertently achieved in himself by his painful efforts toward something quite different.

The sensing of waves from communications transmitters—radio or television—was hardly new to him. What were such waves but vibrating magnetic fields? He had long been able to “feel” them a little, in gross, blurred form.

Now, though, he began to discern actual voices, very

faint, yet often elfin clear. He had wished that he had with him a small radio receiver. But at last such a device seemed no longer needed to pick up fragments of world news. With a bit of practice, he found he could focus on a particular carrier-wave form and thus "tune" for its selective reception. He could even get quasi-visual TV images to some extent, but "hearing" and understanding voices was enough.

Of course he "listened" most intently for reports relating to his mate, his unborn child, his friends, and himself. Such information was still not prominent in the news that came down from the synchronously orbiting relay satellite out in space—yet occasionally it was there. Even when he could distinguish all of the dim words, which wasn't always the case, single statements were often incomplete in themselves, needing to be pieced together with something that had gone before, or with something else that would follow later, for any comprehension.

Was he the "Bigfoot" that somebody mentioned? Yes—it had to be so, for soon the name Tolliver, linked to double homicide, was also spoken. Who was this Dr. Hoffmann, quoted by one commentator as having written so earnestly about human mutation and the good it might bring? And what did the joking tone in reference to legends mean except disbelief, almost insult? He also picked up part of a lecture by a Dr. Archmere. He'd heard of him from Ted Destin and Linda Abbott, though not then in an entirely trusting fashion; but now Archmere, replying to someone's query, admitted that he wholeheartedly shared the views they had expressed on various occasions. Was the apparent change to full friendship a thing to be suspicious of, along with the intent of Archmere's forceful though maybe slightly sneering rhetoric about what a person might accomplish whose Body fully revealed its know-how to his Mind?

Only once did he pick up a few phrases spoken by Cara Webber, but they were singularly aimed at himself, in a voice and tone that he could not mistake:

"Lance . . . It is not inconceivable that you will hear this, somehow. I insist you're still alive! Things here are going okay. Though I love you and miss you, do as you must."

He felt her remoteness both in where she was and what she was. He fit better in how he lived now, here in the far northern winter, solitary, and harming no one except the beasts he ate. He had accustomed himself to this existence. Yet it meant nothing toward any purpose, when he had a mate's duty to give, and to receive. Plus a bigger, broader duty, because of his differentness. He wept a bit for what he had not provided, and for his loneliness and failures.

He didn't feel any cleverer than before. Yet he couldn't stay stagnant like this when he was not only a mate, and soon to be a father, but the means to a larger test. It seemed he couldn't sensibly go further in preparation. No point in waiting, then. He must find a way into action.

He had come to the rim of the Arctic Ocean, hummocked with groaning pack ice. There was no daylight at all anymore, only the shimmer of the aurora. The cold was abysmal. But by turning up his metabolism rate selectively in his extremities, he maintained his physical comfort easily enough.

Several times, where the pressured ice snapped and opened up, exposing water, he shed his clothes and dived for food. Fish. Once, with sorrow, he wrestled and broke the neck of a seal. Back on the surface, he shivered a little as he dressed slowly. With his latest minor and guided physical adaptations, he knew he could easily have stayed submerged in the frigid water for twenty minutes. He could readily have climbed the tallest mountain, carrying no oxygen flasks. With further specialized lung, blood-hemoglobin, and other tissue adjustments, he could prepare himself for quite comfortable living over a considerable range of alien environments on other worlds, without artificial aids: atmospheric oxygen content and pressure as low as a tenth

of the terrestrial, or ten times as much; low gravity or high; temperatures to fifty degrees Celsius below zero, or a hundred above. Of course he could not have ventured, unprotected, into truly killing ambiances, as deep inside some Gas Giant, yet his adaptability wasn't small. Though of what use was so much, as the situation was?

From the east, well along the shore, he felt the emanations of a ground-based radio transmitter. It would serve him as well as any other fragment of civilization. He could use its waves as a beacon. So, through thickening weather, he hurried on, a great, shadowy bulk, as at home under the auroral shine that penetrated the clouds as any polar bear. He did not eat again, but slept once beneath the snow, suppressing his stench, before pushing ahead.

A kind of fury drove him. Maybe because of his brain tampering, he still was a little stupid, or mad—even sadistically cruel. Apart from his main purpose, he wondered if his woman—his Cara—and his gestating child really were okay. If not, those who had harmed them should beware!

He kept going for some hours more, until he saw storm-blurred lights. It was favorable that the weather remained violent; it would mask his approach. Within minutes, he was a snow-caked giant at a window, the antennas of the station looming like spirit webs above him, among the swirling flakes. The pane was completely frost-rimed on the inside; its transparency was gone; but the shadow silhouette of one man fell across it from the lighted interior. And, both from the antenna emanations and as sound, too, he could hear the voice of another man, transmitting a weather report.

He went to the door of the small prefabbed building. He could not plan; he could only tense himself for swift surprise action that would rely mostly on smooth reflexes. His almost demon-clawed fingers flexed inside his mittens as, cautiously, he tried the heavy latch.

There was usually no reason for it to be locked, and it wasn't.

What he did might have seemed one explosive motion. He burst into the room like part of a wind gust, showering caked snow from his parka. His hands made two chopping strokes, right and left. From his own general and common structure, he knew just where, and how lightly, to strike for best stunning effect. Yet what he was doing was insane, or at least naive. He had learned many of the ways of the outer world, but his education remained very incomplete. Besides, living as he had been doing for the past months, he had slipped deep into savagery, trusting nothing but his own primal, suspicious judgment.

He caught the microphone as it fell from the speaker's hand. Then, tired of the futility of secrecy, he roared into it bluntly, without the least delicacy or guile, his speech again a bit fuzzy from disuse:

"I am Lance Tolliver! Ogre! Bigfoot! Mad Boy! Accused murderer! Mutant! Some suggest I can do wonders! This is not a joke, but fact! Come and get me, and I will show you! Only that way will we find out whether I am useful, or a disaster! To live, or die! Come! It's time!"

He ranted on for another minute, lowering the microphone only when he saw movement from the corner of his eye. One of the two men had revived and, still lying on the floor, was reaching for a chair leg.

So he turned, and pressed a boot sole lightly on a wrist.

The guy—a cool type—glared up at him.

"Hell—if all you wanted to do was lecture on the radio, you could have just asked," he complained.

"Except I wasn't sure you'd let me," the ogre answered. "Sorry."

"No—don't shut the door yet—Gawd how you stink!" the man said.

CHAPTER 16

Authorities came for Tolliver. Via satellite, he received one brief and cheering phone call from Dr. Ted Destin. He had been cleaned up, sweetened, trimmed, given fresh clothes. He tolerated the manacles and leg irons with passive grimness, considering them an indignity he must accept to prove his good intentions. But, on receipt of his promise of good behavior, they were soon taken off, though kept handy.

He was helicoptered away from the weather station. In the northern Canadian town where international-prisoner transfer was accomplished there was a small Stateside police plane to receive him. Aboard it, among others, were an attorney and Cara Webber. The official excuse for her presence was to identify Tolliver. To this extent, she had come out of retirement.

So, in the waiting room of the little, deep-frozen, scraped, and snow-piled airport, Cara, her approaching maternity now mildly evident, threw her arms tight around Tolliver's neck. She was in a rather uncharacteristic, gushy mood of happiness:

"Lance, love!" she rasped. "How do I talk to you *normally*, now? I *knew* you were all right! And—since you clearly want things to move fast and openly now—though there's some doubt that that's best—we tried. So here I am. Gosh—you've grown even more! Wups, though, m'lad—I think you need a *bath*, Lance."

Thereupon, his own fierce clutching at her became somewhat restrained.

"I've turned the smell off, Cara," he growled defensively. "What's left won't last. Or should I contrive something agreeable?"

"No—no—dummy! You might even leave a whisper of it. It's fierce and right for you. But—on a serious subject, Lance: We in our bunch sort of wish you hadn't announced what you are quite so abruptly. It shakes folks up too much. Just what we've been trying to avoid. It's wild meat for the news media."

Tolliver's pale eyes hardened with anguish and fury as he stood away from her while being fingerprinted.

"I've given up thinking like that, Cara," he rumbled. "I feel it—Inside. Mostly a waste to be cautious. Soon or late—against huge and basic reality—the trouble will be the same."

During the three-hour flight to the city, the gray-haired, fiftyish, distinguished-looking attorney, a noted one named Oliver Field, huddled with Tolliver. But stubborn Cara remained beside her man.

"So you're this phenomenon we've been hearing about," Field said. "Technically, publicity about you should be kept at a minimum, Tolliver, so that widely held opinions won't influence jury decisions in the murder trial, of which, it seems, you'll be the central figure. Though, if what Reg Archmere, Dr. Abbott, and Dr. Destin say is true about you—and I know Reg, even if you don't yet—I don't see how such purism, which would amount to news suppression, is even remotely possible. Not that some authentic reporting won't be in our favor, if you can visibly accomplish what is claimed for you."

"Oh, he can," Cara Webber cut in. Then she asked a question that Tolliver might not even have thought of: "And what do you think his chances are in court? I didn't get around to inquiring before."

The attorney smiled at her enigmatically.

"Since I'm the chief defense counsel, I have to be optimistic, don't I?" he retorted. "But Mr. Tolliver was identifiably accused before witnesses by one of his alleged victims, then at the point of death. And there are those who are very eager to press the charge. However, since there has never been a case quite like this one, its handling will be, to a considerable extent, an experiment. So I'd like to get to know my client better, by frequent contact over a couple of weeks. Meanwhile, we'll have to feel our way about other developing aspects as well. The passionate accusers are already demanding a prompt trial date, and, with my entire agreement, plus popular interest pressures, I expect there'll be mutual success in that at least."

Tolliver's reality had hit the world with a blunt, sudden, swift-spreading impact. Suggestions of what his capabilities were had become broadly disseminated before. Now, legend was assuming solidity. Tolliver's first, and totally frank, announcement of what he was and could do, roared desperately into a microphone in the far north, was irreversible in its effect. News services had it to scatter everywhere at once. His mate and his friends, who had tried to be cautious in informing about him before, had had to roll with the thrust of his decision and action, conforming to it with as much wisdom and foresight as they could.

Somewhat reluctantly bowing to his evident wishes, Cara had released good pictures of him, from her extensive collection. Cara forbore to give out one with a large fish gripped in his teeth. But there, in picture after picture, for TV viewers to see plainly, taut or relaxed, were those living, blue-tinted fringes along his arms.

At one of the lesser airports of the city, the greeting crowd that actually saw his plane come in was consider-

able. Its members, knowing that the security-conscious police would obscure matters, regarded themselves as the shrewd, lucky, and patient ones, first at having divined *which* airport correctly, and then for waiting till the arrival hour—which turned out to be after midnight.

If these several thousand greeters, mostly young and eager, though there were some elderly among them, had hoped to see Tolliver at close range—perhaps even to touch him—their actual reward was small. The majority, however, still thought it a great, personal achievement: for a few seconds, they glimpsed him among his attending party, still well out on a lighted landing strip as a transfer was quickly made from plane to large chopper, which then hoisted him away into the dark.

Tolliver had hardly noticed the crowd at all, though he may have sensed a bit of its poignance.

The mood of these relative few was not very dissimilar to that of much of the populace, though it was clearly more emphatic, since they had made an effort to be on the scene despite considerable difficulties. Call their attitude one of rather subdued consternation, generally benign, though its conflicting components were yet unsorted. Call it a kind of emotion numbness—a murmured, fascinated questioning:

Was this the one who had roamed the tundra and who—according to reports—*ate wolves raw* and had sprouted *actual wings*, even though he couldn't fly? Again and again—*was he real*? Didn't his boast of wondrous powers, made with such passion over the radio from the far north, have aspects suggesting that he was just another shameless quack, making a pitch for suckers to "cure"? Yet, hadn't he promised? Here, various thoughts fogged away into a nebulosity of unknowns and speculations, thrilling, frightening, heady, yet reserved. Nobody yet knew quite what to think or how to react.

If anyone, including Tolliver himself, had supposed that Lance Tolliver would be lodged in a jail or be released—with guards present—to live with his associates

in the suburban house which they had been occupying, neither of these choices was any longer quite practical, or even possible. He was already too much a focus of attention. Against jail, there would have been swift and monumental protest. In that house, exposed to the approach of anyone who learned its location—not a difficult task and certainly not a success to be kept secret when achieved—hazards and problems would escalate. No mere house could be reasonably fortified. The police knew. Mobs, enthusiastic or inimical, would quickly try to storm the place.

So, inevitably, since scientific probing of Tolliver's peculiarities was also of major concern, the helicopter that wafted him from the airport flew high and landed him atop the tall Integrated Sciences Center, in the midst of the city. He and his associates had been granted quarters which included the lush roof garden and adjacent labs and apartments in the tower. There he greeted Doctors Destin, Abbott, Archmere, and the little, ruddy-cheeked, elfin man of broadest knowledge, Dr. Rolf Hoffmann. Any thoughts or questions he may still have had about these last two were quickly submerged by more troubling considerations. Just then they were there, and friendly, and that was sufficient.

Tolliver was in a kind of daze, quite distinct from his retreats Inward; events and new circumstances were flowing around him too fast and too strangely. The sounds, smells, and sensations were unfamiliar. He, too, was not immune to a kind of shock, the essence of which seemed to be stress-powered thought.

After being soaped, soaked, and deodorized in a tepid bath, and dried in a blast of warm air, he took his mate gingerly in his arms in a luxurious bed—the latter, quite out of his previous experience. At her urging, his intensity increased:

“Let go, dear Lance. It's all right—anyone will tell you.”

Within limits, he obeyed. His Body cautioned him: easy. The child . . .

But in post-climax rest, he said suddenly, roughly: "Cara—we'll get married. Right away."

"Hey—now that's abrupt!" She laughed flatly in surprise and, it seemed just then, not with entire approval. "We needn't be quite so quaint. There'll be enough bad jokes."

"It's best, Cara. I *feel* it. It might block some objections to us in certain heads—even though it might stir up less serious fun in others. There'll be enough trouble anyhow. But if we can reduce its level a little in this way, it could help. Yes, I know what you're thinking. That I've had too big a public mouth already. We needn't tell everybody about this—just let the word leak out sometime, whenever it does."

After maybe a half minute of silent conference with herself, Cara Webber responded: "All right. I'll conform to your wishes, Lance." She snuggled against him contentedly. "You know, m'lad—you do have some nice ideas." She chuckled.

There was a parallel decision. When Destin and Abbott were told the private news the next day, they got together in a corner of the roof garden for a while. They informed no one else of just what they said to each other, and there may have been some slightly heated incongruities of view expressed. But when they rejoined the others, who were arranging Tolliver's appointments with specialists, both were solemn.

"We're tying a loose end too—Lind and I," Ted Destin announced.

"Our bow to old-fashioned respectability," Linda Abbott amended. "Even if certain critics may regard these weddings as being overly timely. Now back to useful work."

The civil marriages were performed, almost as an afterthought, the following evening in the main lounge of their quarters, after a hectic twelve hours of other activities. There were hurried and austere gestures to tradition: Corsages for the brides. Tolliver was somehow stuffed into a dark suit. Champagne. A good dinner.

One small cake. Participants were pledged to silence, and pictures were withheld.

The next morning, Lance Tolliver began his first formal medical demonstration. Details had been arranged over the phone by the four doctors, who, with their official assignment as a staff group still being processed, were already functioning in that capacity. Several rooms had been converted into a hospital unit. Prominent internists, surgeons, and other noted and interested practitioners of medicine had been allowed in as observers, and to offer assistance if anything went wrong. The patient selected was a moribund old man with a massive, neglected stomach cancer and numerous smaller secondary growths—metastases—elsewhere in his body.

He was brought into the Integrated Sciences Center by helicopter, because surrounding streets were jammed with people, who had managed to get wind of what was taking place, though no statement had been given out.

Tolliver's procedure was not visibly much different from his treatment of Destin's far different illness up in the northern wilds. He touched the patient's belly with his hands and seemed to make judgments; then a small sample of the old man's thin blood was withdrawn and injected into Tolliver's circulatory system. The interval of inner study and preparation was longer—four hours—during which Tolliver lay on a couch, sweating and breathing hard, and with his eyes closed.

Nor, when his own precisely modified blood was injected into the patient's veins—a hundred CCs every hour for five hours—was the favorable response so prompt as with Destin's acute and simpler affliction. On the other hand, neither did such violent, if brief, negative reactions appear; there was only a little tenuously pink vomiting.

"There is so much . . . of the thing," Tolliver growled thickly. "Action must be . . . slow. If the tumors dissolved too fast . . . there would not be quick enough . . . normal-tissue rebuilding . . . to replace them. Something would break, and he would bleed a lot inside

... and die. And there must not be too much ... dead-cancer substance all at once ... because it has to be reabsorbed. If there were more than a certain amount, it would rot and poison."

"How is it done, Mr. Tolliver?" a famous internist asked, though he already had a slight inkling, from a precise analysis of the same blood that was being used in the treatment, and from constant monitoring of the changes now taking place in the patient's malignancies. "By gradual devascularization?"

Tolliver scowled over this last word like a stumped schoolboy.

"He doesn't always understand our terms, Doctor," Archmere explained. "Though I don't doubt he has better silent ones of his own."

"Lance," Hoffmann said. "By devascularization, the gentleman means shrinkage and loss of capillaries and other blood vessels in the tumor."

"That is part of the means," Tolliver gruffed. "So that the cancer is deprived of oxygen and food, and smothers and starves. But much more is necessary."

Not until the third day was the shrinkage of the old man's tumors obvious. From then on, his progress was rapid.

"It's like advanced immunization and chemotherapy combined," the internist commented later into a recorder. "This is better than anything we've had before. We would have lost this patient within a few days as he was. But now there is complete remission. Tolliver says bluntly that there will be no recurrence—that he is cured."

During the next three weeks, until his trial, Lance Tolliver treated ten "hopeless," or at least difficult, cases of widely varying classifications. Infarcted hearts beat normally again, and the coronary obstructions and constrictions were dissolved. A small boy was cured of his leukemia and asthma. Suspicions of quackery were waning.

A girl of seven years turned her dark eyes up to

Tolliver and asked, "Can you fix my crooked legs, Mr. Lance?"

He answered gravely, honestly, in a low growl: "I think I might, Alice. I fixed a crooked arm and leg in myself. But you are not me, and that is harder. It would take a long while."

The child showed no disappointment at this. The kindly words from the giant were enough. She giggled.

"You're big, Mr. Lance," she said. "I'm gonna grow big like you. And you have claws. I'd like to have claws!"

"They were a mistake, Alice," Tolliver rumbled with embarrassment. "I haven't gotten around to making mine disappear."

Here was sentimental stuff—ideal for TV.

None of Tolliver's medical exploits were presented live. To have done that would have been imprudent. But selectively excerpted portions of the audio-visual recordings were released.

There were three weeks of relative quiet and public wondering. But all the while, queries were being posed and responded to speculatively, with both becoming expanded and extended:

"Just what *is* this guy, mutant, creature—whatever he is? What does he mean? What will happen?"

"Good, of course! He's the greatest! A wonderful age of progress is rushing at us! Isn't it obvious, friend?"

"Oh, so—friend? Would you care to look—and *think*—again?"

Sides were being chosen.

Even among the probable majority, where the passive, the indifferent, the coolly thoughtful, and those whose nerves and wits were steady enough to take nothing too seriously, made a stolid mixture of types, there was growing concern about how the more volatile parts of the population would react.

CHAPTER 17

Attorney Oliver Field's instructions to his client about the trial were simple:

"Just be yourself, Lance. Truthful and brief. Don't go into details in answering questions, unless specifically asked."

If Ollie Field had a personality flaw in his professional approach it was in his experimental turn of mind. But this was also his genius. He liked to do the radical, when it explored new tactics and varying human attitudes. Which could be dangerous. The few cases he had lost—among the many he had won—had been on this basis.

There had been pressure to move the trial back to the local region where the alleged murders had taken place. Field decided that this made no practical difference to him. However, the nearness of the prisoner, in his present and almost necessary place of incarceration, to city-situated judicial facilities, to and from which he could

be air-lifted daily, and the awkwardness and added guarding that would be incidental to taking him farther decided the matter. The trial would be held in the city.

The indictment was read: that on the preceding year's May 27, Lance Tolliver did kill and murder Henry Arrow and Chester Bossiter.

The attorneys made their opening statements. Field's remarks in this area remained more or less conventional, though their tone was perhaps slightly absent-minded. He intended to support his client's not-guilty plea. Only casually did he state that Tolliver's identity might be somewhat obscure.

During the first two days of the trial, Ted and Linda, in particular, watched and took part in the proceedings with mounting doubts. Cara, though in constant, closed-circuit, audio-visual contact, was staying away, in accordance with her practice of remaining out of the public view.

One matter that worried Destin was the judge: he had a narrow face—all hard sharpness, but curiously ascetic. When his mouth curved upward in an infrequent smile, Destin somehow thought of a nick suddenly appearing in the edge of a hatchet.

A circumstance that troubled Abbott and Destin more was Field's almost unlistening tolerance of his opponent—a tough, capable, though uninspired lawyer of his own age.

Tolliver's sanity, and his competence to stand trial, were attested to by a psychiatrist for the prosecution, and seconded rather warily and reluctantly by Dr. Archmere. Time was spent outlining Tolliver's peculiar biological characteristics. In giving testimony here, Destin and Abbott saw no reason to be any less than truthful.

With such groundwork laid, the state began its case. The first witness was an ambulance medic.

"Before he breathed his last, did Chester Bossiter say anything?" the prosecuting attorney asked.

"Yes, sir, he did. I can quote him exactly."

"Will you please do so for the court?"

"He said, 'That raw-meat gobbling lunatic! He did this! A devil!'"

The ambulance driver then corroborated his colleague's statement.

In both instances, Oliver Field almost shrugged, saying, "No questions at this time."

Witnesses from far off then told of the circumstances and date of Tolliver's original escape from the refuge for the mentally retarded. His fingerprints from that institution were matched with his current ones. One attendant from there declared strongly that he had always doubted that Tolliver was retarded at all—that he had been maliciously bluffing. The meat-hungry burglary at the supermarket was recounted by the police officer who had attempted the arrest. The motorist who had found the two young men lying dead and dying on a woodland road at night was called to the stand, followed in succession by a state trooper and a hospital physician who described the obviously not accident-inflicted injuries.

Then another trooper—Destin noted with embarrassment that he was the same one whom he himself had put to sleep with a cup of drugged coffee on the night they left for Canada—was called to tell about Tolliver's capture after the killings, his lodgment for psychiatric examination at Spruce Crest, and his clever escape.

"You were the guard on duty at the time, Officer?" the prosecuting attorney inquired.

"Yes," the trooper declared.

"And you have reason to believe that you were deprived of alertness by a strong sleeping potion put into coffee?"

"I was drugged!" the trooper stated. "And I know by whom!"

"Please, Officer," the attorney chided insincerely. "You haven't been asked to go into that. The prosecu-

tion has no further questions for you at this time."

Again, Oliver Field declined an opportunity to cross-examine. Destin noticed how the judge gave another of his hatchet-nick smiles as he, Destin, was recalled to the stand.

"Dr. Destin," the prosecuting attorney began, "in your earlier testimony you have stated that after an initial show of capacity for extreme, vindictive violence, the defendant was entirely docile. Is that substantially correct?"

"My words were 'strong self-protection,' not 'extreme, vindictive violence,'" Destin corrected. "But then he was entirely docile—yes."

"Of course, Dr. Destin," the attorney conceded blandly. "Though, being somewhat shadowed yourself by active involvement with the defendant's activities last May . . ."

Oliver Field did not even challenge then for improper insinuations.

Destin felt that he had been led into a trap, to Tolliver's detriment. Still, he had the presence of mind to say, "If that is so, sir, I don't think I am required, under the law, to answer any questions which may relate to my own case and prejudice the result."

In effect, he knew he was taking the familiar Fifth Amendment.

Minutes later, court was adjourned for the day. There were angry mutterings of opposite orientations in the great room as the spectators began to leave.

Field spoke briefly to Tolliver: "We haven't yet had our turn, Lance. But sometime tomorrow, I think. Be ready."

Then the noted trial lawyer was airily gone—out of reach—while the others of the Tolliver party took an elevator to the roof, and the waiting helicopter.

Destin was somewhat reassured. When Field flashed a grin, he *did* inspire confidence. With his reputation, he must know what he was doing.

In the morning, the prosecuting attorney called old Lon Bossiter, father of Cheek Bossiter, to the stand, and began his interrogation with a few solicitous, almost chatty queries:

"You of course knew your son, Mr. Bossiter. How well did you know his buddy, Henry Arbow?"

"Very well, sir," Lon Bossiter said in his gravelly voice, which he loaded with great earnestness and sorrow. "They were good boys. They worked hard in the Jason Garage, up in Carmody. And they loved their bikes. You have to be steady and careful to ride such bikes and not hurt yourself or anybody else."

"Mr. Bossiter, why do you believe that, on the evening of last May 27th, the accused murdered your son and his buddy?"

"Believe?" old Lon echoed in incredulous outrage. "I *know*! Everybody knows it! Didn't my boy tell just how it was, with his dying words? Besides, what do we keep finding out lately? That this Tolliver is not crazy, but some kind of—*thing*! With wings! And he eats wild wolves! I'm glad there's capital punishment again! How can anybody live with such a monster around?"

The prosecuting attorney shushed his witness's furious outburst himself, just as the judge—not Field—seemed about to intervene:

"Please, Mr. Bossiter. All that in proper time. Now, to continue."

Stirrings in the jury box and mixed mutterings among the spectators quieted down. But a point had been made: a father—two fathers, rather, for the elder Arbow was also present—who had lost a son. Two whole families and many friends had had a loss—to some kind of incomprehensible fiend! They deserved legal revenge, didn't they? And didn't every citizen deserve to be safe from such a threat?

Ted Destin's jaw tightened. Linda Abbott's fingers bit into his arm. Wasn't Field going to do *anything* for Lance?

Oliver Field waited until his opponent was through with the elder Bossiter. Then he took his turn with him before the stand:

"A question of identity, Mr. Bossiter," he said loudly and clearly, so that the jury would be sure to take notice. "I've mentioned this before. And indeed we *have* seen fingerprint evidence—accepted everywhere as conclusive. But, in this very special instance, how can it be? Let us make a careful comparison. Stand up to be visible, Lance Tolliver. Now, Mr. Bossiter, if the court will show us again the picture of a Lance Tolliver, taken by the police at the time of his capture, within forty-eight hours after your son and his companion met with misfortune . . . Ah, there he is, on our courtroom audio-visual screen. This time, let us look closely, Mr. Bossiter. Do you see any substantive likeness between the poor, hunted Tolliver in the picture and Tolliver the man who stands before you?"

The opposing attorney's protest was quick:

"Asking the opinion of a witness—and about an identity already established!"

"Um—" Field retorted dryly. "I have been indulgent of my opponent often in this case—in the matter of not offering objections. I think that he might at least return the courtesy—as might Mr. Bossiter himself—considering the obvious discrepancy between picture and man."

Ollie Field had his mild way of awing witnesses, and even judges. Only part of this was because of his reputation.

"Very well, this court will indulge you for a moment, Counselor," the judge said in his reedy voice. "Answer the question as best you can, Mr. Bossiter."

"They gotta be the same!" Lon Bossiter growled, flustered. "It's been proven! His face is still a little out of plumb. Besides, we know he can do screwy things!"

"Did you ever actually see that the Lance Tolliver in that photo, either before or after his capture, Mr. Bossiter?" Field demanded. "Have you ever seen a

Lance Tolliver in the flesh at all outside of this courtroom?"

"Well, no. But that picture was all around!"

"Thank you, Mr. Bossiter. I have nothing further to ask you."

Field paused while Lon Bossiter returned truculently to his seat. Then he spoke up in brisk form:

"May it please the court, I have a suggestion."

"State it, then, Counselor," the judge answered. "Though it better be a valid one."

"It is, Your Honor," Field replied. "Valid and time- and effort-saving. We are dealing with a very important though perhaps obscure and delicate point of philosophy, or even metaphysics. That two essentially different Lance Tollivers are on trial here. First, a poor, lonely, frightened, disoriented unfortunate whom nobody cared about or wanted to bother with. Second, a great benefactor, whose misfortune is that he is receiving *too much* concerned attention. Both deserve justice, and it seems to me that the fault is with neither. Requesting that these thoughts be kept in mind, I propose that all roundabout procedures be stopped while I put my client on the stand. We might even get the confession that some seem to hope for. At least we might find out a bit better what actually took place on that night last May."

"All right. Go ahead, Counselor."

Tolliver took the oath with solemn formality.

"Tell the court what happened on the evening of last May 27th, Lance," Field urged.

The mutant responded evenly, "I was walking along that darkened road. Two men on motorcycles cornered and grabbed me. When I tried to get away, they made fun and began beating me up. One cut my face with a knife. Even as I was then, I was very strong and quick, particularly when I was so scared. And I knew just where to strike back. Being still confused and frightened, I ran into the woods. Soon I realized that I had

killed them. I am sincerely sorry."

"So there is the confession—if anyone dares call it that," Field commented. "And not, rather, an embarrassment to my client's accusers. He admits what took place—when he is the only living witness. But a clear conclusion seems evident: an instance of sadistic hazing, which backfired to the extreme misfortune of the perpetrators. Need we go further? My client is plainly not guilty by reason of self-defense. Therefore, unless the prosecution insists on continuing a futile case, the defense rests."

The jury was out for two hours. Meanwhile, Destin and Abbott, among others, were furious with the famous Oliver Field for his eccentric and seemingly slipshod handling of the case. An accused person was presumed innocent unless proven guilty by the prosecution. Tolliver needn't have said a word, instead of admitting all so openly. *He could lose!* If it had been as simple as Field had tried to make it seem at the end, why hadn't he asked for a dismissal, skipping the bother of an actual trial? There were opposed grumblings among the crowd that lingered tensely in the courtroom and the much larger crowds that packed the streets outside. The Bossiter and Arbow clans looked ready to commit a lynching. Even the hatchet-faced judge looked weary.

Tolliver stood to receive the verdict as the jury returned to the box. He loomed broad, tall, and black-bearded.

"Not guilty."

The mutant's grim expression didn't change. Though perhaps his wolf-glare moistened slightly.

The triumphant shouting was preceded by a silent moment. Then there were muttered growls under the happy and innocent noise.

On the way to the elevator to the roof of the courthouse, where a helicopter waited to take Tolliver and his immediate associates back to the Integrated Sciences Center, Ted Destin hurried ahead, alone, to catch up with the almost furtive Oliver Field.

The noted attorney gave him no chance to speak.

"Don't complain, Dr. Destin," he said in a low voice, smirking bleakly. "Nor thank me, either. When, of late, have you heard of any great public hero of ours being punished severely for anything—through legal process? Or, for that matter, even any great villain? How could anyone ever fear that Tolliver might be executed through the action of any proper jury or judge, even if he hadn't been innocent of murder? Most of today's judgment of him was made beforehand, by the populace—and in spite of ceremonial safeguards against just that. If he is ever tried and destroyed, it will be in the same way. I favor him in my heart; but knowing what I believe I know, I could dare to be unusual about his defense. And do you think it would have made any difference if he had been condemned to prison? If you don't grasp my meaning, I think you soon will."

"But . . ." Destin tried to interrupt.

Ollie Field stood still for a moment more. Then he went on: "Yes, and another thing. Your own case, Destin—and Dr. Abbott's. Helping Tolliver escape to Canada. With small trouble—not even your personal attendance—I'm sure I can now get the matters dismissed as no longer applicable to any facts. Then I believe I shall withdraw, as much as I can, from contact with Tolliver and attendant events. I might go on a moon tour, perhaps. I've done my bit. I will ask no fee, and I intend to drop legal practice for a while, thus maybe avoiding involvement with inevitable developments. I have been turning cynical about how masses of people yield to emotions under intensified publicity, and today's insights have made me feel futile as well. I might add in afterthought that, regardless of difficulties, it would have been less dangerous to have lodged Tolliver in a remoter place than here in the city, where so much population and public interest are concentrated, though it is too late to change. So now, thank you. Goodbye, good luck, and excuse me."

Ollie Field hurried off as if escaping.

CHAPTER 18

Next day, Destin realized one truth that Field had spoken:

Had Tolliver been condemned to prison, this wouldn't have altered his or his companions' lifestyle. They would have continued to be housed in the same luxurious quarters. Nothing else would have been considered appropriate or feasible. They would have engaged in the same activities, received like attention, found their freedom no more restricted.

Beyond a certain point, celebrities tend to be prisoners anyway, and Destin, Abbott, and Archmere, by their visible linkage to Tolliver, found themselves confined within the same narrow bounds. Their faces had become known; they couldn't have gone into the streets without being mobbed at once by hordes of curious, excited people. This could be pleasant, yet not to the level of being overwhelmed.

Dr. Rolf Hoffmann had avoided being televised with

Tolliver; thus he retained a certain protective anonymity. And Cara Webber—Mrs. Lance Tolliver, if one wanted to be antiquely technical—had, since her single interview with a newsman months ago, remained out of sight almost entirely. This near hiding gave her no liberty at all, and was in contradiction to her past as a popular naturalist. She imposed it on herself somewhat as if she were on a solitary expedition to some remote region; it was a circumstance to be matter-of-factly accepted as a safety measure for her gestating child, against the as yet unknown.

Tolliver himself, Destin already felt certain, could never have gone forth at all without a means to break the way being provided. The other five of their main group—with the limited exception of Rolf Hoffmann—were already practically confined to the 120th floor of the ISC Building and its roof garden. In effect, locked in a tower.

Destin, Abbott, and Archmere—and, in a less obtrusive capacity, Hoffmann—along with a considerable staff, were kept very busy dealing with, arranging, channeling, and overseeing contacts with the outer world. Much of this involved granting time and sequencing the use of equipment to specialists in various fields who wanted to talk to, test, and study Tolliver, with the intent to increase knowledge.

He was constantly being wired up to various devices. Just about everything in his physical form and functions that could be oscillographed, hologrammed, or otherwise observed and recorded by instrumentation was submitted to these processes. If, as a seemingly ordinary malformed child, he had received hardly more than casual scrutiny, this was surely no longer so.

Noted physicians, biocyberneticists, and biochemists sought to isolate, analyze, and identify the various chemical substances he created in his blood, to trigger complex actions against a variety of human disorders. If such agents, plus intricate nerve controls, could be syn-

thesized or otherwise established artificially, they might be put into broad use, not only in curative medicine, but to modify and improve mankind's characteristics. Thus, with Tolliver as a viable, natural pattern, perhaps what he could do within his flesh for himself and a few others could be duplicated for many by artificial means.

At intervals of about seventy-two hours, Tolliver accepted visits by gravely ill, injured, or congenitally damaged people, and treated them by his blood transfer and reinjection method.

But petitions to consult him were hardly limited to people with medical interests. Chemists and physicists, urged out of skepticism by remarkable things that had already been proven true about him, and intrigued by the published claims that he could "see" down into the extremely small within his body, looked to him for possible clarification of obscure aspects of the architecture of materials—molecular, atomic, and subatomic. This was both for abstract science and for practical applications—the development of new products and manufacturing methods, and improvement of the old, and more efficient use and understanding of energy sources, nuclear and other.

Paleontologists came to talk to him too, about terrestrial biohistory. Astronomers and astrophysicists brought questions about the births and deaths of stars and solar systems, and the space-time geometry and mechanics of the universe.

Of course soon there was an evangelist, asking earnestly if, with his special insight, he had ever seen the face of God.

Tolliver, just then spread-eagled on a couch amid festoons of testing cables and probes, looked up at the youngish man with some puzzlement, but then replied, "I suppose I have, sir. Though by outer sight as well."

"Where?"

"In your face, just now. But in other faces as much. And in grass blades. The sky. The sun. A rain cloud. In-

side me, too. I suppose everywhere. It is something that I am a smallest part of."

"That is a standard agnostic's answer about Him, Mr. Tolliver. *It*—not *He*." the visitor stated without passion.

"Standard, sir?" Tolliver responded mildly. "Then my standard *is* standard. Do I have to be original? It, He, or She? Can the word used matter very much? When there is plenty that I don't know."

The evangelist's brows knitted, not with any apparent offense, but with deep thought.

"I must consider these matters, Mr. Tolliver," he said gravely. "Also that—from what I hear—though you are not exactly immortal—you need never grow old—if you don't want to."

"True, sir. I can quite easily stop or reverse the process. Which does not necessarily mean that I will live very long."

"Thank you, Mr. Tolliver—for allowing me this minute with you. It is very kind. Now, since you have so much to do, and since I have no more immediate questions, I will leave you in peace. Goodbye."

The visitor turned and left. Out of the nearly continuous audio-visual recording of Tolliver's activities, this odd incident was one that was released for televising, as a human-interest bit.

So much—of which the mutant was the center and cause—was happening, near and far, building up toward some ponderous outcome.

There was an episode which Linda Abbott reported to Ted Destin while they had a hurried lunch of sandwiches at a table in the roof garden:

"Just now, Ted—half an hour ago. A delegation of ten girls—late teens, early twenties—who insisted they wanted artificial insemination from Lance—if they couldn't copulate with him directly, that is. Having sort of anticipated, I don't think I went very rectangular—I just said that nothing of the sort had been considered

yet. Well—most of them were gravely polite about the subject, saying that they were lodging the request, which they considered entirely reasonable and right. But one girl cut loose at me. So I'm 'a dumb, officious, backward old bitch,' and what am I 'doing being so closely tied up with the obvious wave of the future at all?' Further, I was 'obtuse' if I didn't know that everybody knew that 'some comic named Cara' had 'actually gotten poor Lance to marry her,' and was 'that fair,' and did it 'make any sense—considering?' And had I 'helped rig the whole thing,' since it was also around that I had 'pressured Lance's friend, Dr. Destin, into misfortune at the same time?'"

In spite of his better judgment, Destin had to laugh. But his expression sobered at once. "Sorry, Lind, of course I didn't mean it *that* way—it's just funny how you tell it. Anyhow the double-wedding story has leaked out, which we figured it must about now, without creating too much of a fuss. The real problem with what those girls did and said is elsewhere."

"Uh-huh, Teddy, a perfect story to enrage the fresh crop of bluenose moral revivalists against 'amoral youth,' who in turn will get mad. As if there wasn't already enough dangerous controversy rising around our remarkable protégé."

This last remark of Linda's was certainly valid. By being what he was, in person, in present accomplishments, and in the story of his life, Tolliver had won enormous approval.

However, a little more slowly—an interval being given for deeper and sometimes not quite accurate thought—hard and furious disapproval was also on the rise.

Old Lon Bossiter, and those other relatives and friends of the two young men who had died, sank quickly into the background mists of the whole enlarged process. They were not articulate enough. They only hated Tolliver as the odd and different youth—an

automatic object of their bigotry and contempt—who had killed two of their own. They had only wanted restoration of their pride, in revenge. Profounder implications were largely lost on them.

But a flood of more effective voices rose in their place, drowning them—and often each other—into the general mutter and shouting. For Tolliver, and against. Starting in informative newscasts, commented about, digested, extended in accordance with the variable mingling of truth, fancy, and prejudice; parroted, modified, shouted through bullhorns, discussed privately at breakfast tables, in bars and dark corners of discotheques and while hurrying to jobs, until about every angle of conceivability was covered. And always with a rising agreeing or disagreeing fervor:

“Tolliver . . . The biggest thing that ever happened! . . . Maybe we’ll never die! . . . And an enormous jump forward! We must accept this—be ready. . . . Utopia—the threshold.”

“Oh, so? You’re really high-up, ain’t you, old buddy? Let’s not be naive. We know everybody lies. He *killed*, didn’t he? He told it right out and got away with it. He killed two rugged guys—even when he looked such a nothing. That part ain’t any lie—I take that much back. Never mind those flaps on his arms. Did you see his fingernails?”

Yes, the mechanics of conflict: a problem, felt with excitement—of hope or doubt. Differences of opinion—maybe small to start with. But irritating—even with a friend. So, a few rough words exchanged—and getting rougher. Then, when the divisive topic is large enough to be on everybody’s mind and tongue . . . So it *must* be important! Yes, important—*important*—IMPOR-TANT! And similar parallel and mounting magnifications: hope—*hope*—HOPE; doubt—*doubt*—DOUBT. And fear. With anger and hatred subject to the same escalation.

With this behind it, in substance, in millions of sepa-

rate discussions, especially among the excitable fraction of the populace:

"Don't you see how *right* it is? Nothing like this, ever before!"

"Right? It *sounds* so right that it's got to be all wrong! Phony! Dangerous! Our whole future is at stake like never before! That's why it's so *wrong*! You'll get us all into trouble!"

"Our whole future, indeed! You're correct there! That's why it's so right! It's *you* and all those like you who are *wrong*!"

"You fool! You poor, innocent fool!"

"Not nearly the dangerous, primitive fool that you are!"

"More to you—double fool!"

So, to individualize the dialogues further as to their varied participants and locations and the variety of disturbances that were stirred up, or made worse:

"Helen, honey, a swell dinner you've cooked tonight. You know, this country hasn't had a leader that knew anything, or could do anything, in forty years. Now, though, maybe we'll get a break. I'm no follower of any lousy politicians. But this Tolliver—like something fine that folks used to imagine."

"Sure, George"—dreamily. "I go along with all that. Just a sec, now—the seven p.m. newscast. They'll be repeating part of his wedding. Weren't you absolutely startled when they finally let the pictures out this a.m? Him and that horsy-faced scientist dame and that stiff other couple. Uh, there he is! Did anybody ever see such an absolutely magnificent hunk of man? Even in *that* suit! Um-yum! George, if I didn't love you and all!"

"Only, he got married, Helen. Too bad."

"Think that makes any difference to lots of women? I hear they want his sperm parceled out even! To start a new, tougher, more intellectual kind of people. I wouldn't mind. George, did I say something wrong?"

Elsewhere:

“What do you think Tolliver is, Frank? Jesus Christ at His Second Coming? No, don’t buy me another drink! He ate wolves! And he had an awful smell. He’s more like the devil than this guy, Faust, in the opera, made a bargain with! His soul for a few crummy favors! Only, get this through your head, Frank, Tolliver isn’t just part of a story—he’s *for real*. That’s why this is so terribly serious. Anyhow, I bet in a few years our physician fellas will be curing the sick as well as he can, with their own science—and a thousand times as many cases! Who needs this freak? But—goddamn it—we know he’s got power. He can see into his body and control its growth. Pretty soon he’ll be looking into our heads and controlling our thoughts and everything we do, without us even knowing it. It wouldn’t surprise me if he’s already doing that, with a lot of dumb dopes! You see ’em and hear ’em around. I tell you I’m beginning to think Tolliver is a worse danger than a multi-megaton warhead coming down! We gotta stop him, Frank!”

“Ah, Eddie, quit talking like an asshole with diarrhea! Because, if you mean it, somebody is gonna have to stop *you*! I mean that! I’d like to see a lot of fast progress made in this crummy world, and living a couple of hundred years wouldn’t be so bad then either! Bartender, a couple more of whatever these were.”

Again, elsewhere, two women on their lunch hour at a natural history museum:

“A good idea of yours, dropping in, here, Orpha. It fits the situation, like you say. Dinosaur and mammoth skeletons. Extinct, gone. Fossils. Improvements going on.”

“Fossils—that’s just the point, Val. Since you’re so enthused about this Tolliver. You want to be just fossils? You and your Don and your kids—if you ever do settle down and have kids—and grand-kids. That’s how it’s liable to be. Look at *Homo Erectus*. Or the *Australopithecines*. Vanished, replaced, trampled on, wiped out by more advanced types. You’ve heard Ian

Jannis, the commentator, talking about it on channel 92—just calm and factual—he's very intelligent, I think. That's just about what might happen to us all, with human genes mixing up with this Tolliver's stronger ones and getting suppressed. I don't know why you think Tolliver is so much, anyhow—he's just the bastard product of scientists' messing with atoms. Otherwise, he's an oversized mass of brawn—like some imaginary hero in an adolescent's adventure book. Except that he's a fact and a menace. Please, can't you see that, Val? It's no joke!"

"You keep overreacting, Orpha. I'm not all that much for Tolliver. But I can take that other commentator—what's his name?—Jake Conway, who believes in him, a lot easier than Jannis. Myself, I'd just as soon slide along and see what happens. Things could be better than what we've got. It's nervous folks that make the trouble."

"Not as much as you enthusiasts and pacifists! Waiting till you're surrounded and conquered! I don't suppose you listened to Ian Jannis last evening. Not saying right out—he can't, Val. But about abortions for the public good, and that a certain lady ought to have one—from what is rumored. Which means that a second generation of monsters is already on the way!"

"Orpha, they have a *right* to have children."

"Of course—*two* children—just like any couple. If their progeny aren't a threat to the rest of us. Well, there's a snackbar here in the museum. Shall we?"

"No, Orpha, you stay. Suddenly it's kind of gloomy in here. I've had a rough work morning. I'll go down the street somewhere and quietly relax. Sorry."

Or once again, in yet another scene, and with different effects:

"Hey, Vince! Didn't you say you'd meet me in front of the library? Not here inside! Still researching that silly term paper? When we were going to jog in the park, and see what's up that's new? Time for passion and poetry! Colossal changes ahead. We could still be alive

in the next millennium! Star empires. Refreshed souls. Who knows just what? Thanks to New Prometheus, whom we may have to defend. Are you tired, Vince? Don't tell me you're losing the spark?"

"No, but sit down a minute, will you, Gib, and listen. I wish it was going to be mostly good—like we thought. Only, too many won't let it. I've been talking and listening around. And last night I had a dream that made me realize. It was about a troupe of baboons minding their regular business, foraging for wild onions on an African plain. I know nothing about baboons, except what I've read. Well—we threw them crates of oranges and bananas. So—disruption. They were scared and growling. Some ran away. The others started tearing each other up over the goodies. It's not exactly the same with people, Gib, it's worse. New Prometheus is too big a thing for lots of them to handle. There never has been an issue as oversized and controversial as this one. Ever-living paradise on one side—*maybe*—which plenty of people will follow any leader into fire to grab and have. But just about as many who are scared sick of that much differentness—scared enough to kill to keep it from happening. They think there's been too much rushing change taking place already, in the last seventy-eighty years—upsetting everything they consider stable and dependable. And in between the two opposing factions is a larger mass—some would call them the stolid clods, or the solid citizens—who may have the most sensible, clearest-thinking, most courageous individuals among them, who prefer to just move quietly with events and see what comes out."

"Wait now, Vince. That must have been quite a dream! You *do* need fresh air! Or are you quaking out? Not wanting to back New Prometheus anymore—eh? I didn't think you were a trembler, Vince."

"Ah, come off it, Gib! You know me better than that! You didn't let me finish! We know New Prometheus represents the best, and what's got to be! Anyhow, there's no way to quake out on anything! *That's*

what I mean! We thought that before; now I'm sure! The neutral middle course is no good either, because there'll be plenty of negative crazies trying to convert the neutrals, or stomp out their teeth as wrong-way enemies, the same as with us, till they're forced to fight, too. It's ironic that the three incompatible viewpoints lean on each other for that kind of sustenance in insanity. The trouble is that ever since that first nuclear bomb drop, way back over Hiroshima, Japan, our society has been living in a state of controlled panic, semi-emergency waiting for the next fright. Too many people have been pushed toward phobia and rage by anything technologically new—as if a latter-day wave of superstition had been let loose: Fission power. Then microwaves beaming energy down from solar power-plants in orbit. Then fusion power, too, it's supposed to be entirely safe. Now interplanetary settlements in prospect. And biocybernetics, electronic and photonic stuff embedded in the brain, to step up mental capacity perhaps. So, what is evident or suggested about our New Prometheus, Lance Tolliver, is about as terrifying and enraging to many people as being sucked down into a Black Hole in space. I know how my granddad talks, Gib—wistfully about the little New England town he grew up in: neat old houses under a spring sun, with green hills around—and like he says, 'with the stars in their places—nothing fancy and super about them at all—just little sparks to decorate the sky at night.' Sure, it's another kind of vision, Gib—pretty and no longer practical. Still, it's an emotional shelter for those people who are so worried about the hurtling future to crawl into in their minds. A lot of them will feel pushed into the battle against New Prometheus, though. Just as we have *for him.*”

“Uh-huh, Vince—you finally got that clear, eh? When I thought you might never. So shall we go jog, and plan on being prepared?”

CHAPTER 19

These spring days were an interval in which the populace muttered, as if under its breath, not yet in the full fury of confrontation, but just at the treacherous edge of it. Sporadic fights broke out, causing injuries and some deaths. There were opposing protest marches. Under the warming sun, the city often had an aspect of peaceful normalcy. But the buildup of strain went on, inevitably, along with secret, improvised, and sometimes massive readying.

In quiet mouth-to-ear communication, even Shakespeare was quoted and paraphrased: "To be, or not to be—that is *our* question!"

And over the air, Ian Jannis's now-and-then interjections into his remarks about general news continued:

"Tolliver—dear Lance—great, glorious bruiser of a man—kitschy imitation of Hercules, to whom so many bow down as bringer of the perfect, trouble-free world of bewildering miracles—why don't you do even your-

self a favor? Go back to the Arctic—grow long white fur? Perhaps you'd sire a super-species of polar bears. That way, whatever ambitions you have would trouble us simpler mortals less."

Jake Conway—Jannis's perhaps most audible opposition—had his own pointed responses:

"Bow down? Who is doing that? Only those who bow down to weakness—to everything ancient, rotten, and *familiar*—hence—to them—not a cause for timidity! Are we so delicate of guts and spirit that we can't move with the natural advance of our kind and recognize strength and value and new visions when we see them, and incorporate the advantage into ourselves? Yes—gradually—genetically—too! Tolliver is *not* alien! He was born of our own kind and culture! So he is part of us—ours! What do those who disagree want? To stop time? To get off the Earth? That is part of their confusion! For it truly is time to begin being fledged from our nest—our native planet—to start settling on other worlds. Many don't even favor that! Some, I think, would like to see us retreat to the Dark Ages of disease, ignorance, and misery—led by a false idea that it was not like that then, that it was romantically beautiful and not full of plagues and fleas. When we should be moving toward the stars. Let's not make a brainless struggle of this! It is that that can destroy us— *not* Tolliver! So let's be mature, show we are ready for big things!"

So there were these two: Jannis, with his youngish, rather professorial solemnity and light but cutting manner of speech. And Conway, equally youngish but not young either, much more an impassioned, straight-faced square, spouting his truths, somewhat pedantically. They could be called similar: two twerps—squeaks in the wind—maybe as much intent on gaining personal notoriety as on expressing honest beliefs. Thus, both were noisy demagogues, more apparent than others like them—but articulately expressing large masses of shared opinion, for and against—with the

cooler, quieter bulk of humanity caught in between.

Probably the fact that both of these hysterically aroused factions were further splintered by variant views made the situation even worse. For passions were high, and mounting higher, in the largest polarization of the ages. So two views, like galaxies on a collision course, were hurtling toward each other, as with an undeflectable certainty that had assumed a suicidal will and power of its own, beyond the ability of any individual or group to control, even by unilateral surrender; for who else could give up a furious, self-protective conviction in a matter considered vital?

Those who were fortified in the tower of the ISC Building, most of them in constant and significant contact with persons from beyond their shelter, certainly knew this as well as anybody. And Cara, less visibly busy than the others but even more involved than anyone except her man and her unborn infant, surely understood this too. It went against her grain to be helpless, inactive, and hidden. She tried to be stoical about this, believing that it was a wise choice. Though maybe there was also feminine pride and need for privacy involved. Still, there were moments when she railed against it:

"I'm sick of keeping out of sight, as a bloated brood dam, either for an angel of salvation or a fiend of nemesis—as so many think—for the crummy, excitable, bubble-witted fraction of the human race it is! When this is mainly just *my* kid! And that rotten Jannis dared to suggest an abortion! I wouldn't mind so much, except that millions of bastards think he's right! If he ever came here, I'd kill him! Just let anybody, now or later, try to hurt my kid! Though they'll all have to be informed soon. I ought to phone Jannis *right now*—invite him over—tell him—and then shoot him!"

There were other things to blame Jannis for. Tolliver had saved the lives of severely injured persons—one young man in particular—half his chest crushed in a

traffic accident. During restorative surgery, his bruised heart had stopped beyond restarting by conventional means. So he was rushed to Tolliver. An hour later, his heart beat again, with twenty CCs of the mutant's blood needled into it. Nor did the man's brain suffer any lasting damage from the long stoppage of blood supply. Somehow Tolliver had been able to counteract this usual, inevitable effect.

Yet when a truck loaded with explosives had been detonated in front of the ISC Building—in one of the first overt acts of violent protest against him, Tolliver had been able to do nothing for the young couple who had happened to be passing in the street. They were blown to gobbets that had splattered against the building's facade. To this event, Jannis had dared to comment sorrowfully:

"A tragedy for which Lance Tolliver can never justly be blamed. It is said that he weeps easily. He must be doing so now, thinking that, except for the fact of his existence, it wouldn't have happened. A great blow to him, too."

"The bastard!" Reg Archmere hissed. "Once, that kind of insinuation would have brought immediate suit, both against the egotistical speaker and the news facility behind him."

Tolliver shed no visible tears. But for several days, even before the event, he had been turning vague, retreating inward, almost out of reach of words and questions, even from Cara. His massive shoulders slumped in dejection. Once—but only once now—like one of those neurotics who respond to depression with compulsive gluttony, he reverted to his old custom, gorging himself with raw meat.

"Get in front of the cameras and microphones, Lance," Destin urged. "The largest number are sensible; they resist hysteria and need you to support and reassure them!"

Tolliver looked at Destin with wolf eyes turned cloudy.

"As I am . . . now?" the mutant slurred with dull scorn. His voice was again as thick and halting as any drunk's. "Often . . . enough . . . I've said I meant . . . only good . . . not harm. There is something here . . . that seems . . . so simple . . . but isn't. Or . . . I'm not sufficiently . . . clever. I can only . . . try . . . again. I left the . . . fontanelles . . . a little . . . open. So . . . soon . . . before . . . Now . . . I must . . . sleep."

It was evening. A few stars were coming out. Tolliver's massive form staggered across the dewed turf of the roof garden. Destin, ever protective of the miracle—though sometimes he wondered why?—hurried beside him.

"Lance, that sounds like desperation. You could destroy yourself. Or take weeks to recover. And any day now . . ."

Linda was there, and Archmere, and Hoffmann, the gnome, for once seeming grave.

But Cara, bulky with child, took her man's arm.

"Leave us be!" she ordered crisply. "He doesn't always tell me either—or can't. But he knows what he's doing—I think. Don't bother us. I'll come out and let you know—whenever."

They went into their quarters. Cara closed the door.

Below, and all around, the city mewled restively. How many persons would be injured tonight in sporadic brawls? Destin wondered. How many would die? And how many more tomorrow? An ascending scale, as furies of rage and fear proliferated more of the same. A single word stood out in Destin's head. An overemphatic word, that, as a man who liked to consider himself poised and not given to sloppy exaggerations of disaster, he hated even to think: *inexorable*. And all in the name of the best of intentions.

Now Hoffmann spoke up mildly:

"We'd best get back to our desks and phones. Answer some calls. So people won't think we've cut all contact . . ."

There were two relatively quiet days. The only substantive information that got out of the ISC tower was that all present appointments with Tolliver were postponed till further notice; that he was exhausted and had been forced to withdraw to rest. So there was grace time, which would have to end in an explosion of impatience if the waiting-and-not-knowing interval became too extended.

At dusk of the second evening, Cara emerged from the apartment where she and her man had secluded themselves. She went to the large room that contained the administrative offices. She made unobtrusive signs with her hands, and then retreated. Destin and Abbott followed her. Archmere and Hoffmann were not far behind.

"I was asleep for a while," she told them. "Maybe something has gone sour with Lance."

They found Tolliver on the floor beside the bed. He seemed a shrunken ghost of what he had been. His open eyes stared and bulged, as from some internal pressure, and the capillaries in their whites were blue. Their look held the blankness of an erased presence.

While Linda fetched an oxygen flask, Ted Destin applied a portable vital-parameters monitor: heartbeat and blood pressure only threads. Brain waves scrambled and weak—nearly flat in spots. Body temperature way down.

"That much is not too critical for him," Archmere said fiercely. "If he didn't do much worse—trying to keen his wits by meddling with the gray stuff inside his skull. This time, he must *really* have shoved himself into the inferno! And how does any ordinary physician treat a patient like him?"

As Linda pressed the oxygen mask over Tolliver's mouth and nose, Ted Destin suffered anguish for a possible, terrible loss, not in any physical death of the mutant, but for something delicate in his brain cells, damaged by overdriving, being permanently lost. Yet,

fleetingly, opposite to his pain as a scientist and a romantic, Destin experienced that almost-relief again. If Tolliver's powers were rubbed out of him, the cause for this greatest of social emergencies would no longer exist. But this ghost in Destin's head was quickly smothered by shame. How cowardly could he get?

The big body lying there breathed better; its heart action strengthened. But the brain waves had become almost flat. And, though vitality began to show in that bearded, Jovian face, its blankness was that of vegetal idiocy. The same negative benefit as dying, and the same wrongness.

"Lance," Cara said.

Something new had already started in the color-coded brain-wave display. The straightness writhed—then went into jumping, knotting, scrambling confusion. Until it began to settle toward organized rhythms—sharp peaks and dips, odd, looping sinusoids.

Tolliver's empty eyes blinked, then livened. The wolf-glare, usually gentled in the recent past, returned. No—now it was stronger than it had ever been. Harder, in those pale-yellow irises? Deadly in a way? Cold? Remote? Truly demoniac?. And was this much more to worry about—in addition to preexisting circumstances? Destin felt his goose-pimples humping up all over. If Tolliver's uncertain tinkering with his brain had had the result that was now suggested, then this creature could truly be a threat and a challenge to the ancient race of Man.

Tolliver had swept the oxygen mask aside. His whiskery lips struggled to move, his thick tongue to modulate his croaking voice:

"Thanks . . . Your help wasn't—needed. I managed—alone."

"What now, then?" Destin asked, rather stupidly, he thought.

Again that growled, blurred voice:

"Go away—all of you! Leave me—with my Cara—

while I continue with clearing—healing—the disruption inside my skull! Tell the staff to go home—if they wish. Go, too—any, or every one of you. If you think that is safer—better. Tonight the baby will come—I know. Tell this—right away—if you choose. It won't matter—because—as soon as we can—we three will show ourselves—whatever happens."

"Is that quite sensible, Lance?" Archmere stammered, struggling to recover his usual, genial aplomb. "And are you—as you might put it—any smarter than you were?"

Like a courageous bull that has been stunned by a sledgehammer, Tolliver had struggled to his feet.

"Smarter?" he echoed. "I can't tell yet. Maybe even more a fool. . . . Though a truth must be made known. I will see how people react. It is the completer test. We three are what is to be judged—my mate, somewhat; me, much more; and our daughter maybe most of all! Whether we are a good thing—in enough eyes—or too much of a disaster in too many—if there isn't enough readiness. I'm not optimistic. But at least I will be surer—understand better—for choosing some action. . . . Now leave us!"

Cara smiled, holding on to friendships past her man's alien grimness. But in another second, she touched her middle with the flat of her hand and winced cheerfully.

"It's starting." She chuckled. "Lance and I will handle this ordinary phase—though we appreciate your concern about it. Don't wear out any carpets pacing. Now we want some privacy. So scram!"

Abbott and Destin might have tried to linger as a standby safeguard, but Rolf Hoffmann, with a cherubic grin and an indicating jerk of his head, guided them out of the apartment and followed them and Archmere into the roof garden.

"By all indications, she should have an easy delivery," he said. "Lance made sure of that months ago—even if he's feeling kind of fuzzy now. The difficulties are elsewhere."

At 21:00—nine p.m.—an hour early, Destin shut down phone contact with the ISC tower. There had had to be too many evasive answers to queries. As usual at night, he bolted the doors of heavy bulletproof glass at the principal entrance to the 120th floor, which was devoted entirely to matters relating to Tolliver. Inside the glass doors was an even stouter sliding panel of steel, which had been installed shortly after the mutant had been quartered here. Destin secured that, too—also as usual—yet now with a sharpened intimation of siege, as of raising the drawbridge of a castle. The other, smaller, elevator-tended service entrances to the floor had been kept locked from the inside, except when in use, since Tolliver's residence in the ISC building. Now those who had elected to remain with him during the critical interval at hand were immured against easy intrusion.

Destin was the last to leave the richly appointed reception lounge immediately inside the steel panel. His soft-soled shoes made no sound on the tiles as he moved among the desks and transparent partitions of the administration room and went out to lean against the roof garden parapet, and to listen to the muted murmur from the street far below.

Occasional shrillnesses, clear but faint with distance, pierced the blended crowd sound and came drifting up through the humid, late-spring night like splinters of fury, fear, and incomprehension, breaking loose from the restraint of waiting:

"Logic and illogic! Oh—you goddamn, stupid, idiotic cretins! Can't you see? It's just a—"

"You're the cretins! Who can live with this? We just want peace! We want to be left alone, without any of this way-ahead-of-us-people stuff! You want to be fossils—extinct?"

"Peace! Peace! 'A little child shall lead them.' "

"Fanatics!"

The clarity was washed over and erased by a wave of screams, curses, and yells and tinkles of shattering glass. Battle. Sirens howled. Police vehicles. Ambulances. The

sound level lowered again to something like that of nearby surf.

Destin knew that he could have experienced this whole incident, and others like it elsewhere more completely by television, but he was tired of that. He could hardly have said that he enjoyed this direct, real mode of observation either, yet it was eerie—it fascinated him. It tightened his hide with visions of grim certainties to come within the next few hours. No—better not imagine too much—exaggerate.

One thing he had known before—and now it was proven: a crowd such as was now below had not gathered casually. It knew what it waited for. The word, the rumor, had reached it. How? Simple—and it had not been a means they could stop, for there was no value in hiding anything—ultimately—against a clear right to know. The staff members, not resident in the ISC tower, and urged to go home to their dwellings in this emergency, had known, and though they were generally closemouthed, inevitably someone had whispered.

From under a blossoming peach tree, Destin craned his neck out over the parapet of the roof garden and peered down the side of the building to the speckled, undulating brownness in the dim-seeming street illumination that was a ribbon of people packed together. Red lights winked among them. But they were beyond much police channeling.

Now Destin peered across to the roof garden of the building opposite, searching for another kind of indication.

He gave a nervous start when his arm was touched.

“Oh, Lind—hi!”

“There couldn’t be worse trouble yet, could there, Ted? Archmere phoned in, suggesting increased protection, only about an hour ago.”

“The protection has come, Linda. Army brass, or somebody, must have anticipated. Look—over there, behind that azalea bush.”

Flashlight beams flitted about on the opposite roof top, fleetingly revealing helmeted heads and other parts of efficiently toiling shapes, and the stubby, ugly object, fitted with a curved, dun-colored shield, that they were struggling to set up. Sandbags were also being piled in front of it.

"An LA-17 laser-beam projector, particularly useful for antiaircraft defense," Destin said softly. "See—on the roof of that other building, too. I didn't think it would get this extreme."

"Will they mount weapons over here in our garden, do you suppose, Teddy?"

"Who knows? I wouldn't imagine so. That might incite direct attack on this tower with heavy stuff."

"I wonder what those guys behind the weapons think themselves about Tolliver?" Linda mused wryly. "Sure—they're discipline-hardened to keep their cool, and are ordered to defend him. Still, wouldn't it be nice if some of them would as soon finish off Lance and his issue, and the rest of us here with them?"

"Lind, you do pose the most charming possibilities." Destin chuckled sourly. "Not much good in worrying about that, though. Have you any idea how the more immediate concern is going?"

"Okay, I guess, Teddy. I eavesdropped a bit outside their quarters. I heard their voices, but not a whimper. Though why should there be? He ought to know, and she's a rugged lady. Reg and Rolf aren't so nosy. They're in Rolf's place, talking. Gosh, I'm tired, Ted, love! What excuse have I got for that?"

"So let's go bury some of the strain in each other."

Just before midnight, Tolliver evidently switched on the intercom system. A lusty young yell came through it, but quickly quieted. Abbott and Destin, struggling toward alertness from sleep, groped and fumbled. Then they heard Tolliver's slurred, roaring speech:

"One small daughter . . . as we knew! About three kilos! One baby . . . not so unlike . . . any other! So big

a deal? Go to your beds! Relax! There is no harm intended. Give her and her mother till tomorrow evening to rest. Then . . . if you still want it . . . you'll see this family. Good night."

Destin and Abbott realized that what the mutant was saying was being broadcast from the radio antenna atop the tower. Here was another minor convenience that Hoffmann and Archmere had prearranged.

Seconds later, Linda and Ted were back at the roof garden parapet, peering over. The blended sounds of the throng below had risen in pitch, surely indicating that it had heard. There were curses, shouts, cheers; some group started to sing; but the massive mingling of voices quickly smothered its own details. Full disaster hovered at the triggering point, and then somehow the crowd began to disperse—not totally peacefully, but with some semblance of order.

"There's something about a baby that's rubbed into the way most of us are," Linda breathed with relief.

"Instinctive biological tenderness," Destin agreed. "Even for a tiger cub. Or a newborn demigoddess. Or an appealing infant devil, as some seem to believe. Everybody has had a long day, and now they've got some of what they were waiting for. A kind of temporary ending to sort out in their heads before whatever comes next. It's almost tomorrow already."

Archmere spoke from behind Destin and Abbott:

"Go see the kid, why don't you two? I don't think I want to sleep much the rest of the night. Anyhow, somebody better stay awake and sort of patrol around."

Archmere went into the administration room. Experimentally, he touched a control, activating the phones. At once there was a deluge of ringings. No sense in trying to contend with that. He fingered an opposed control, restoring quiet. Then he worked the coffee maker. As he sipped at a steaming cup, he figured that Destin or somebody would soon be joining him.

CHAPTER 20

Destin had not meant to repeat a pointless cautioning:

"If you talked to them alone first, Lance—maybe."

The unsure, desperate words washed futilely against Tolliver's stubborn, still-dazed eyes; he had not yet recovered from the effects of his brain tampering. But he growled out his rough response:

"No. Our family is three. The impact will come anyhow . . . and be the same. Trying to show facts slowly . . . can't help."

Neither Destin nor the others could find any substantive fault with this argument. Serious, factional battling had begun in the night and had heightened during the day. In the city alone, there were hundreds of dead and thousands of injured.

In the room where the TV cameras were, the illumination over the small rostrum had a brutal brilliance as Tolliver and his mate took their places there, standing together. The baby was couched along his forearm.

Tolliver was in tan slacks and long-sleeved shirt, collar open. Cara's costume, though of soft blue, was of like simplicity. She hadn't even rouged her cheeks to mask her slight post-parturitional haggardness. Everything in the background was harshly, austerly plain. Fine furnishings had been removed; it was Cara's idea that nothing pretentiously elegant should be visible.

Destin, Abbott, Archmere, and Hoffmann hovered in shadow, out of the view of the lenses.

Looking on, the impression that Destin got was vaguely that of an execution scaffold scene—the victims a huge, Jovian-bearded man, a beautiful, hardy woman, and their anonymous but appealing infant—merely a white-blanketed bundle.

The TV cameras, broadcasting live, began their faint yet fateful whisper.

Tolliver rumbled out a few perhaps rather naive phrases. His experience with the outer world was still too slight to make him a skilled speaker. Further, from whatever disruption he had caused so recently within his cranial cortex, he was in poor shape for a public appearance; he looked stunned, and his speech was slurred and broken. But he had an earnestness, and still a deep, biological comprehension:

"Hello, everybody. Here we are—Cara, Electra, and I—Lance Tolliver. We mean no harm at all. . . . Only good—when asked for. I don't want to command anyone—nor would my doing so be right. When I was very young, I only wished to be like other people—to blend in—to stop being alone. If there is wrong in me—to you—it is in my—and my daughter's—existence and differentness—not in any intention of mine. Some will believe this. Others won't. Even believing, there will be disagreement—we hope not too much. I and my daughter and everyone are under test. I want to be a friend who worries—or hurts—no one. I won't say anything else about that now. You want . . . a better look at . . . Electra?"

At least several billion people who had been waiting for hours saw and heard at once. It was by no means the first time that there had been so large an audience, with its attention centered simultaneously on one small scene. The technology of communications had made such a possibility real decades ago. For the viewing of a sports contest, a festival, a natural catastrophe, a political process, a social confrontation, a launching of some exploratory vehicle from Earth-orbit into deeper space.

But never had it happened before with such intensity or such unity of concentration—though not of opinion.

Tolliver, mutant, phenomenon with strange biological powers, hated or loved, extender of life, promiser of marvels, demon threat to mankind's survival, demigod, or just the latest episode in a changing world—depending on one's viewpoint. Yes—he, seldom thought of without some strong emotion—had been a familiar television presence, visible, acting, and sometimes speaking a little, since early spring. He—perhaps crudely, exaggeratedly bulge-muscled. Now, here he was—reemphasized, made more than just himself, because he was with his woman and his child, whose capabilities might exceed her sire's.

Tolliver didn't say any more for several seconds. Instead, like a gentle giant with a live doll, he tugged the blanket away from his daughter's face and shoulders. There was nothing very remarkable to behold just then—a normal, well-formed, healthy infant, fuzzed with darkish hair on its high pate. Until Tolliver drew out a tiny arm, so that the diaphanous, pink, azure-tinted membrane was shown along its underside, as one might display the extended wing of a bird.

"Yes . . . in Electra . . . they carried over . . . from what I tried," he remarked mildly. "I don't know whether they will work . . . or not. Or if it matters. Now you have seen. And we wait . . . offering . . . and wishing for . . . friendship. That's all I'll say . . . at present."

The picture of the Tollivers was caused to dim slowly for the viewers of countless screens. It was the old, dramatic, sentimental fadeout, still appealing to many, but worn very thin to others.

Archmere activated the TV set there in the camera room, for those in the tower to gather around and observe the public response. They weren't very optimistic.

There was silence at first. Assessment, sorting out meaning, behind myriad faces in thousands of crowded streets, in the city and far beyond, as the TV scenes shifted automatically, tumbling around the Earth, to give a comprehensive sampling.

Here was the moment of truth, and decision, brought out of the argument stage and into forced choice at last for all those with strong feelings—by sight, reality, presence of the three—was three a mystic number? So—each person or group, take your place, select—for or against or neutral—if you think your futures are on the line as never before! Even those courageous or indifferent enough to want to wait peacefully in their homes to see what would happen, were spurred toward fury by those excitable others who, not by intention but by their frantic wants and fears, would rip all stability apart. Too much opposing, nervous force had been built up. In a vast, swift-communications-linked society, so often in controversy about something, and leaping from one mini-crisis to the next, now the tragic splintering of viewpoint in a score of ways was perhaps a mathematical certainty. For an issue had become explosively compelling.

Very soon, then, from the TV set, came joyful cries, smiles, cheers, even hymn-singing. But almost as quickly there were shoutings of rage and denial. The flood of people jostled, entangled, struck out at each other, shrieking epithets: "Bastards! Fanatics! Ignorant fools! Stone Age imbeciles!"

Meanwhile the hordes separated themselves, clumping together in diverse factions, there to confront each

other with greater fury. Fragments of solid refuse were hurled, along with curses: "You'd kill them! He the best that ever happened—and his baby!"

And the ripostes: "Yes—kill them! He promises like any rotten politician! But he's far worse! Wolf-eater! We won't have him or his devil spawn! They are much too much!"

Dr. Archmere picked Ian Jannis's broadcast—almost a forgotten voice now in the conflicting news flow from many similar and jaggedly opposed sources—out of the general tumult. He stopped the automatic channel shifting to hold Jannis, who still had his dry, calm significance, in some ways quite relevant, even to his particular bias:

"A family, this Tolliver says—a *royal* family? Are we, pledged so long to democracy, suddenly to become royalists? Ah, that is a mild and innocent prospect! Compared to another, which, to some, seems much more fitting! Rather, another religious trinity? The human family parallel. How was it at first? Corn-god father, Earth-goddess mother, divine child symbolizing the rebirth of life in the springtime. Is this to be—literally? Not anymore a harmless—even comforting—sometimes-fantasy? Are we to knock our foreheads seven times in the dust before thrones? In pagan homage, far older than the Christian? For what? The antique bribery of promised immortality, counteracting the fear of death? The wish for a Great Power to take all our cares and responsibilities away? As if we were immature? I'm sorry if I tread on earnest convictions. Tolliver and his child are only biology; let them not befuddle our heads with illusions that they are gods, or God! Whatever good they might do, we can surely do too, in time—on our own. We don't need them! Yes we must resist all forms of nonsense, wisely. The situation is grave. We should not sell our souls—maybe into slow extinction if courses favored by some are followed. We must fight."

Archmere's questioning glance was met by vertical

head movements from those around him. So, at his touches, scene and opinion sources shifted successively to others. Jake Conway first:

"This is not 'Hail, Caesar!' or anything of the sort. Nor any confused tangling of science with religion. Nor of sense with nonsense, either! This is evolutionary progression—as was meant to be. Nor is it so terribly urgent, if we keep our heads instead of breaking each other's! This is so serious only because so many are overstressed and hysterical."

"Cultists! Compulsive worshipers—can't they see! Are there always demagogues—and those who follow them? One way or another?"

"We are *not* cultists. Not *our* group! Why do they attack us? We will fight back! We must!"

"Why, then, do the cultists attack us?"

"Everything will collapse. The economy will break down. No food, no water . . ."

Archmere shifted the television views back to the city streets, where, in the gloom of night, half the lamps had already been shattered. Masses of people lunged at or were pushed at each other, to mix and strike out, to fall and be trampled. Police vehicles and ambulances howled, blinked redly, or blazed, overturned. Now there were military vehicles, too—even an occasional tank—and helmeted men—which only seemed to worsen the murderous chaos. Groups of civilians of differing persuasions—they had surely been preparing for this for weeks—were firing at each other. And there were snipers at work.

Archmere's move, either to change channels or to shut off the set, was forstalled by a heavy explosion somewhere not too far off. The whole ISC tower quivered with the shock. The screen stayed lit, but pictures and sound ended at once.

"Somebody blew up an important part of the local central video!" Ted Destin exclaimed hoarsely.

Dr. Rolf Hoffmann gave a short nod—his bow to

the obvious. "In a way, a blessing," he remarked. "Though we should still be able to receive from other cities via satellite—unless they're in the same fix. Then, of course, there's radio—that's less vulnerable. For my part, I'd as soon remain out of touch for a bit, since I have a general idea of what's happening."

Hoffmann had hardly finished saying this much when there was another blast, heavier, and closer in. The lights went out for a moment, until an emergency power system in the building activated itself.

"Why are we sitting here by the cameras?" Destin challenged. "I'm going to look around."

He looked at Tolliver, who sat slumped on a divan that had been removed from the rostrum for the showing of the three. Cara was sitting beside her man, with her hand protectingly on his shoulder. Tolliver's expression was bemused and withdrawn. His infant daughter was still on his arm. She whimpered once. Her small face screwed up and her eyes opened wide, as with a kind of alertness improbable in one so very young—as if she sensed distant things wrong, apart from the loud noises she had heard. Tolliver made chirping, wordless sounds to her, and touched her head lightly, gropingly with a great, hesitant finger. Destin experienced a congruous-incongruous vagary: that Tolliver was like a big, yet-unknowing male gorilla, trying to learn how to be gentle with his first, tiny offspring.

Tolliver's daughter, reassured, lapsed back into slumber. But the poignance lingered. And one thing seemed very certain: Tolliver was dazed, in poor shape to deal with the present, much larger, and no doubt crescendoing crisis. Washed out as a man—*not* a superman—just when the need was greatest.

Still, somehow, he was looked to for guidance.

"What do you think we should do now, Lance?" Archmere inquired conversationally.

The question didn't even seem to register on the mutant for a good twenty heartbeats.

"Huh? Ah . . . I don't know. Nothing, I guess. Wait." These words were wool-thick.

"Leave him be!" Cara said sharply. And then, in a milder tone: "I'll take Electra now, Lance."

The others investigated all the rooms and laboratories of the 120th floor—the Tolliver domain—to be sure of the state of things during what must, at best, be considered a siege. The staff had gone except a young couple—Ella and Doug—who took care of the apartments and did the cooking. Linda found them in the kitchen, Ella near tears with fright.

The group gravitated back to the administration room, with its several deserted desks, their tops left somewhat in disarray. Here was the nerve center of the establishment, and here it was quickly discovered that the communication links with all the other floors were dead—a circumstance which couldn't come about without some human agency. And in a building as big as this one, who could tell what was happening even a couple of stories below without signal contacts? The lack was ominous.

Destin had come in from checking the roof garden. Nothing unexpected there: smoke-hazed night sky, red with the reflections of fires. Helicopter gunship patrolling. Sounds of destruction from far below. Across the way, on other rooftops, the laser teams were still on guard. He had not tried to attract their attention, since they might take him for an unwelcome intruder and slice him in half with their blades of polarized light.

Because it was no good remaining in the administration room, the beleaguered group had moved to the reception lounge just beyond it, first maybe because it was more comfortable, and second because it was immediately behind the thick, steel slide panel that blocked the main entrance to their refuge. Their thought was to make their first defensive stand here.

Cara still carried her infant, but she also had her heavy handgun holstered at her belt. Tolliver sat lump-

ishly beside her. From a tiny radio, Archmere was getting fresh information. The worst was that, in Montana, a multi-megaton warhead had been detonated while still on the mobile missile launcher on the ground. Never before had senseless protest reached such a level of magnitude. Two more attempts at similar horror had been frustrated by alert and determined watchers.

Hoffmann winced. His normally rubicund face lost color.

"Most folks still seem to keep their brains," he muttered. "But it's a mathematical certainty that in any large population there'll be a few extremely clever nuts. So there's always the hazard that one will get past any security."

Destin and Abbott sat side by side, clutching each other's fingers, right hand to left.

Rather irrelevantly, Reginald Archmere grumbled something about his once enjoying public attention, but that now . . .

With a kind of distracted nonchalance—or in concession to the needs of existence no matter what—Cara began nursing her baby. Yet in a mood shift no doubt based on worsening circumstances, she discarded her protectiveness toward her man and urged him sharply:

"Lance, you ought to talk to all those crazy people again! We still have the radio transmitter!"

Destin doubted that this suggestion had the slightest merit, considering how Tolliver had regressed, sunken into his inside, or into darkest despond. It occurred to Destin again that that tearless, cold, unseeing glare might conceal terrible unknowns and contrivings. Might his brain meddling have made him truly an alien, unsympathetic fiend, as many had surely believed since their first awareness of him? Now who could be sure?

The bemused mutant spoke at last in a slurred mumble:

"It wouldn't . . . help. Might add . . . more damage. Not enough are ready. Time. There must be . . . a simple

solution. But I feel . . . no smarter than before. Maybe . . . I must die. But let's wait . . . a little longer . . . while I think further."

No one challenged or commented on these musings. A small, diverting optimism was gleaned from the garbled radio reports. Archmere put it together:

"It seems that the contamination of that warhead blast isn't as bad as it might be. There's only a light breeze, blowing it northwest, over sparsely inhabited country."

Doug, the man of all work, brought coffee from the kitchen. Ella had checked her fresh outburst of scared weeping. Several minutes passed. Once, Tolliver turned his shaggy head toward the closed steel slide panel at the entrance. Along with the building's communication system, the television eye for seeing beyond the panel was out. Tolliver's movement seemed to indicate his return to alertness. Yet in a moment he seemed to subside again into lethargy.

Then the others heard. Rubbery sounds, as of small wheels, from beyond that stout door. And glassy clinkings, dim, but unmistakably there, stealthy and threatening.

"Guests," Hoffmann pronounced in wry sarcasm.

"Um—I imagine they'd make louder noises if they were friendly," Archmere said softly. "I wonder—should we try to hail them? Let them know we know they're here? I supposed that an attack might be attempted from the roof, in spite of those troops guarding us. But from inside the building—up so many floors? Unless the soldiers at ground level have been overwhelmed."

"Or if some of them with wavering convictions changed their minds and sides," Hoffmann commented. "Not that I'm accusing anybody offhand of disloyalty. In a chaotic situation, and in a big building like this one, there could be tricks, ways, roundabout paths for overcoming the most careful defense."

"Okay," Archmere murmured. "Still, to get to us here they'd have to break through those outer doors of heavy glass first. Then through the steel—which is laminated with energy-resistant plastic."

"I dunno," Hoffmann responded softly and dryly. "If they are able enough to get to our very gates, do you suppose that they have neglected to bring adequate means for entering?"

"Then we're cornered, Rolf," Archmere said. "But before we try to hide or take other defensive measures we'd better hail them—pound, yell, make sure."

"No!"

The word was low, intense, and grating. And it came from Tolliver, who was now on his feet. Eyes swung toward him and Cara. She still sat, but she had put her breast away. She held her child close with her left arm, and she had her pistol in her right hand.

"I hear their radio voices in my head. I'll go out—meet them directly. Not just by camera—or microphone."

It was Tolliver, stating bluntly, quietly, and beyond denial what he would do.

Like the others of the group—except Cara with her child—Destin was now standing. He had said nothing. Now he wanted to protest—to tell Tolliver that he would be killed, and his purpose immutably lost. But he did not. It seemed to him that matters had gone beyond such cautionings. He too felt dazed. Wistfully, vaguely, for an instant, he found himself groping to refresh the clarity of his own fondest hope for outcome: just to go along with a remarkable, natural jump forward in biological development; to ride with it and see what happened. It was too rich a thing to lose—let alone be destroyed! It was something to defend! Could he be less brave and reckless than the one in whom it was contained? So he heard his own pride- and comparison-driven words:

"I'm going with you, Lance."

"As you choose," Tolliver growled, still sounding somewhat blurred. "I can't tell you . . . what to do. But wait! Hear that? I think they're cutting the lock out of the outer . . . the glass . . . doors."

There was a faint, muffled, rather prolonged hissing. Then silence. Could Tolliver detect more?

"Ted . . ." Linda began in an almost pleading tone.

"Let him, Lind," Cara urged in an even voice. "A man has to be what he feels called on to be. I like him, too; he's my cousin. And I love my Lance, who'll go out ahead of him."

"Close quickly . . . after us," Tolliver said very low. "You, Rolf. Now . . . just enough. Open!"

Destin had little idea of what might happen—except that their intention was surprise.

Hoffmann fingered the servo-control that unbolted and moved the massive sliding panel. He let it move to less than a meter width—ample for Tolliver to lunge quickly through, and Destin to follow, for the outer doors had been swung wide.

Before the panel could thud shut at his heels, Destin saw and heard the arc and crash of a mighty, booted kick: the mutant was in full nerve and muscle drive as never quite before now. The delicate guts of a small laser projector on wheels went tinkling and scattering across the elevator landing.

There was an instant in which a pair of technicians in gray uniforms stared in gap-jawed wonderment. Tolliver seemed to tap at one with a short jab of unseeable speed that made the fellow crumple and skid among the wreckage of the shattered apparatus.

Tolliver grabbed, shouldered, and seemed to dive, with the other technician, down the first flight of the stairwell, using the fellow as a shield as a dozen or so armed intruders rushed from behind an angle of the elevator shafts' housing, where they must have been waiting in concealment for their laser men to cut their way into the tower fortress.

Bullets splattered and reechoed in a stunning burst of noise. Destin, in his own emergency-stretched time perception, saw the man whom Tolliver carried quiver and jerk as he was hit. Then the whole activity was a receding clatter of boots and howls of hate—of flight and pursuit—that faded away down the stairwell.

“Get him! Get that devil! We can’t live with such . . .”

Destin found that he had spread-eagled himself defensively against the wall across from the elevators. He had expected to be killed. Instead, he had been ignored—scarcely noticed. And he was alone. Belatedly, a piece of plaster, loosened by the impacts of bullets fifty centimeters above his head, tumbled down upon him, dusting him with more white powder. Yes—ignominy. And silence.

He sprang into action—dashed down the stairs to the floor below—almost tripping and falling in the last stride. He sighed heavily—made his way to the elevators, and fingered the down control, which lighted up. The lifts, then, were probably still working—as they ought to be, with the emergency power on.

As he waited, he thought of Tolliver, who, even burdened, and perhaps wounded, was likely taking each flight of stairs at a single, downward bound. As he out-distanced his murderous pursuers, he could toss away the shielding man, limbering himself further.

Destin’s scattered wits fumbled again for comprehension. Just what had driven Tolliver to—and sustained—his desperate burst of physical energy? Defense of self, his child, his mate, his purpose, the shape of human eras to come? Importances in the balance, under extreme, brief crisis of test. They could all be lost forever, with reason in a death struggle with insanity. All of these things, of course—or perhaps. No occasion now for further pondering.

The elevator arrived almost as quickly as he had hoped. Then it was plummeting. There was one stop. A

variety of frightened, angry people, including two grim guards, got on. Destin, with a known face, was pridelessly glad that he blended into the general dishevelment and diversion of attention to other matters, and was thus unrecognized. Blessed anonymity! No one said much—perhaps fearing opposed sentiments in whoever was pressed close against him. So there were no clues about what was happening for Destin to pick up—only grunts, gasps, weeping, and muttered curses.

Destin was spewed out at lobby level with the others. His senses grabbed for some instantaneous impression of what was here. Total, multifaceted chaos! No—not quite. Opposing groups had broken into the building and were fighting. Yet a number of armed and helmeted figures were trying to regain control. The voice noise alone was tremendous from the surging people. There was light and there were smells—disinfectant from the first-aid area and stinks of vomit and excrement—most unglorious realities of human commitment to beliefs worth fighting for. Kill those who don't believe as we do, or their believing will destroy us—along with the precious value which we heroically defend! In spite of not wanting such bitter thoughts, they were forced into Destin's awareness. Idealism—beautiful to cherish—but too often flawed by one-sidedness—innocence, which could be just another term for ignorance—an incomplete grasp of Reality. Ideals—fine, yes—but best with one's feet squarely on the ground. If that—if full knowledge of truth—was ever possible. Another conundrum. Though mankind was more admirable than not—commonly well intentioned and kindly—but often confused and enraged by infectious fears. Damn! Drop the philosophy!

Ted Destin's boot soles slipped on something—blood, or maybe brains. He stumbled over a corpse. He saw sprawled bodies—in particular, one of a young man, lying on a lobby divan with his belly ripped open, perhaps with a knife. A jostled, black-skinned medic was trying to suture the wound.

Familiar phrases of insult and rigid denial, and contrary ones of approval and even worship, were slamming against Destin's eardrums. And now, suddenly, they reached a freshened peak of conflicting passion, in many voices:

"The wolf-eater! The anti-divine! He's been driven out of his hole! He's been chased down! He's out in the street! Grab him—finish him! Don't let him get away or he'll have us all for slaves—test animals!"

And, in contrast:

"It's New Prometheus! Messiah—Messiah! Giver of Life. Jesus returned. Utopia could be here—after ages of trouble! Protect him. Save him. Die for him. Those swine want to kill him! Hurry! We could be too late! Demigod . . ."

And somewhere between these two extremes, somewhat more controlled—hence, thinner—cries:

"Reason! Reason! Common sense! Peace. Peace . . ."

Destin began to struggle to get out of the building. The new focus of attention seemed to be just outside the main entrance. In the press of bodies, Destin's effort might have been impossible—except that, by luck, he was thrust into an outward flow of people and almost hurled into the street.

Once more his senses grabbed for impressions, so that he might behave effectively instead of becoming a passive, unknowing hunk of flesh to which things merely happened.

Here was a battleground several hours old, with the furious surging undiminished. Overturned vehicles were ablaze in the night. The redness glistened on patches of pavement, slick with gore and other body juices. Neither police, soldiery, nor civilians showed any definitive cohesion; in fact, of the first two categories, there appeared to be some who had deserted their sworn duty to join with other combatants whose sentiments were closer to their own. Gunfire was in a momentary lull, but vocal sounds were like a continuous howl of mounting rage.

Fleetingly, Destin saw a middle-aged man leaning against a wrecked car, a look of horror, exhaustion, and disbelief on his bashed and bleeding face, as if he had never realized a fight could be this bad. And yet he turned around grimly, doggedly, to rejoin it. This was the phase of war that had been reached: well past any initial, arrogant, almost adventurous excitement and into that deadly, slogging region of mind where physical pain, grief for someone killed or broken, and madness against those who did it take the place of those more elegant drives, even past energies spent to the point of collapse. With a yell, the man staggered back toward the center of the fray, brandishing a bloodied baseball bat. Conflict, once seriously joined, has its own stubborn will—almost beyond anyone's choice.

Not quite as quickly as a computer might have done, yet fast enough, Destin totalized the significance of the present, intense focus of activity: a squirming, clutching, grabbing, screaming heap of human forms—men, boys, girls, soldiery, police—a cluster of excited worms would have been far less active. Any comedy, here, was far submerged by wrong-way tragedy and irony. And there were enough articulate war cries among the wordless screams and grunts to make the situation entirely plain:

“Got him! Smash the super-shit! Don't let those rotten, dumb bastards have him!”

“It's New Prometheus! Oh—Gawd! Immortality . . . Don't let these retarded cretins hurt him! Save him!”

For and against. But did it matter much to the welfare of Tolliver, obviously at the bottom of that disheveled, bloodied pile, which was which? He was as vulnerable to both sides as a prize bone among a pack of contesting dogs.

By just what path the mutant had exited from the ground level of the 120-story stairwell and into the street was a nearly irrelevant question. Destin rushed to join the rescuers.

It was then that there was a Stentorian roar, and the

heap of furious humanity seemed literally to explode in all directions. Destin was hurled backward, but managed to retain his footing. In the second before he could turn his distracted eyes to look again, a horrible stench, not only to make his stomach retch, but to cause his hackles to rise with a promise of imponderable hells, outraged his nose, intruding on the pervasive smells of fire and violence in the humid night.

Destin's gaze recentered just soon enough to see the giant fling away the last of the forms that had buried him. Tolliver stood free, tall and broad, the flickering illumination of the scene picking out the ridges of his gargantuan musculature and accenting the shaggy splendor of his face and head. Except for a broad belt, and shreds of his slacks, he had been ripped naked. Blood was on him from cheek to sole, some of it not his own. His wing membranes were in tatters. His stance was like a great capital A. And his mighty voice roared on, unslurred now, and awesome:

"I did not let you kill me! Yet! Though that could be best! Then you might stop killing and maiming each other! Is this what you want?"

The sudden quiet had a shock in it; it was nearly timid. Destin heard only the crackle of fire, the moans of some dying person, and the beat of his own hurrying pulses in his ears. But he saw cameras being raised. When and if TV broadcasts were restored, everyone could watch and hear the present events.

At last somebody shouted boldly:

"Lead us, New Prometheus! Your myth namesake stole fire from the gods for Man! You are doing more! Some of us have the intelligence to follow! So lead us—show us the way!"

And there were other, supportive yells:

"Yes! Master, Master! We love you! Tell us what to do!"

The growls of the opposition lagged a few seconds, made hesitant and unsure by Tolliver's reason and his overpowering aspect and capabilities—though it was

these things about him that they feared and hated most. Soon there were other shouts and grumblings:

“ ‘*Master*’ indeed—in our modern, supposedly enlightened world! Words for silly, trusting cultists who want us to join their spineless march into extinction! You’re a misbegotten offspring of nuclear technology, Tolliver! Right! Right! We don’t want you or your spawn, Tolliver! Fiend—he stinks! Was there ever such a choking stench? Worse—he wants to inseminate our girls!”

These denunciations in scattered voices sounded fierce enough, yet to Destin they seemed to have lost conviction. For a moment he felt that Tolliver might have roared his enemies down, overawed them with his lonely, battered, dark-region magnificence, ordered even them, and restored calm by dictatorial decree. But when he shouted again, still in clear, unbroken phrases, he gave no commands:

“I am not ‘master’! I compel or lead *none*! I have said much the same before! I am sad that I am mistrusted, when I mean only to be a friend! There is no final good in mastery, except of one’s self! I want no worship, nor do I much admire bowing worshipers who give too much of themselves to leaders! Maybe we all need another fifty thousand years before we are truly ready for the complete yielding of Body Knowledge to Mind. Thus, I might be too soon. I don’t know yet what I will do. But be assured of one thing—I will father no children except by my own mate! However, there are matters which I would like to have time to explore and think about. So I have a request: be as peaceful as you can for three days—longer if you can manage. By then I should know better what course I will follow. It may be that I and mine will go very far off. Or I might die, or seek to stay. But, by choice, I will hurt nobody! So is it agreed?”

As the echoes of Tolliver’s immense voice died away, there was a brief, almost stunned stillness. Then a spat-

tering of responses, like the start of a rain shower. It quickly resembled a full downpour:

"Agreed! But you *can't* leave us, Tolliver! Or die! We need your gifts! Immortality! You're still New Prometheus to us, Tolliver! We won't let anybody make you leave!"

The groans of regret and the persistent pledges of fealty were plain to hear. The growls of rage and suspicion had lost emphasis, but they persisted too:

"Treacherous freak! Who knows what a thing like him is? Three days, he wants—to cook up what rotten tricks? Yes—when we almost had him—the stinking demon!"

But from a small crowd that showed few signs of having been involved in the hysterical, factional battling, somebody called out with reasonable though tired patience:

"Look, let's all go home and get some sleep."

Tolliver nodded grateful acknowledgment toward this man. Then the mutant boomed further:

"A fine idea. I thank everybody who stays restrained. Good night."

He strode toward the ISC Building. Some braved the residue of the odor he had released from his flesh for defense, meaning to intercept him—either to murder or to protect him. But he avoided any contact. Instead of going into the chaotic lobby, he crouched and then leaped straight upward, nearly four meters, to catch the overhang above the entrance. He swung himself above it, and then climbed. Somebody fired a rifle at him but missed because others had seen the fellow's move. He was grabbed but not killed. This much forbearance was now shown. Yet there was almost open battle again.

Three stories up, Tolliver reached a ledge, where Destin saw him enter through a smashed window. Likely it was by this same route in reverse that he had completed his long journey down the long stairwell to the street. Neither time were his tears noticed.

CHAPTER 21

Destin got back to the tower refuge promptly by elevator, but, because of the inoperative communications system, had to pound on the steel panel and shout out who he was to gain admittance. Linda, who had worried that he might have met with misfortune, fussed over him a bit.

Tolliver, though he climbed the whole way by stair from the 3rd to the 120th floor, arrived only a couple of minutes later. In consideration for the others, he soaked in a deodorizing bath at once. His numerous injuries, superficial except for a bullet hole through one thigh, he could medicate in his own unique, internal fashion. But in the letdown from furious activity, he sprawled in a lounging chair in his and Cara's quarters, panting heavily. His mate and baby, Destin, Abbott, Hoffmann, and Archmere were around him.

Ted Destin had already told those who had stayed

behind what had happened in front of the ISC Building, though even before he had come back, they had heard most of it by radio.

"There were also a couple of items which I expect you adventurous ones both missed," Archmere offered. "Word came through just after you left us. Ian Jannis was stomped to death in his studio."

"No surprise," Tolliver grunted. "There are plenty of others to take his place."

"In exchange, somebody beheaded Jake Conway," Archmere added.

"The same comment applies," Hoffmann said.

"Which is part of stating that there's just a truce," Cara offered grimly. "Three days—maybe."

It was on Destin's tongue tip to say that there might not be even that much. Tolliver had made his plea, which had the tension-checking effect intrinsic to a hopeful pause in which solutions that might be acceptable to all were supposed to be under consideration. But could such a compromise ever come? Tolliver's bodily appearance and action in front of the ISC Building, though momentarily awing and calming, through the force of what he was, surely had the other effect of accenting further two basic, opposed, and furious opinions.

Optimism for peace still rested most on the large fraction of the people who were not prone to overexcitement. Then there had just been Tolliver's reasonableness, his earnest denunciation of any wish for personal power, and his humility.

Yet the additional demonstration of his superhuman capabilities had had mixed results. Though New Prometheus was the metaphorical name which only part of his vast and intense gathering of adherents had applied directly to him, all of the pro-Tolliver followers could feel its meaning now. Like his mythical namesake, he was battered and beleaguered, in effect bound to a rock, with a great, evil bird pecking at his liver. He was a

courageous, defiant, savage benefactor to defend and rescue. If he would not lead, he was at least one to follow. If he was taken away and destroyed, his benefits lost to everyone, that would be the fault of his stupid enemies! There would be revenge!

For the anti-Tolliver side, he was more than ever a being to dread and hate—a thing out of the inferno! Bloody, red-lit by fire, in the midst of disaster! Some of them had actually seen him, *smelled* him, felt his blows, watched him leap inhumanly high in escape, hadn't they? He was like a still arrogant fallen angel, his web wings tattered, his mouth still spewing smooth lies of peace, backing up false promises that could only bring unnatural, unfamiliar, bewildering strangeness! He had terrible might that no one could ever live with! Yet there were misguided fools—evil, too, in their avarice for physical benefits—who wanted to keep him alive—to be present—to throw every established condition into unknowable confusion!

Fantasizing this much, dismally yet realistically, Destin saw no solution that differing sides could agree on. There was a hard, fundamental deadlock that couldn't be reasoned out.

Linda touched her husband's arm. "Don't say it, Ted," she told him dryly. "We know. Maybe it won't be quite that bad."

Tolliver leaned, shirtless, in his chair, with his eyes closed. He had ripped away the dangling shreds of his useless wing membranes.

"Lots to do," he rumbled musingly, his speech once more a bit uneven. "But some moments for rest . . . to tell a new thing which I found out. My brains are on the mend from my latest tampering. So . . . from very deep in them . . . our common, ancestral memory has come clearer. About the one like me, during an ancient Ice Age. Even his name, Rud . . . which meant Darkness or Night . . . because he was born crippled and odd. Though his mutational gifts and lacks weren't caused by

man-produced radioactivity, but more naturally. I think it was a flare of radiation welling up from the sun's center. Anyhow, his shaggy tribe remembered that the sun burned very bright for a day . . . the year before Rud was born . . . making everyone sick.

"Rud managed to survive through childhood . . . meanwhile beginning to fix his warped body.

"There was a girl named Dee . . . Day or Light . . . by her mother, who was a friend of Rud's mother. Dee was also odd—lithe and quick, and with little body hair, probably from the same causes that had affected Rud—for, in the forest, there were many more than the usual number of mutations—mostly crippling and useless—among plants and animals. Yet Dee was not in the least crippled. She didn't have Rud's special linkage of Body to Mind, but she was smarter than the others of the shaggy folk. She jeered at Rud at first, for his crooked shape. But when she became nubile . . . and the rough males of the tribe tried to run her down . . . she escaped with Rud."

Tolliver's pauses had lessened as he went on:

"For . . . I think . . . two years, they lived in the salt marshes by the ice-packed ocean. There were plenty of fish. Rud grew very strong and straight. They came back and ruled the tribe, benignly yet firmly, for one warm season, devising better tools, weapons, and methods of hunting and fishing. Rud even made his subjects desist from relieving themselves inside their caves, for he knew about the microorganisms that cause disease, and that filth favors such hazards.

"Rud did most of what I have done, even thinking of growing wings, though it seems he didn't actually attempt that. He might perhaps have started a great biological and technological revolution that . . . in mere centuries, those sixty-or-so thousand years back . . . could have hurled the primitive savages of his tribe forward into the development of a civilization at least equal to ours. It may be as well that he could never try this.

"Winter approached. Like the birds, Rud felt an impulse to migrate southward—a thing he hadn't yet attempted himself. And he shouted at his tribesfolk. Why had they always holed up in their caves during the arctic months, dying of starvation and pneumonia? Now he and they would not be so ridiculous anymore! They would go where it was warm!

"Rud ordered them, drove them, against their will. Honoring him, they obeyed. Only, he had miscalculated the extent of the distances along the curving magnetic lines of force of the Earth. Birds flew far and fast. The Shaggy Folk could only plod.

"Besides, luck turned bad. A great, early blizzard caught them unsheltered on the open beaches. Fires wouldn't light or burn. Rud's tribe were a very simple people. They panicked. Try as he might, he could no longer control them. They scattered—froze. Wolves got them. Only Dee survived.

"Rud saved her by holding her close against him to give her his stepped-up warmth, while they were protected between rocks and under snow.

"Later, he continued to suffer guilt and regret for his poor judgment. That was how he came to try to improve his intelligence, as I have tried twice. But there was a cost of awful, bleak depression; this is how Body, often perverse in spite of its huge knowledge, insists to Mind that it is a reckless, irresponsible know-nothing for tampering with it—especially its brain! Believe me, I too have felt the agony of neuron congestion!

"Convinced of his complete uselessness, Rud swam out to sea, toward simple, natural salvage of discarded life—to feed other, sturdier life, in accordance with the regular cycle.

"Dee swam after Rud, to call him back. But she was no match for him in the violent water. Besides, though she loved him, she had a more compelling drive; she was pregnant. She returned to shore. Before long, she had a son. He lacked his sire's special gifts, but he grew

strong, straight, and bright. As a man, he rutted far and wide with the most desirable females he could discover.

"There was this much salvage. It was a benefit not quite clear before, since it had seemed to me that Rud had canceled himself entirely, leaving no issue. But from him and Dee the first true humans are descended. *Homo Sapiens*. The Neanderthals. Or the more favored, handsome Cro-Magnons. Or both."

Tolliver had finished the telling. The muffled blast of an explosion somewhere in the city sounded in the apartment.

"Like a legend, Lance," Linda remarked. "Are you hinting at some sort of repetition now? Your own death? Or even complete failure? That's crazy! We've always insisted that what you represent in human improvement deserves—*must have!*—its *full chance!* Anything less would be a scared idiot's waste! Worse than criminal!"

Tolliver's expression hardened—turned strained. Part of him seemed to withdraw again from those around him. Even from Cara.

"The test isn't played out to the end yet," he said. "There's something different . . . I have to try to . . . find out. In a hurry. It came to me plainer . . . out of my last sweat at sharpening my wits. Though I don't feel a lot wiser."

A fresh, eager animation came over the mutant. He got out of the lounging chair and turned to Destin.

"Ted, I know you're tired," he growled. "But a little more—please? Three floors down, in the Space Museum, there are some meteoroids. On impulse I examined them a while back. They weren't burn-eroded by falling through the atmosphere like meteorites, because they were gathered out there in space by sampling ships. Now will you come along with me? While I was scrubbing off my bad odor, I had Doug go fetch the keys from Maintenance."

Less precipitously than earlier that night, Tolliver descended three flights of stairs and unlocked the museum. Destin followed him inside. The Mutant had a second key for the display case.

"Here—specimen number 29 is the one I've been thinking of," Tolliver said. "It looks and feels right, and all the right data are listed for it. Though others might do almost as well."

He had selected a small, blackish lump. Its vaguely bullet-shaped form could easily have resulted from random forces. In any event, its surface was heavily pitted, probably by uncounted ages of infrequent micro-meteoroid impacts, while it had hurtled across interstellar—perhaps even intergalactic?—space.

Tolliver led Destin into the museum's small lab.

"You could help me by starting to check this chunk out thoroughly, Ted," he urged. "No, don't overdo the care! Not enough hours for that! Look for organic substances, which aren't too uncommon in meteoroids, and start separating them. Pulverize the whole lump if that seems right to you. But I'll be back with you soon. More things I have to have done."

Without offering further explanations for any of this, the huge mutant hurried off.

As it was, Destin had enough to wonder about in the task he had been given. Wide awake, he fought the sticky weariness of his eyes by blinking, as he began to have a vague, bleakly exciting hunch about the purpose of what Tolliver had asked him to do.

First he examined the microfiches of information about this specimen, number 29, as made long ago by the technicians aboard the interplanetary craft that had netted it in, and added to by the museum specialists, all readily extractable from the files: not of local origin, bound in orbit by solar gravity. Of the less common, transient, high-velocity type. Deep-space trans-stellar. Gathered from a meteoroid cluster crossing the solar system from the direction of the constellation Taurus.

There were chemical composition charts, and sonic and X-ray visuals of its internal structure. Back in pre-med, in college, Destin had done a considerable range of lab work in general physics, chemistry, and mechanics, as well as their bio-branches. He had had to use some shop equipment.

Now he halved the lump with a laser tool. It was unlikely that this was a very remarkable meteoroid, though its cross-section had a curious, all-around layering, rather like the annual rings of a tree branch. And it was mainly stone, with some nickel-iron—all common components of natural fragments from space.

There were little black nodules, too, containing hydrocarbons broadly classifiable as "organic"—again not very unusual. Toiling with controlled haste, and ignoring some heightened thumpings and jarrings from the streets, Destin cut a paper-thin slice for micro-examination, and then began to dig and grind the nodules from the remaining mass. After an hour's absence, Tolliver was back with him.

"All pretty regular, Lance," Destin began. "Some of the stuff might even have been alive once."

"No matter," Tolliver gruffed crisply. "I see you've extracted plenty of organic. So we'll powder it. Then let it soak in mild acid for a few minutes. Then neutralize the acid with a mild alkali. Then inject a syringe of the resulting liquid into me."

Destin wasn't even startled. "I figured you intended something like that," he said. "Your inner perception applied to a different problem—one out of reach by ordinary means."

"Uh-huh, Ted. I hope! *The whole pattern for a person's, or a beast's, construction can be packed into a tiny cluster of genes. So why not any other—usually far less intricate—information? Actually, it's an old idea—a way for a highly advanced culture to communicate with another about itself.* The receiver civilization could be much less knowing than the sender. But it

would have to be sufficiently developed to have the means to receive. All this is a logical assumption, Ted, a *right* way. Almost a certainty. Besides, my Body hints that it is a natural and repeating episode in biological progression—coded to those cultures advanced enough, while excluding those still too primitive even to guess the method. Many meteoroids may carry information in that way. But who on this Earth could know this? By chance, through no merit of my own, since I didn't create my inner vision, I may be the lucky one. Now, if there's any slight relic of life-stuff left in this meteoroid juice, I should be able to find it better than any instrument. And maybe read a message."

A suppressed, very cautious excitement showed in Tolliver's voice. While he spoke, Destin and he were getting ready.

"Giving us a way to solve our present, major difficulty?" Destin asked.

"On that I won't bet," Tolliver answered, his tone suddenly hard and sorrowful. "Anyway, however this experiment goes, I should be better able to judge . . . what's got to be done. There's no magic."

The meteoroid fluid was syringed into Tolliver's bloodstream. He stumbled a little as Destin led him up to the roof garden, where Cara took him at once to their quarters.

Destin had seen how uneven the mutant's breathing had become, and how the exposed and lacerated skin of his great rib cage was reddening. With this latest idea of his, he risked his life once more. Suddenly, Destin felt his own exhaustion. His enthusiasms sagged.

He didn't find Linda in their apartment, though it was almost dawn. So he sat in the garden, waiting. The breeze smelled of conflagrations and dew. At this hour, the troubled city noises had lulled to a brooding, weary mutter. Under the fading stars, he scarcely noticed the helicopter that squatted with drooping vanes on the sheltered landing platform. Lately, it had seldom been there.

Linda's touch startled him out of his chilled doze.

"So what's Lance trying now? Tell me, Teddy."

Destin did, in some detail. Her reaction was noncommittal.

"And what did I miss, Lind?" Destin demanded.

"We got the phones working and reopened," she answered. "So we've been taking what calls we could, and trying to keep the calm. Rolf and Archie are still at it—they'll catnap in the visitor's lounge, guarding that locked steel door. Lance's plea helped; there was relative quiet. Things are getting worse again, though. There are always new factional leaders agitating, competing to be heard. Local TV was restored but got smashed in a few minutes. And who can do his job—or often even get to it—with transportation so snarled? I doubt that any of our day staff will show. Tangled radio reports make matters worse by saying that general collapse is already started, that there'll be starvation and disease—though we hear that an attempt to explode another warhead cluster on the ground was prevented. As for that first blast's fallout, winds have shifted unfavorably. Overall, the prospects for problem solving aren't much improved."

Maybe it was unfortunate that Ted Destin and Linda Abbott were temperamentally so alike. Now their dismal views were nearly the same.

They looked at each other, and their faces were so glum that they laughed a little.

"Sandwiches, beer, love—and a bit of sleep," Destin recommended.

"Sounds right, Teddy."

Archmere, Abbott, Destin, and Hoffmann had another thirty-six hours struggling to deal with the disturbed public, while everybody faced darker and darker news. Out west, two more nuclear missiles had been blown up on the ground. As always, it didn't take many kooks. Total insanity. Who could even say which faction was protesting what?

Tolliver didn't come out of his quarters till early in the second red-lit night. Cara held on to his arm in savage protectiveness as they gathered with their immediate friends in a small, glassed-in portion of the roof garden—it offered partial protection from the fallout, which hadn't arrived but was drifting closer.

The mutant looked up almost sullenly at the stars, which were very dim through the imperfect transparency of the covering material and the murk and glow of disaster. Once he raised a craggy fist, but the gesture lacked the force of defiance. Though he was obviously very tired, his phrases were now only a little fuzzy and broken:

"I wasn't wrong. There was a mass of information . . . structured and coded like virus genes . . . in the liquids in which we soaked the powder we made from that meteoroid. After you shot that neutralized acid into me, Ted, I could read . . . sense . . . some of what it told. *They* arranged the puzzle to be almost easy. *They* are not one culture, but a benign league . . . from a star cluster. What can I say about *them* . . . translate from body language . . . when I couldn't follow it all very well myself? In origin, most of them are oxygen-hydrogen-carbon-based life, like us. They've gone beyond that extensively, though. Largely beyond even biomechanical-electronic-photonic forms. Partially shaped—crystallized?—force-field anatomy? Some are a little like us humans. Others are coiled, planed, geometric. They are from several separate beginnings. But that meteoroid is not just millions but almost a billion years old . . . coming from such distance. Its data is that much out of date. That civilization must have changed since . . . or moved even farther off . . . or have vanished."

Tolliver paused—then went on as with a dry, wistful humor:

"I've said this before: even migrating birds, guided by the constellations, would fly all the way to the stars . . . if they could. My Body has told me that the stars are

the natural goal of biology, and the yearnings that begin in it, and go beyond it. I had a kind of pleasant idea—not a hope, since I was sure it was impractical—that I and mine might go out there soon and join those *others*! What do you think of that? Funny, eh?”

Tolliver gave a snorting chuckle.

“Can you really learn enough to build a starship?” Archmere asked.

“I might have been able to figure out something of the sort before, just from the know-how accessible in my own carcass—if I had a century,” the mutant replied. “Now . . . since this other contact . . . definitely yes, and somewhat sooner. The thought is still blocked, though. Even with everyone’s peaceful help, and much costly materials, building such a ship would take many years. Second—even if those trans-stellar beings are still there, I don’t belong with them. Can a mouse, except as a lowly pet, be a friend to people? With those others, I’d be lost. Except for the simplest, which weren’t simple to me, most of the thoughts, pleasures, and responsibilities suggested in their message were way beyond my reach, making me confused and miserably frustrated with futile trying to grasp the beauty that I knew they felt. Something a bit like splendid music was only a small part of it. Third reason: I did get their clear advice not to go far from the world where I came into being, and either to help in its evolutionary development or to fail. So that’s where I am now—freeing no group from strain either by my final absence or by assurance of my continued presence. I was fairly sure of this before. Now I know. Natural law must be served.”

“So what will you do, Tolliver?” Dr. Archmere demanded almost angrily. “Our whole ecosystem could tear apart. And we can’t lose what you are. There’s *got* to be some sensible answer!”

Rolf Hoffmann’s gnomish face had lost much of its pinkness in recent days. Never one to argue heatedly, he hadn’t been saying anything very profound lately. Yet

just for a second now, Tolliver and he exchanged glances. Both shrugged.

"An almost unresolvable conflict of conditions—eh, Dr. Archmere?" Tolliver said. "Suggesting that one side has to yield. Maybe I *have* made myself a little smarter. Look—Time and timing remain big factors. To us, an hour can seem long. Plenty can happen in it. But in bio-Time, a hundred thousand years is a trifle. What difference, really, if that much is lost in a small setback? We're all pretty pooped. Just give me till morning—likely less—to sort matters out before action. There still are a few hours of truce time left. Why shouldn't we all flop down somewhere and relax? We surely need it."

The rattling bursts of noise from the city's canyons seemed to have lulled somewhat.

Cara cried out defiantly, backing up her man: "Yes, give us privacy to be with our kid!"

She went with Tolliver, into their rooms.

Just minutes ago, Destin had felt himself slipping toward the intolerable tautness and physical depletion that used to be called battle fatigue. Now, though he almost sensed an oddity in the mutant's suddenly lightened mood, he let his tired wits blur and rest. So maybe he wasn't thinking too well.

"Uh-huh, Lind," he grunted. "They're right. A break. And saying 'To hell with it!' a little. That's got to be, sometimes."

In their quarters, they clutched at each other. They found some relief in straining, tender passion. Then they dozed. Above the continuing, muffled sounds of conflict, they didn't notice the quieter clatter of the helicopter that Tolliver had made sure two days ago would be on the pad. Nor did they know that, later, he had also phoned a request that the protective laser projectors and their crews be withdrawn from neighboring roofs. With many officials, Tolliver's wishes still had clout.

CHAPTER 22

Destin and Abbott were awakened by a hammering at their door. Or was it as much by an abrupt near silence, otherwise?

It was Archmere. Behind him was Doug.

Doug spoke up, since just then Archmere was inarticulate:

"All three have flown off, we think!"

"I heard the chopper leave!" Archmere broke in. "Maybe a half-hour ago. I ran out. Our general alarm wouldn't sound—somebody has wrecked it again! I hollered, and tried the phones—dead too. My first thought was to call somebody reliable to follow the chopper right away. Maybe by radio? Doug showed up because of my yelling. Together, we finally got through to the Coast Guard. They're still operating a little, and are—I hope—still trustworthy. They've sent their own choppers. And now . . ."

Archmere's breath failed.

"Listen—a report!" Doug said.

Destin, Abbott, Archmere, and Doug hurried to the covered portion of the roof garden, where a radio speaker muttered scratchily:

"Helicopter seen to crash and sink offshore east of Long Island. Claims are that New Prometheus and his wife and child were aboard. Flares have been dropped. Rescue efforts are hampered by darkness and existing confusion. Assembling boats and scuba divers . . ."

A hollow rage came over Ted Destin. He wanted to scream at Archmere, accuse him of bungling. His one-time chief should have called Linda and him right away, to judge what to do together, instead of acting hastily.

But then he really looked at Archmere—clad only in rumpled shorts and unbeautiful of shape, panting and distressed; Linda and he had at least put on robes. So his anger fell apart by its own illogic and guilt.

"We were tight asleep ourselves, Ted," Linda pointed out. "When we shouldn't have been! Likely, they'll still turn up okay. Cara's a fine swimmer herself. And as for Lance . . . Hey, Doug, and you, Reg, have either of you, actually checked to find out if all three are gone? Explored *all* their rooms?"

"No!" Archmere gasped in sheepish, delighted wonderment. "We didn't! Because it seemed so certain! Come on!"

Everything in Tolliver's quarters was in good order. But no one was there.

"It was a nice thought," Linda sighed. "But when did Lance ever learn to fly a chopper?"

"Cara, my vigorous cousin, knew how well enough," Destin answered. "Besides, there are automated controls."

It didn't take much searching of the apartment to find a sheet of paper on the desk, sticking out between a copy of Darwin's now antique *Origin of Species* and an astronomy book almost as outdated. It was a note in Tolliver's jagged hand:

"It's just too soon. Back to Mother Ocean. Small

salvage. Apologies for all the trouble. End of test. I and mine. Lance."

"Numbskull!" Archmere hissed. "Like our legendary Stone Age ancestor he told us about—Rud—feeding himself to the fishes!"

"He was under terrible strain," Linda protested. "Cara, too. But mostly him. From his last go at sharpening his brain. And that other thing. The resulting depression he mentioned. Who has to be in psychiatry to understand how a black mood warps judgment? If theirs was truly so bad. He not only felt guilty and useless. His and his child's being were the cause of what is going on. Somebody had to do something to try to stop it. But it mightn't work! Oh, they could still turn up alive! We might be too pessimistic."

Linda's sigh, this time, was really a dry sob.

Ted Destin couldn't settle on any single, even emotion. His consciousness leaped from stunned, face-tingling blankness to bitter, amorphous fury, to a fragment of guilty relief, to an awful feeling of loss, sorrow, and waste—and back again.

"We could get some clothes on," Linda suggested practically.

In another minute they were out in the open roof garden, the better to hear the renewed street tumult. Shots once more. Cursings and blamings. Other shouts of triumph. It was just past midnight, so the militant mobs were still thick. They had gotten the news by radio. Updating was continuous.

"I'll go report the note," Destin said.

He found Archmere, still just in shorts, already trying to do so on his little two-way set.

"Somebody else is missing," Destin pronounced suddenly.

"Yes," Doug responded.

By sunup, no trace of Tolliver and family was yet reported. Not within the drowned chopper, nor far out on the roughened Atlantic, nor on land.

With its causes and goals evaporated, violence was already dying of weariness. New Prometheus and the promise and dangers of a sudden, great era of change seemed gone beyond recall. Vengeful anger against those who had hated through fear—and who were now not totally glad—would linger and fade. Yet on both sides there was ambivalent relief; humankind felt less jolted from its slow, groping, relatively comfortable way, and into unknowns that might even have made it a threatened species. Still, there was a fractionally opposing shame for the priceless vanished, and not soon to be replaced—because of, at least, a half-wrongness? What a lousy, rotten trade! Yet hindsight could fix nothing.

During the first post-Tolliver days, some nuclear fallout reached the city. Ironically, this drove the last of the battlers from the streets, fleeing before a truly serious danger, and into peace and cooperation within the shelters. But, by a whim of the winds, the metropolis suffered little from radioactive pollution; elsewhere the effects of the ground-detonated warheads were much worse.

For a long period, medical personnel were very busy. Abbott and Destin were sent far afield. Sometimes, when they were close at night, after a difficult day, they would reminisce and consider:

“A truism, Teddy? Biological—like geological—change usually takes ages. Even a ‘sudden’ mutation must seem slow on an ordinary time scale. We tried a slow start, but throwing the whole thing at lagging human guts in just a few months was far too quick. Our strained society couldn’t accept him. At least not like that.”

“*Him*, Lind? Sure I’m kidding. Lance—our recurrent, arcane preoccupation. Romantic doubters or scare-heads who can’t regard anything as final keep popping up to hunt around and theorize some more. While we agree that the ending was sort of pat. Also, was you-know-who really killed in the streets on that final night? I guess we’ll just have to keep waiting.”

CHAPTER 23

It was nearly two years after the final Tolliver episode that a small, youngish man came to see Destin in a hospital in a midwestern city, where Abbott and he had just arrived to help treat patients who were still disaster-disoriented.

Destin's pulses were suddenly pounding; yet he kept his face straight, as the two played a sort of game, even after they were behind closed doors.

"You look like a nephew of somebody I used to know," Destin remarked. "Let's see—his name was . . . ?"

"Matthews will do," the visitor cut in. His elfin smile was unmistakable. Rolf Hoffmann.

Destin knew some of a new truth for sure then: the mutant must have survived—learned to have projected more of his powers of physical change beyond himself. Though by now, with his profound inner sense to guide him in the deepest intricacies of biology, it might already have been possible for him to synthesize those

various blood agents externally, even with small lab equipment.

Mixed with his other eager yet almost dreading emotions, Destin felt again the instinctive conflicts of an unwilling subversive. It was basic, and almost uncontested, that the public had a right to be informed. Yet look what had happened when they had known! So must a man sometimes accept guilt himself, in accordance with other facets of judgment and conscience?

Destin grinned. "So you don't bring particularly bad tidings?"

"No. Ghosts are of the dead. I'm not one either."

"That's wonderful. So where?"

"Nevada. The space-studies installation there—re-activated because even in a stringent post-disaster economy, getting human dispersal to other worlds truly started, as a survival measure in case of some new extinction threat, has been reemphasized. He and she were able to slip in as students, and they bother no one. There are about a thousand trainees, who learn college-level stuff, though there's a grimy-hand end too. They're all a cool and crazy crowd. What other kind would want to go settle on Mars?"

"You might belong, Dr. Matthews."

"Yes. Though I like to stay clear of choices that involve other people, I seem to have chosen for myself a while back. Possibly you and Dr. Abbott might also be interested." The smirk teased.

"Maybe. How will we find *them*? If they want us to?"

"They do. They are Gomer and Evelyn Miller—common enough names not as suggestively fake as John and Jane Smith. Of course there are other changes. So what else should I tell you?"

"Well, for one thing, just how was the gone-for-good trick worked?"

"Quiet, unnoticed survival—subterfuge being an acceptable factor in natural bio-progression. Like the moths that look like tree bark so the birds won't see and

eat them. Our 'moths' picked me to assist. I was more of a pragmatist, less idealistic, and less known—visible—than you, Ted. Also, I'd figured the best routes in difficult traffic. I just waited close to a certain Long Island beach with a car. They swam in quickly from the chopper. Sure, the old bridge spanning the Sound was almost blocked by wrecked vehicles abandoned by fleeing refugees, but we got across. For a good while after the ruckus died down, we laid low in a house I knew, figuring out and doing what had to be done. Next requirement?"

"Just the details of how and when. Plus any pertinent hints—um—Dr. Matthews. So I can consult with my wife. Better—if you can spare a few minutes, I'll fetch her here."

Sitting apart from each other in a tour bus from a neighboring town, Ted and Linda arrived at the Nevada installation. They were casually clad, like students, to blend with the other visitors. Ted was beardless now; Linda had reworked her hairdo. With time, people forgot faces that weren't too unique. Both played unobtrusive roles that differed a bit from their usual selves. Enough to regain anonymity.

Here was a popular spot for sightseers. The only security check was for weapons and dangerous materials—a heartening reversion toward trust. Supposedly, nothing was secret in this place. But any hostile act, even dropping a scrap of litter, would be detected by sophisticated devices, and the perpetrator would be in an appropriate degree of trouble.

Low, white buildings sprawled in the sunlight, among space-exploration equipment that thrust up webby extensions. There were buzzings and hammerings. When the busload of tourists was through with the lecturing guides, they were at liberty to wander about within reasonable bounds. Visits to trainees by relatives and friends was a common thing.

Destin and Abbott went to a numbered, ground-level

apartment, like all the others. The hour was 1700—five p.m.

“Sure I’m Gomer Miller,” said the tall young man who answered the door. “Glad you could make it. Come on in.”

As he closed the door behind them, his chattiness increased:

“Here’s Evelyn, just home from her last class. Mine start at seven tonight, with listening to a lecture on food-crop care in exotic environments. Then shop training, aimed at the skills of a space-rigger working in zero-G, till one a.m. It’s a little tough for a couple to coordinate shifts when they have a youngster.”

“Though we manage,” Evelyn laughed. “Sit down anywhere, or look around—whichever first.”

It was a game again, nobody yet saying tabooed, arcane words.

But Ted Destin felt an intensity of groping for obscured bits of identification hidden amid masking ordinariness: small, bright, new apartment, like innumerable, prefabbed others. Another quick, ambitious pair with an adventurous bent, struggling to make their particular mark, past common obstacles.

Right away, though, their hosts’ altered appearance had startled Linda and Ted close to solemnity.

He was still very tall. But his overblown muscularity had given way to a hard leanness—almost gauntness. His shaggy dark hair and whiskers had become close-trimmed and tawny. His eyes weren’t yellow anymore but gray; though the left one remained displaced downward a tiny bit, they showed good humor, not a wolf-glare. The timbre of his voice had given up some of its bass profundity. With apparent inattention, he pulled up the left sleeve of his pastel-green student coverall and rubbed the under surface of his forearm; only a line of slightly lighter skin color, like a faint, unnoticeable scar—relic of reabsorbed wing membrane—showed there. He didn’t look much like he used to at all. He

seemed just a big, average, very active and outgoing young man.

More mysteriously, his mate, from being blond, had become brunette, chestnut-haloed under the overhead light. The use of mere artificial pigments to make the difference was rendered more improbable by how her facial bone structure was also somewhat altered.

"You're fakers, Gomer and Evelyn Miller." Destin dared to chuckle.

"Should we argue that, Ted?" Evelyn retorted lightly.

"Join me all around with beers?" Gomer boomed out.

"Thanks, there's time for that," Linda said.

"For supper, too," Evelyn amended.

"Aw—now—hey!" Linda protested. "We couldn't impose! Besides—our tour bus!"

"Let it leave!" Evelyn insisted. "We have a car—I'll drive you into town later . . . or"—here her expression sobered slightly—"there's a public bus every alf-hour. That might be best—considering how we're set up. Anyway, we can't send you off unfed! Where would that put our hospitality to old friends?"

Rattle of pans. Stuff pulled out of the small freezer. The two Millers worked at it together. Simple, old-time, almost rural warmth and pride. Banality. But what better cover could there be for so much more? Steak. Packaged, quickie food, yet wholesome. The salad separate and fresh. Gomer set a bottle of wine to chill for the occasion. Casual chatter went on.

At an unobtrusive moment, when operations were well under way, the little girl was brought out in her mother's arms. And what was the accepted, if sometimes slightly hypocritical, course for guests to follow toward young parents except to *oh* and *ah* a little in admiration?

"She's adorable!" Linda declared.

"Yeah!" Ted Destin affirmed, though, as a physi-

cian, he disliked sentimental gop.

Just another somnolent two-year-old—almost.

“Wake up, Ellen-Electra!” the mother urged. “Company to see you! She sleeps such a lot, folks. It worries me. I wonder if we should consult the pediatrician? She’s an odd kid. Very bright, though, when she’s awake. You should hear the words she burbles! ‘*Leukocytes*’ yet! Of course her dad talks to her a lot. He says he used to sleep as much as she does. Wonder if she’ll have many friends? Guess not—she’s different. We were afraid they wouldn’t accept us for Mars because of her. But they told us okay; for settling, they actually want *some* kids, to accent family life. Worth remembering, you two. And even if the departure schedule holds, she’ll be five years older. Wake up, pumpkin!”

The child’s eyes opened and groped—as if past the intriguing jumble of some inner vision. They seemed newborn blank at first to outer sight. But they focused quickly, sharply. The visitors saw that a Knowing Somebody already dwelt behind their pale, amber gaze. It was eerie—a bit chilling. But then the smile came—broad, complete, gentle, and brief. The child yawned again.

“Ellen—you’re impossible!” Evelyn scolded. “But do you know, she was already smart enough to do much of what had to be done about her arms. See—they’re perfectly smooth—not a trace of oddity left. Just one small, special, prompting shot of her dad’s blood—in part to help let her know that what was there was no good right now. Changing me only a little took a while and was harder; I got sick, and my face swelled. Also I had to focus my attention on what should grow differently. But for me Gomer made up some bio-stuff, more concentrated than how it was in his own body; it causes those nerve channels to grow and strengthen so that you begin to ‘see’ a little inside yourself and can try to guide what’s happening.”

Evelyn had nodded toward an alcove off the kitchen

where a regulation student homework lab was now neatly closed up in its cabinet. But now she shrugged and grinned indulgently.

"Yes, our kid prefers her sack above all things and people—including her parents." She sighed. "Excuse it, folks. Will you tuck her back in, Gummy—please?"

Gomer Miller returned quickly from the bedroom and opened another round of beers.

Besides their physical modifications, both senior Millers were different from the people they had been, in the parts they were playing. Yet their vigor remained.

Wary taboos about words and topics were already broken. Destin carried this guardedly further:

"So what have you given up, Gomer?"

There was a fleeting glint of the old wolf-glare.

"Nothing that counts. It's only set aside. For now, Ev and I mostly just train along ordinary lines. Plenty there to learn."

Destin felt those cold gray eyes still challenging him. His reaction became mixed with his own eagerness, fear, and almost decision.

"How far will you go—otherwise?" he demanded. "I mean—about what you are—and might be—and extend to others?"

The answer came in a whispery rustle:

"As far as I'm able, I suppose. As long as it seems good. That's quite a span beyond what I can even guess yet. There's plenty of research and work still to do. Probably I won't try anything heavy for another thirty years at least. Even then I won't bother the crowd that Ev and I and a couple of other friends have joined, unless they want it. Right now, it's enough to belong to a bunch of willing pioneers to Mars. They'll be a special, rugged, adventurous lot, distilled out of Earth's population by their own drives. With their kind around, the increased Body-to-Mind communication in me has a better chance to test out successfully. More important for this, I'll be off the Earth, away from people who get

excited too fast. True—the fifty-three million kilometers, minimum, out to Mars, isn't very far on an interstellar scale, but it should be sufficient to reduce any tensions about me on Earth, and provide some privacy. Oh, it won't be as comfortable there as inside the little rotating artificial cylinder planets, with all the landscaped charm on their inner curves. Dust storms instead, stirred up in a turbulent atmosphere, far too thin and oxygen-shy to breathe, weather often as cold as dry ice, with riddles, desolation, and problems to study and work at. Only inspired crazies should go to Mars at the start—to make it a livable, air-dome world, with plastic-covered crop fields and towns. But it can and should be done. Then, maybe more. You?"

His glare, swinging from one of the guests to the other, dared them, yet hoped.

Destin and Abbott exchanged long glances that reconfirmed agreement.

"That's part of why we're here," Destin stated, almost startled as he firmed his choice. "Count me in—one reason being that I need a fresh start in a new place."

He didn't say that he had already lived too close to a kind of splendor for too long a time to leave it. In a way, he felt trapped, as by an awesome force. Because to back down would have made him despise himself to the end of his days. He needed to keep the wonder that, by slimmest chance and a physician's conscientious attention, he had been the first to recognize. Oh, he might curse along the route ahead, but, he pledged, he'd find the strength.

Linda Abbott had paled just a little.

"There's no conflict between Ted and me in this," she said. "We talked it out, and all but decided yesterday. I've been in on the prelude from just about as far back as my husband. Given the chance to go on—any final return to an ordinary existence would be awfully dull. So if we can both get through whatever is necessary . . ."

Gomer Miller flashed a broad, happy grin.

"Thanks! Now I won't have to miss my first real friends! You're very useful citizens. So there shouldn't be any difficulty that we can't surmount, getting you quietly accepted. Best, though, for you to train in the new installation up in Idaho, away from Ev and me. But before anything else, you'd best be made to look a little different—which will take some time and quiet doing. Matthews will contact you again in a couple of weeks to set that up. Coming here to me twice more should be enough. Matthews will also bring you the paperwork you'll need for new identities. He has taken over that sort of thing. Am I rushing you two? Are you still with it?"

Under that amused but now benevolent gaze, Destin chuckled a bit shakily. Linda and he looked at each other.

"Just the old high-dive feeling, Lance—Gomer." she laughed.

Talk and action were pushed back toward the commonplace: the clink of wine glasses and rattle of knives and forks during the simple meal. Just a few pertinent questions were asked and answered. Then the conversation touched on topics such as local birds and trees, followed by practical, nuts-and-bolts know-how about spaceship operation.

At quarter to seven, Gomer Miller kissed Linda's cheek lightly, punched Ted's shoulder, said, "So long! See you!" and, carrying notebook and tool kit like any other green-clad workman-student, strode off into the evening, whistling a currently popular tune.

Later, Evelyn called Ted Destin "cuz" as she bade him and Linda good luck during the next half-decade of preparation. In a few minutes, the two visitors were waiting in the star-emerging dusk for the bus that would take them nearer to their homeward plane connection.

"So we're pledged, Teddy," Linda mused. "I feel kind of numb-high. Mars first. Then, sometime, like stepping into some strange mist—not for people as they

are, and being swallowed up by it—beyond where even our mutant admits his imagination can yet reach. I'm still scared, Ted."

"So am I," he granted cheerfully. "But it's what we want the most, isn't it? And there'll be many years in which to get ready and adjust."

"Ted . . ."

"Yeah?"

A body-to-mind demand, very ancient indeed, was prompting her:

"Ted . . . Though we've been so busy, and though negative reasons are much bigger now . . ."

"Sure—I know," he breathed, understanding her from a similar demand within himself. "But—separate from your heavy part—would it be entirely right to drag somebody too small to make a choice into that much strangeness?"

"Maybe not, Ted. But that might have meant never. Pioneers and settlers, anywhere, usually haven't been just grown men and women. A risk, of course, but it worked out—and gave settling a reason."

Destin scowled grimly. But then the idea took better hold, and he was cheerful again. He hugged her close.

"Okay, dearest Linda," he said. "I love you furiously, too! So, shall we stop precautions right away, and leave it to that and chance? In—with luck—extended vigor spans?"

"Let's!" she whispered, her nose nuzzling his throat. "Hey—easy, Impulsive One—till we reach cover! I was teasing some, but I mean everything I said. Old common sense still counts, so I'll still wait until I'm surer that I'm big enough to handle that much besides, and that being pregnant won't cause us a bollix otherwise. Wups—our bus is coming."

EPILOGUE

Like its beginning, which may be dated variously, even back to the birth of the universe, this history or story has an indefinite ending time. Because it goes on, perhaps toward some preordained—even if unconscious—infinity. Yet a brief summary of the events of the first century of its extension—a long interval as measured by men for themselves, but explosively swift when contrasted with the total annals of Earthly biology—is appropriate.

A few of the Mars settlers died of hardships. Others, disgruntled, went home. But as the harsh environment was gradually bettered, many more of the restless ilk arrived. Thus, relief of excessive terrestrial population pressure was promised. Meanwhile, memories of an interval of terrible confrontation—of too much eagerness and of paranoid fears lunging at each other—were fading. Though far from perfect, Earth became more a place for conservative, plodding peace.

Many Terrestrials began to joke about those neo-

Martians, who, according to some reports, were a weird, overly hardworking and tolerant lot, with peculiar social customs. Yet their labor continued.

With great reflectors of metal foil, low in mass but rigid enough at zero-gravity, orbiting Mars and concentrating more of the radiant energy of the sun—half again as distant as from Earth—on its surface, its bleak climate had warmed somewhat. Polar carbon-dioxide snows evaporated completely, increasing the density of the atmosphere. Much of the underlying fossil water-ice was also vaporized. Rugged algae scattered in spore form and multiplying in an improved environment began to work on the atmospheric carbon dioxide, freeing oxygen from it by the familiar photosynthetic process.

After a generation, some people born on Mars began to show adaptive changes. No—no wings were noticed; they wouldn't have been very functional in a world of still tenuous external gases, nor inside low-pressure air-domes covering towns and food crops. Nor were any instances of enlarged crania reported. But there were bigger rib cages to accommodate bigger lungs; these remained ineffective for breathing the yet inadequately oxygenated outer atmosphere without supplemental lox tanks; but in the soft-pressure domes they were fine. Due to the low gravity, Martian atmosphere would always be poorly compressed by weight—hence expanded and thin, no matter how much its quality and quantity could realistically be improved otherwise. But those big lungs would be good enough out in the open before too long.

Sufficiently interested Terrestrials usually assumed that just regular genetic engineering—a science which, after decades of overrestriction on Earth, was at last lumbering into action there—was the main agent for bio-adaptations, both among the neo-Martians themselves and for their Earth-originated food plants. Some of these latter began to be successfully grown out of doors, resisting the nocturnal cold and the ultraviolet

rays of the sun, softened by denser air now, but still harsh. Terrestrial assumptions were probably true in part.

And of course most Earth folk recognized the obvious fact that the general human future must include otherworld ambiances. That being so, wasn't it right that venturesome individuals become variously specialized in their physical selves, to heat, cold, high G-forces, and air densities—or low? Yes, Mars had been a good place to begin.

But it was soon rumored on the home planet that the swift progression hadn't been so simple. Many people there—favoring Tolliver or not—had been less than convinced of his end in Mother Ocean. Even if living legends—good or evil—die, they haunt.

Tolliver remained fascinating more as an idea and a force than as a person. He had been a truce of mysteries, in which Mind could at last tap and guide the accumulated and massed know-how of billion-year-old biology, almost always before protectively locked as secrets in, and by, Body. Thus he had been the briefly opened, fiery chink to Knowledge of life, death, and all else there was. Yet, between popular enthusiasm for some utopia, and the opposite dread of being ripped from every familiar mooring, the mutative phenomenon had been too much.

But had Tolliver survived the catastrophe of pro and con after all, to roam Mars and continue his wonders—or abominations? Did his daughter and whatever other children and their children go on unrecognizable? And what about his mate and old associates? How many of his abilities had he found ways to share with them? There was reason enough, in these revived uncertainties, for many rememberers to be glad; fewer to curse.

It is easier to be pleasantly charmed by a legend than to worry about it—if it doesn't come too close. Mars still seemed a sufficiently remote, uninviting place to such Terrestrials who might seriously fear. Let the

weirdos who had gone there tamper with nature as they chose, build hugely, engage in strange genetic practices, including what according to untrue gossip amounted to vast, amoral sexual promiscuity—the crummy bastards! Who gave a damn?

But a small fraction of the Martian populace pushed far ahead of Earthly technology and bio-science. Maybe a hundred millennia of development were compressed into a few score years.

It wasn't till late in the century that some of what was seen became rather disquieting, even to local Martian folk: webby constructions looming in the desert. And occasionally glimpsed elsewhere, moving shapes that glinted with metal and crystal, yet photographs seemed to show some flesh. Were they biomechanical integrations that had been human but had surpassed their earlier selves in mental, emotional, and physical capabilities?

These were transient phenomena, soon superseded by unsubstantial forms, dimly or brightly luminous—plasmas, force fields, which surely must conform to deeper natural law—since nothing could be supernatural! They were loosely, variably bound into configurations that could change: glowing, nebular spirals, or elusive, geometric shapes. Often enough too—and again there were photographs to prove this—they took on the tenuous guises of men and women, smiling or solemn. And a mixed group of new arrivals and old-timers on Mars swore that they had once seen towering likenesses of Tolliver, Cara, and their old friends, and a beautiful girl who must have been the daughter. Gone on to some godlike condition of Mind and Being? But in this instance, the few pictures on film or video were blurred.

Worry stirred once more on Earth. What might such entities do? But before concern could reach anything like panic level, all of those diaphanous shapes—some of which might have been recreated for fun from history—vanished from Mars within hours. They left behind disjointed fragments and small, oddly contrived

artifacts which couldn't be as simple and nonfunctional as they seemed.

At the same time, nearly five thousand listings in the Martian population rolls were abruptly without accountable presences. The name Tolliver was not among them. Nor were the names of his known colleagues. Computers checked the total recording of the inhabitants of the planet, now numbering nearly a million. No Tollivers, Destins, or Archmeres at all. Nine Abbotts, none of whom could have any connection. Two score Hoffmanns—more often spelled "Hoffman"—but that was a common name. Such a search was silly, anyhow.

"Those missing folks have gone out to join beings as advanced as they've rushed to become," a barrel-chested native son of Mars—grown well over two meters tall, too, in that weak, 0.38-G gravity—declared. And there were plenty of others who agreed with him. "Likely, they haven't kept forms like we saw in the sky; those must have been for show or a joke. But something smaller and more reasonable instead. They've headed for one of the nearer goal cultures, it's got to be—only maybe a hundred light-years off. As we are, we might someday go a like distance, but not in mind and feeling without becoming a lot different. Because to those others we're like mice to people. Imagine a mouse enjoying poetry, or even knowing that it exists. It must be a wonderful condition to have pulled some of our own so hard! I guess the means might still be open for anybody else with the wish and guts to try. Myself, though, I'd rather stay half Terrestrial. That's pleasant too, and sets better with how I am: I like my job, wandering alone in the red deserts, looking for and marking ore deposits while I philosophize to myself. And I like getting back to my dome-house at the station. My Marcy and the two brats. Good grub, and better bed exercise, or a game of cards with whoever turns up at the rec dome, or billiards—the tricky jump shots you can make in this gravity if you know how! A few mugs of mulled Tarsus beer ain't so bad either! How could I have all

that, way out there with all those super-fancy characters? Of course the kids will do whatever they want."

His was a common opinion—intertwined with the fearsome but intriguing regrets of limitation. The barrier: a blankness. Who can reach, possess, know, judge as worthwhile or not, what he is too limited to understand? But there is the bio-driven tug of enigma, onward, toward—never the dullness of perfection, perhaps—but some infinity. With most of the motive power in the forever-question: What lies within the murk of not-knowing?

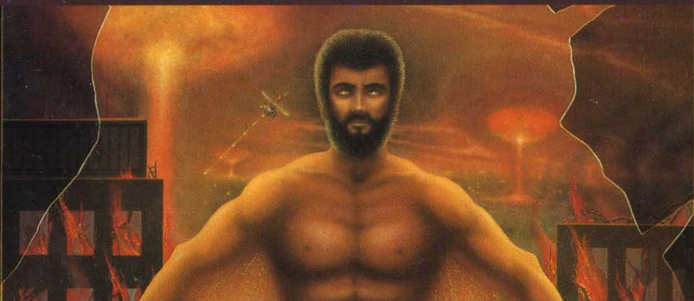
Mars became essentially a world of humans, not too different from what they had been. Earth stayed closer to that; though there, too, by an inevitable quirk of circumstances that might be the servant of some preset, sensate, or insensate scheme of Nature, a little of the lost, latter-day Prometheus kept sneaking into the formula. So, against those who might still fear, there was a joker:

Considerable commerce kept up between two planets. A fair number of persons born on Mars already had, for a variety of stock reasons, emigrated back to Earth, mated with locals, and produced offspring. So some of what had started with Tolliver—more from what he was able to perceive than directly from his own flesh—was being spread through genes. A taint? Anyhow, a trace more of rugged gentleness and reasoned strength to help restrain dangerous hysteria, whatever its cause. Here and there also appeared more frequent fragments of his inner vision—improved Body-and-Mind contact. So, if there had been a loss, still there was substantive salvage, more in conformity with the usual slow pace of biological progression.

It was like Tolliver's tragic forerunner, Rud, who, convinced of failure, had given his substance back to the Ice Age ocean.

But his descendants had become the first true men and women.

THE MISSING LINK... TO THE FUTURE



A unique combination of man and genetic chameleon, he had the power to heal, to adapt, to create—or to destroy. To some, he was the New Prometheus. To others, a freak of nature capable of unlimited evil. But no one could be certain whether Lance Tolliver was really the next step on the ladder of human evolution, or sire to a race of supermonsters that would lead the human race towards total extinction!

