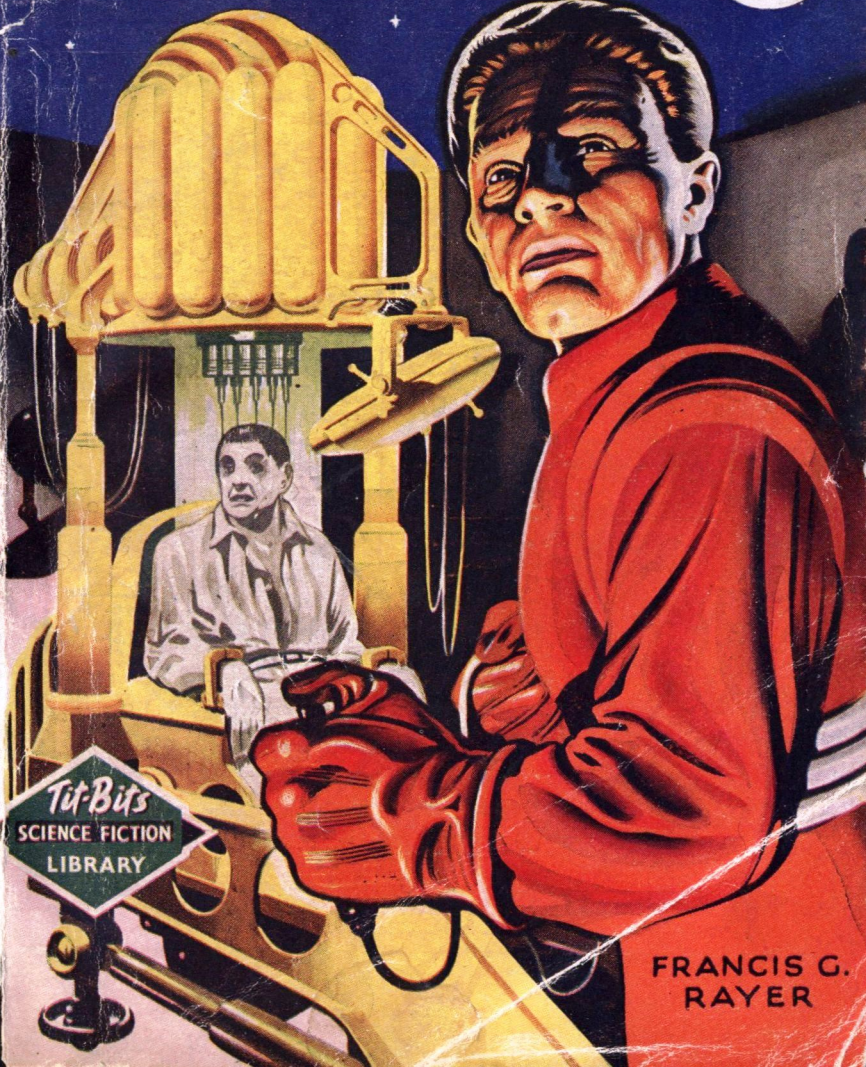


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THE STAR SEEKERS

By FRANCIS G. RAYER

PROLOGUE

It was a natural step that men should build ships to reach other planets—other stars. Project 13 was such a rocket—a space-ship efficient, self-contained, and larger than any built before. Nick Riordan was a man to whom the ship meant much—it was the first step in Mankind's expansion to the stars. He desperately wanted it to be successful. Others planned that it should fail—for their own reasons.

Space and time can be strange factors when trips are made that encompass uncountable vastnesses of space, as Nick soon found. Einstein's theory that no object can exceed the speed of light—186,000 miles per second—was right . . . yet wrong in an astonishing way which made of Project 13 a hulk that must never reach space.

Through the adventures that befell, Nick carried always a gift from his grandfather, Henry Riordan. Only at last did he learn its secret, and realise Henry Riordan's wisdom.

CHAPTER I

HIGH buildings and wide, busy streets baked under the evening sun. Beyond the city boundary there gleamed a shining spear upthrust at the sky—a vessel that overtopped even the green-and-cream buildings. Nick Riordan withdrew from the window and put on his tie. There had never been a vessel like the *Project 13*, he thought—could never be another like her, for she was the first of her kind. Little ships had made their tiny journeys to the other planets in the system, but *Project 13* used molecular combustion, and should reach other galaxies. She was the trail-maker. The others—for there would be others, he was sure—would only *follow*.

“Still dreaming, Nick?”

He turned from the mirror and put on his jacket. His wife smiled wistfully, her eyes turned down. Her chin was level with his shoulder, and he lifted it.

“Who doesn't, when he's making history, Niora? *Project 13* can take men out of this planetary system. Doesn't that thrill you?”

Niora lifted pencilled eyebrows. “Perhaps. Things like that mean less in a woman's life. The inventor of gunpowder created history, too.”

Nick examined her, a deep wrinkle of concentration on his forehead.

Her judgment was usually sound; her face had a purposeful look and could be stubborn, despite her beauty, but was abruptly illuminated by a smile.

"You'll be late to see Alfred Somers, Nick," she reminded him. "It'll take you an hour to reach his place."

"It will," he agreed. "Changed your mind?"

"No, Nick. I won't come. When men talk shop about things women don't understand we're better out of it."

Nick rode the lift three floors down to street level and got his sedan from the basement garage. Alf Somers was one of the three men he counted as friends. Soon the streets were far behind and he sped east along the radial road, and through the green belt surrounding the city. At an intersection he turned off, and his lean, high-boned face slipped momentarily into a wry grin. This was not the shortest way—but it took him by the *Project 13* site, and his gaze sought ahead. He remembered his grandfather, old Henry Riordan, and the excitement with which he had first seen the ship.

Sun shone on the upper part of the long vessel. The lower half was in shadow. She stood squarely upon her stern fins, from which radiated the railway lines along which equipment was brought. Four trucks and a locomotive rolled slowly from sight behind the ship's base, and Nick slowed involuntarily. The vessel's sheer mightiness was beautiful. There was arrogance in the way she pointed like a threatening spear at the evening sky. She showed men sought new worlds among the stars.

The sun was going from the hills beyond the city, and Nick turned into a second-class road, wondering about Alf Somers, his expression bleak. Alf had been a good friend of his father, and would never play the traitor, Nick thought. That was not his way. But no other explanation fitted, yet.

The sedan wound down behind the hills, and Nick looked across the valley for the little white-and-red house where Alf lived. Alf had been a good friend, Nick thought as he drove rapidly.

He tried to decide how to introduce what troubled him. "Alf," he could say, "only you and I have ever seen or used the completed astrocompass of the *Project 13*. And I haven't talked——" It would not be easy to say.

He parked at the end of the gravel drive before the square white-and-red house and rang the bell. "We're honest folk, Alf," he would say. "Let's talk this over quietly. There's an explanation, and I want to believe it——"

There was no reply. He rang again, puzzled. He had phoned through about ten minutes before leaving—that would be about an hour and a quarter before, he calculated. Alf had answered, his voice not sounding wholly natural, and Nick tried to recall their exact words. "I'd like to call—to talk over something, Alf," he had sug-

gested. Alf had said: "Not tonight, I'm working," then hung up. That itself had been odd and not like Alf, Nick reflected as he walked round the house. He had wanted to say some things which were too important to wait.

The brick building Alf called his workshop in obvious understatement was at the end of the garden away from the road. No lights shone from its frosted windows. Nick tried the door, found it locked, and after hesitating turned the small steel disc set about the knob. "I'm half-deaf when working," Alf had once said, and told him the combination. "Come in any time you like. I fixed this lock after leaving my keys in town one day."

The workshop, three-roomed, high and airy, was empty. Machine tools stood silent, and in the second room electronic instruments filled the shelves and littered a long bench. Nick crossed, feet soundless on the insulated floor, and pushed open the door into which Alf called the reference room.

Chairs stood round the central table, littered with books from the shelves lining the walls. A strange sense of something wrong crept over Nick as a sixth sense whispered at danger of an odd, unknown kind. Walking stiffly, eyes alert, he moved to the table. Behind it lay a man in a blue overall with red hair brushed back, and quite still. Nick went round quickly and knelt by the body. Alf Somers did not move. His light-blue eyes gazed up unseeingly, and an inexplicable expression seemed locked for ever on his face. His heart did not beat.

Nick rose and went to the phone, but he halted without touching it. Better not, he decided. There might be prints.

He went quickly back through the workshops and locked the door, wondering how this tied up with leakage from the project site. He had started the car and was backing to turn when the house door opened and a man in a blue overall came down the step to him. Nick found himself gazing up into light-blue eyes in a mobile face topped by red hair, and his brain oscillated like a plucked spring: Alf Somers was back there in the reference room, motionless and cold. Yet, against all the dictates of sanity, Alf Somers was now looking in on him through the sedan window, frowning.

"Thought I told you not to come, Nick," he said. "I was busy."

Nick met the blue eyes and felt the unease that had first caught his nerves in the reference room return intensely. Every wrinkle, every shade of hair and eye were Alf's. The voice was his; so was the hand on the open window. And yet Nick *knew* he had made no mistake. Alf Somers lay behind the table. . . .

The eyes seemed to change hue, and Nick knew his hesitation was noted. The hand—Alf's, yet not Alf's—reached for the sedan door-handle.

Nick let in the clutch jerkily. . . . Only when he had negotiated the curving drive and his tyres thrummed the main road did his panic pass and his colour begin to return. His hastened breathing subsided, and he slowed the sedan to a safe speed. When he had reached the

intersection to the green belt his full self-control had returned. He shuddered once, recalling the eyes that had looked into his. *That second man who had come from the house was not Alf.* Beyond that paradox Nick could not go.

He wished that his grandfather was still alive. Henry Riordan had been wise. His advice was good. White-haired, kindly, he had always had time to listen. Once, he had placed a box in Nick's hands. It was sealed.

"Open it—one day," he had said.

Nick had been curious. "When? How shall I know when?"

Henry Riordan had patted his shoulder. "You'll know—when the time comes, lad. Keep it—always. If you doubt that the time to open it has come—don't open it. Only when you *know*—when you're *sure*—do as I say."

Nick had turned the box about. It would go in a pocket. There was no lock—only a golden band holding the lid tightly closed.

His grandfather had smiled. "When the time comes—you'll *know*, lad," he had said. "Then, and only then, *open it.*"

Nick carried the box always.

Judge Henson leaned back heavily in his wide chair and puffed cigar smoke at the ceiling. Through it his gaze returned keenly to Nick.

"So you reported the death from a call-box, then came right here, Nick?"

Nick nodded. Judge Henson was the second of the three men he counted as true friends, and Niora's father. Sixty, shrewd, he could be relied upon.

"Yes. You're on the way back—and I wanted to talk. There were things I couldn't leave unsaid."

"So I've gathered," Judge Henson commented drily from behind the haze. "You're sure Alfred Somers was dead?"

"Absolutely." Nick knew the judge's tone only concealed his intense, critical interest. "Men don't look like *that* when they're alive."

Judge Henson nodded quietly to himself so that the swivel chair behind the desk creaked. The desk lamp left his face in shadow. "What did the police think?" he asked abruptly.

"They're sending an ambulance and surgeon immediately, and asked me to go back."

"Yet you didn't. That could look suspicious."

The odd timbre of the words arrested Nick. A shock radiated down his spine, and his breathing momentarily halted. The voice suddenly seemed only an imitation of Judge Henson's—an indefinable something had been lost. It had been like that when the second Alf Somers had spoken through the car window, and the tiny, inexplicable oddness had made him engage the clutch with a jerk. Now his

hands grew tight on the chair arms, and his muscles tensed. He wished his old friend was not in shadows, and the room not so hazed with cigar smoke drifting in the brilliant disc of light cast on the desk.

"Suspicious?" Nick murmured, and congratulated himself that his voice betrayed nothing.

"The person who finds the body must always be suspect." The other drew on his cigar and exhaled smoke-rings towards the ceiling. Nick watched, fascinated. He had often seen Judge Henson do exactly that; yet this was different. Confused, he thought the other seemed no longer to be the man he had known, and was somehow dangerous, even as he smiled in the dimness, his round cheeks rising and his eyes benevolently on Nick. "I went to see Alfred and left only an hour or so before you called," Henson said. "He was alive and well."

The statement held no accusation, but Nick felt his nerves tighten, and he got up. His host swivelled round in his chair and came round the desk heavily, still in semi-shadow.

"You were—at Alf's?" Nick asked, his throat contracted.

"Certainly. He wanted me to check some legal papers." That could be, Nick thought. Yet why did some intuitive sense scream that here was danger he did not understand; that the other, standing with one hand on the desk watching him, was not his old friend, Henson, and was not deceived . . . ?

"I see." Nick made his voice casual. He felt that an acute intelligence was deciding what should be done, and preparing to act. "I mentioned to the police I should be coming here, so perhaps I'd better hurry."

He wondered if the lie would pass. The thickly lidded eyes did not waver; the sensation of sharp personal danger grew, but to the face came a smile which could have been Henson's.

"Very well, Nick." He indicated the door. "I'll let you out."

Nick was silent. Two friends had become—strangers.

CHAPTER II

NICK drove with one hand, mopping his face. The perspiration was cold, and he knew that his forehead and cheeks were white. Two friends had changed. But so subtle was the change, an acquaintance would never know. Alf Somers was a solitary, quiet man, and lived alone. Judge Henson had retired two years before; his wife was dead, and he rarely kept company. The choice had been good, Nick thought. The two had few close friends to notice. . . . He frowned to himself. What did he mean—*the choice had been good?*

Orange globes ahead marked the green belt. Two searchlights illuminated the *Project 13* vessel, topped by red lights as an aircraft warning. On impulse Nick turned in through the main gate, showed

his pass, and stopped outside the long offices. His *third* friend would be here. . . .

He went into the outer office. A girl was drinking coffee and yawning behind the reception desk.

"Sam Cordy here?" he asked.

She blinked herself awake and smiled. "Yes, Mr. Riordan. In the outside bay."

"Thanks."

He let himself out and went across to buildings opposite. Trucks rolled past; men came and went, and in the machine shop tools whined. Nick felt his nerves tightening again as he approached the bay where Sam would be. Alf Somers had been the first; old Judge Henson his second friend. . . . With a shock he realised that Sam, too, did not love society. He was unmarried, and almost lived on the site, immersed wholeheartedly in the project.

A man was coming towards him among the piles of stores and crated and labelled equipment, and Nick halted. This was Sam. The eyes, twinkling and with tiny wrinkles; the slightly humorous uptilt to the corners of the mouth; the good-humoured face, a trifle round and boyish for a man of forty—all *were* Sam, and Nick felt as if a ponderous load had been removed from his shoulders. He had felt like that when seeing his grandfather.

"'Low Nick," Sam slapped his back. "Come to see nobody's stolen our little rocket?"

Nick smiled faintly. Sam's jokes were always weak. They went out into the night air, away from the voices and activity in the bay, and Nick looked up. Almost overhead Ursa Major shone brightly; north, just visible, was the Cassiopeia group, and west, rising above the outline of *Project 13*, the Lyra and Hercules constellations.

"Have you ever felt how *big* the cosmos is, Nick?" Sam murmured. "That's where *we're* going. To the stars. Man is a wonderful thing, supreme, always conquering—"

"Time was when the giant suarians thought that—if they thought." Nick wondered how to begin. "When a life-form expands out of its own environment it must expect to come into conflict with things that may be its superiors."

Sam Cordy seemed to be pondering. A light from the building threw their shadows long across the concrete. "Meaning what?" he asked at last.

"That the cosmos is big, as you say. That *Project 13* constitutes a threat to everything out there." Nick indicated the heavens. "It will give man the power to impose himself on other worlds. That other worlds may not care to be imposed upon is a point we seldom consider. Mars and Venus are like Earth—pebbles in the same puddle. Out there may be planets and worlds quite different. *Project 13* is a stepping-stone to those worlds. Time was when mankind was the greatest thing men knew; when he could build his stepping-stones how and when he wished. But I've often wondered whether that will

always be so. Why should *man* be top-dog, in all *that*?" He expressively indicated the sky from horizon to horizon.

Sam Cordy grinned in the light of a passing lorry. "Romancer," he said. "Dreamer. Let's go into the office."

When Nick left, he knew he had mentioned not one of the things which had brought him to see Sam. It had been too difficult to begin. Could he be certain he had not made a mistake? It seemed impossible to say. He got into the sedan, frowning.

Niora was waiting, and from her face he knew that the police had phoned. "They're annoyed, Nick," she said.

He hung up his hat, avoiding her clear, golden eyes. *Annoyed*, he thought. That meant they had found no body, either in the reference room or elsewhere. Quite likely Alf—the second Alf—had been waiting for them when they called.

"It was a silly mistake, Nick." She had followed him into the living-room, her low voice puzzled. "They expect you to make a full statement first thing tomorrow."

Nick felt she needed some apparently logical explanation. He pulled a face. "Guess it does look silly, Niora. I suppose Alf was laid out with some kind of attack and I panicked."

He hoped she believed what he knew was a lie: Alf had been dead. Dead, with eyes glazed, heart still, and breathing halted for ever.

He went to the window and looked out over the glowing city, not wanting to talk, or add further excuses. To talk of what he had seen would bring in Judge Henson, Niora's father, and he preferred that she should not know that there, too, something he could not pretend to understand had happened.

A man was standing in the street below. He looked up, counting the lighted windows as if to find one he knew, and an abrupt chill ran through Nick. He tensed, his eyes turned down to follow the man, now going on slowly. He had been big, with a dark hat and slightly rolling step Nick would always remember.

"What is it, Nick?"

He felt Niora's hand on his arm, and turned away. No use to say that Henson seemed to be watching below, he decided.

"It's nothing." He saw that his explanations about Alf had convinced her, and he withdrew from the window, not wanting her to see—whatever it was that watched below. "I'll be working late tonight. There are points I need to check."

He went into his study and locked the communicating door on the inside. The watcher outside could mean only one thing. *He was now on the list of the hunted*. To be with Niora endangered her, and her talking hindered thought. He wondered whether it was time to open the box. No, he thought.

He examined the room. The window was fastened, and there was no balcony or ledge outside. One door went into their living-room; the

other into the corridor common to all the rooms, and both were locked. He put out the light and stood near the window. After a long time the figure came back, looked up, crossed the road, and disappeared below, going towards the entrance to the flats. Nick felt the hair on his neck crisp. Niora was playing the radio; music floated through into the study, and an abrupt announcement from a music-hall show, as she tuned in. He considered phoning the police, but decided they could not help him. What could he say? That Judge Henson, his wife's father and lifelong friend, intended to kill him—was not really Judge Henson at all, any longer? It would not pass.

A soft knock brushed the panels of the outer door. Nick started, crossed and dropped a hand on the knob.

"Who is it?" His palms were moist.

"Judge Henson."

The words were breathed as if not to disturb Niora. Nick hesitated, then snapped on the light and unlocked the door. The newcomer pushed himself silently in, walking heavily, and looking at Nick under thick lids.

"I admire your courage," he said. "But not your wisdom."

Nick locked the door and put the key in his pocket. Niora had turned the radio a little louder, and he was glad.

"Why my courage, Judge?" he asked, and sat down. There was no other name he could use.

"Because you know I am not Judge Henson."

The other lowered himself into the second chair and leaned back heavily. He took out a cigar and began to cut the end. Nick felt admiration, and used it to hide the fear he could not dispel.

"You do it—very well," he murmured.

The other nodded, dropping one eyelid in a mannerism which had been Henson's. "When big things are at stake the agents chosen are naturally—very competent," he said drily. "That is why I do not admire your wisdom. You should not have admitted me."

"Perhaps I prefer to get things over; perhaps you under-estimate me. You may think me unprepared—but I'm tough!"

"The former I admit could be so. But reliable agents do not underestimate an enemy." He exhaled smoke at the ceiling, fattening his round cheeks. Nick switched on the overhead light and watched keenly.

"I had not imagined *Project 13* was in danger from anyone on Earth," he said. "We are united. It will benefit all, causing danger or loss to no one. I can't think why anybody on Earth should wish to sabotage it. . . ."

"You follow developments quickly." A smile was on the round face, but it lacked the essential quality which could have made it kindly. "You reason well. Nor can I think of any reason why anyone on Earth should wish to sabotage it, as you say."

Nick experienced a shock, though he knew that it had been this thought which had been creeping uncalled into his mind.

"You are—not of this Earth?" he breathed.
"Obviously."

They looked at each other through the thin blue smoke, and Nick knew the other was more than human, judged by standards he knew. Here was no mere disguise—the newcomer was a *duplicate* of Henson, and so perfectly done was the duplication that it was unlikely anyone except himself and Niora would ever notice the difference. A new thought struck him coldly.

"What of Judge Henson?"

A steady hand deposited ash carefully in a tray. "His disposal was regrettable, but necessary. Individuals cannot be allowed to stand between us and our aim."

The eyes, cold as blue ice, settled on Nick. He felt that behind them was an intellect of extreme potential, whose reasoning processes were advanced beyond those of Earthmen, so that the unexpected was likely, bringing dangerous developments in quite unanticipated ways. The hand crushed out the cigar.

"Earth has reached a little too far towards the stars."

He got up heavily, his eyes not leaving Nick. Nick's flesh crept. He grated back his chair, remembering how Alf Somers had lain. There was a moment's silence in the radio programme, and he hoped his visitor would not speak. Niora was safe only so long as she did not know. Those who knew had to be eliminated. Music began again, and the heavy form advanced.

"We do not wish to complicate matters by unnecessary deaths," Henson said.

Nick caught up his chair by its back and struck. It rebounded off an upraised forearm, and the second arm lapped round his neck. He felt himself borne over backwards, and the chair was wrenched from his fingers. Two round eyes no longer like Henson's stared down into his, and the weight of the heavy body settled like a sack of grain on his chest. He wriggled violently, and his fingers closed round the neck overhanging him.

At the touch a nervous shock ran through him. The neck was not like his own, but took on a feeling of unyielding toughness with which he knew it useless to grapple. The muscles were strong and resistant, so that his grip seemed puny and helpless. He tore at the imprisoning arms. They, too, were so strong they felt like moulded steel, and one hand closed round his throat, squeezing, while the other poised a shining instrument over his one arm. The face began to lose its resemblance to Judge Henson, as if the imitative deception could not be maintained. The cheeks grew lean, the eyes calculating, and the mouth lost its fullness.

Nick kicked, freed a hand, and got one foot up and on the waistcoat. Using all his strength he flung the body up and away, and scrambled back, jumping to his feet, panting.

The radio had stopped. Niora's voice came through the door. "Is that you, Nick?"

Nick saw that his door-key was in the other's muscular hands. With an odd rolling gait Henson reached the door, opened it quickly, and disappeared down the corridor. Nick went to the window, rubbing his throat.

Judge Henson came out of the entrance to the block, and disappeared briskly down the street.

"Anything the matter, Nick?"

He realised that Niora was rapping loudly on the door. He controlled his breathing, making his voice level.

"Nothing, dear. I was only moving the furniture."

"Silly time to do it."

The radio began again. Nick locked the door and sat down, trembling from reaction. So that was the manner of being they were up against, he thought. His visitor had certainly been higher on the evolutionary scale than himself. Had been physically superior, adaptive, intelligent, and could have ended the struggle effectively had he wished. He had gone away so that Niora should not know, not because he was beaten.

Nick recalled his words to Sam Cordy, and shivered. The universe was big. Mankind might not be top-dog any longer.

CHAPTER III

HE went out early, agreed he had been hasty in assuming his friend dead, made his statement, and signed it. He learned that Somers had said he had been unwell. *Bluff*, thought Nick as he went into the street. *They* did not want the police to make troublesome investigations, preferring to play the game their own way. The fewer who suspected, the better: it would be fewer to eliminate. Nick had thought of that angle all night, and an old .208, relic of a war in which his father had served, rested heavily in his pocket. The elimination of undesirable elements could work both ways, he decided. His father had once used almost that expression.

The blonde co-ordination clerk told him Alf Somers had come early and was in the astrogation room.

"Sam Cordy here?" he asked.

She looked at a card-file and shook her head. "No, Mr. Riordan. He won't be in until noon."

He thanked her and got on a truck loaded with stores.

Project 13 was a high, silvery pillar pointing at grey morning skies. He left the truck at its base and entered the lift-cage, which whirred slowly up taut cables to the circular entrance lock. He paused on the narrow platform, looking down at the vehicles below and at the lines

which radiated to the distant buildings. Then, thin-lipped, he went into the vessel's interior.

It was a miracle of craftsmanship, he thought, as he rode up in the central lift. Engines filled nearly one-third of the ship's bulk, and stores a second third. The remainder housed living-quarters and apparatus—mostly the latter. *Project 13* was a self-contained laboratory, equipped to locate and examine the planets which circled distant suns. Once out there in the mighty vastness of space, she would have to be self-supporting, and her designers intended that she should make a round trip through the heavens, with reserve power for several planetary landings.

The new Alf Somers was sitting on a mushroom stool before an instrument panel, and got up as he entered.

"How do, Nick." The mobile face grinned.

Nick entered stiffly, and saw that a wireman was working on cables under a panel near the door.

"You're here early, Alf," he said, his face bleak as he eyed the other across the six feet of free floor-space.

The light-blue eyes mocked him. "Another mistake like last night, Nick, and you'll find yourself sent down for psychopathical adjustment."

True, thought Nick. And the words were a threat: the alien knew who held the superior position. Nick had no proof—if he made an accusation it would appear mere insanity. He smiled, his limbs like ice and his grip on the old .208 in his pocket so hard it hurt.

"I should scarcely make the same mistake twice," he murmured.

The wireman came from under the panel, gave them a passing glance, and went out. Nick closed the door and stood with his back to it. His expression changed to hate; his eyes snapped.

"What did you do with Alf?" he demanded.

The expression on the mobile face was characteristic still. The red hair was brushed back exactly as Alf would have done it. Nick reminded himself of what he had seen in the reference room, almost imagining that he had dreamed up the whole thing. But the other shrugged.

"Need you know what we did with him?"

"Perhaps it doesn't matter." Nick was glad pretence had ceased. "Remember I *know*. Alf didn't."

"What makes you think he didn't?"

Nick shivered. He had told no one because they would not believe. He had supposed his friend had not known. It was unnerving to realise that Alf might have suspected something, and kept it to himself for that same reason. The thought chilled, and only the hard feel of the .208 in his pocket quietened his panic.

"I could kill you," he said thinly.

"You could try."

"Then why aren't you afraid?"

"It should be obvious the agents of a whole galaxy are not going to

allow their lives to depend upon such a slender chance." The other got off the stool. "Our preparations were in no way incomplete."

Nick's fingers squeezed the trigger; once, twice, and a third time. The weapon kicked. Three holes appeared in the breast of the blue overall and three bullets shattered apparatus behind. The face so like Alf's only twitched, and Nick's grip on his weapon relaxed.

"Do not always evaluate more advanced life forms by your own poor biological standards." There was reproach in the words and tone.

Nick jumped back through the door and ran. He trembled as he rode down in the lift, and knew he was white as he reached the circular lock and took the external cage to ground level. There, he gained full control of himself and went on one of the trucks to the office buildings. In the co-ordination office the girl stopped him.

"The Chairman of the Board will want to speak to you, Mr. Riordan."

"Why?" he snapped.

"Mr. Somers has reported that while showing him a souvenir in the astrogation cabin you damaged some of the instruments."

She looked at him queerly, and Nick shrugged. The phone call from *Project 13* had apparently preceded him by several minutes.

"Quite an accident," he said.

He saw that he would have to be doubly careful; things like this, after reporting Somers dead, gave a bad impression. He went on into a call-booth and dialled Sam Cordy's number. After a long interval Sam's voice came over the line.

"Listen," Nick pleaded. "I want to talk. Can I come round?"

Sam seemed to be considering. "I'm on at noon, Nick," he said at last. "It's ten-thirty now."

"That gives us an hour!"

"Not so fast! I've got a journey out of town first. I don't think I can make it."

Nick felt sweat on his palms. "Sam, this is important!"

"So is my trip, Nick. Alf asked me to slip down to his place to bring up some charts he left there last night."

Nick found himself staring at a dead phone, and he replaced it automatically. Sam's statement might mean exactly what it said. Again, it might not.

Nick came out from the Board meeting with his ears red. It had been in session when his action was reported, and he had been hurriedly added to the agenda. The Chairman had been stern and fully aware of his enormous responsibility.

"We feel you are aware of the vessel's importance, too, Riordan," he concluded. "For the first time men will travel more than mere interplanetary distances. You realise no thoughtlessness must be allowed to jeopardise this vast undertaking, and that we should regret having to withdraw your official pass."

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. We hope nothing further of this nature will arise."

Nick had left under the eagle scrutiny of the twenty directors. By the office clock he saw that he had been delayed an hour, and the clerk at the entrance desk stopped him.

"Mr. Cordy tried to phone you, Mr. Riordan. Said it was urgent. I said you were being interviewed, and the Board left strict orders there be no interruption."

Nick swore silently. "Did he leave a message?"

"No, Mr. Riordan. He seemed anxious, and said we must realise we had to fight for survival." She looked puzzled. "I thought perhaps you would understand."

So Sam *knew*, Nick thought with excitement. He could mean only that.

"Where was the call from?" he asked quickly.

"Mr. Somers' house, sir."

"I see."

He went out, irritated that the call had to come when he was before the Board. He would have given ten years of his life to have been there to answer Sam, he decided. *If he had ten years. . . .* He wondered exactly how much Sam knew. It was galling to have missed him; yet wonderful to know he did not stand alone any longer.

He went home and ate. When they were drinking the coffee Niora looked across the table at him.

"I rang dad this morning."

Nick felt his muscles tense. He put his cup down slowly.

"Yes?" Those who did not know were safe, he thought. Did Niora know?

"He seemed a trifle odd, Nick." She frowned. "Nothing I could really put a finger on."

"Odd?" He tested the extent of her suspicion, hoping she knew nothing.

"Yes, Nick. He was coming round this evening, and I wanted to ask what time. But he says now he isn't coming."

Nick felt relief like cool water through his veins. Apparently the being who had become Judge Henson did not want Niora to suspect: those who suspected had to be eliminated, and too many eliminations might cause enquiries. The smaller the circle was, the greater were chances of success. It would not require much deduction to decide that he himself would never tell Niora what he knew.

"Perhaps he was busy," Nick breathed, and wondered how long the deception could continue. A time would come when the truth would out.

After the meal he rang up the project site and asked for Sam Cordy. He heard a connection put through to the co-ordination clerk.

"He's not back, Mr. Riordan," she said. "He reported urgent personal business, but left no number where he might be contacted."

Nick bit his lips. "Thanks. If he appears, have him ring me."

“Certainly, Mr. Riordan.”

He sat in silence, wondering whether Sam was following some line on his own. His eyes strayed to the clock. The new Alf Somers would be going off duty within the hour. That left time, Nick decided. He would go down to the little white-and-red house and investigate. . . .

Cool evening wind came down off the blue hills. The sun was gone, and the white-and-red house had drawn shadows closely about itself. Nick stopped the sedan behind thick elms and looked down across the slopes at the unlit windows. No smoke rose from the chimney; nor was there movement inside or in the garden, or on the gravel drive that came out to the road. It was lonely, he thought, not moving. Time was, when men had hastened to congregate in populous cities. But Alf Somers had preferred solitude—and that well suited those who had come.

He got out and went quietly down along the road and into the end of the gravel drive. Abruptly he wondered at the odd stillness. The air itself seemed to have become a vacuum that conducted no sound, and when he stepped through the gate his shoes on the gravel were like steel on crackling ice. Under the beeches soft turf cushioned his feet, and he went in a long curve towards the still house.

It was silent; seemed empty. Behind, the garden sloped down to a narrow strip of grass, ending in willows and a stream. He went under the willows, listening, and stopped. Below, gleaming in the water, was a pile of canisters. Looking down, he knew them to contain food. They were unopened, and the manufacturer's name gleamed up golden through the water. A tiny fear crept into being on his back; he looked behind, but the garden was empty. His gaze returned to the canisters. A little way below, sodden in the water, were three loaves. He bent down to stare, and tiny fish flicked from them away into the reeds.

He straightened, and knew that his face was white. The grocer who had supplied Alf Somers made his deliveries as usual—but those who had come did not need such food. Bent plants showed where the new Alf Somers had passed down from the house, carrying the unwanted food to the stream.

Chilled, Nick went slowly among the trees towards the house. He remembered what Sam Cordy had phoned so urgently. The time had come when man must again fight for survival. Man was no longer the creature best adapted and superior. Time was, when he had been that. But things had changed. And how few knew, Nick thought uneasily. So insidious was the enemy, people did not know, *nor would believe*, that an enemy had indeed come.

He halted in cover, looking across at the house. The evening sky was dark and the wind hushed. A tremor born of some indefinable but extreme unease passed through his body. The sky was dark; was deep purple—except for one point immediately over the house. A

faint golden disc glowed there, radiating thin streamers that seemed to flow from it up into the heavens. Faint as a sunbeam, it floated silently, and as Nick looked through it he seemed to be looking into a tube that gave a view of the star-pricked, empty back-drop of space, and of a vessel awesomely large, circular, flattened, and spinning slowly on its axis as it moved against the stars. He went cautiously nearer, scarcely breathing, and the view snapped from vision. He halted and stepped back. It reappeared. In the distance of a single pace it came and went from view, and mid-way, moving his head cautiously, he found a spot where the golden disc seemed to break up into a wildly spinning toothed wheel, beyond which moved triangular segments of the saucer-shaped vessel. Only at one spot was there a clear view where by some odd chance a focus arose between his own world of three-dimensional space and the unknown and incomprehensible time-space continuum in which the alien vessel existed. Voices sounded, growing louder, and passed as three men went along the road, cycling quickly and momentarily visible between the trees. They could see nothing, Nick decided. The golden disc was visible only from this one point.

He went cautiously towards the house, keeping from view, and reached the wall near a back window which he knew had no fastening. Alf had taken the broken latch off two weeks before and never replaced it. He pushed it open cautiously and looked through, then vaulted inside. A faint humming came from somewhere upstairs, and he crept up, listening at every step. The humming came from behind a partly open door. With infinite caution he opened it and looked in.

A compact apparatus, lifted from its case, rested on a chair and hummed and sang softly like taut wires in the wind. A radiance rose from it towards the ceiling, where the plaster and old-fashioned beams trembled before his eyes as if seen through rippling water. Nick thought of the shimmering golden disc above the house, and his tense attention quickened. For a long time he studied the apparatus, dropping to his knees to peer closely into its intricate interior, but not touching it. When at last he rose, a deep ridge stood between his brows, but his eyes shone with inner light. He had an excellent memory for technicalities, and the principal circuits were engraved on his mind.

CHAPTER IV

NIORA RIORDAN frowned at the litter of equipment on the lounge table, as if annoyed that their room had become a workshop. Nick wiped his brow and sat back, sighing. His coat hung on the chair, and he saw that he had worked for three hours without pausing. Niora looked at the shining chassis, with its countless connections and components.

"What does it do, Nick?"

"I don't *know*, Niora. I can only guess." He switched off the table-lamp. He could be wrong—and explanations could lead to knowledge dangerous to Niora herself. "It's just a copy of a unit I saw somewhere."

"Not anything to do with the project?"

He shook his head. "Such work wouldn't be done like this."

He was not sure whether she was satisfied, and knew better than to under-estimate her. Niora had a habit of worrying at a problem until she found a solution. This time he hoped that she did not even suspect there was a problem.

"The vessel's really finished?" she asked.

Nick wondered whether this was a continuation of her original subject. "*Project 13?* Yes, except for a few finishing touches of no great importance."

"She will travel faster than light?"

"If you care to express it like that. We prefer to say that she will cease to exist in this time-space continuum. Without that, her crew would need half a lifetime to make the trip."

His gaze flickered to the apparatus he was building, which he had mentally classified in the bedroom when he had seen its original, and his first puzzlement changed slowly to comprehension. Though obviously designed by a race whose technological skill exceeded Earth levels, it embodied no completely new technique. It was the unification of known techniques in a new and unexpected manner.

He tidied up and put the uncompleted space-continuum distorter into a large suit-case. The phone rang as he finished, and he took it up.

"Is that Sam Cordy?"

He regretted his words immediately, and wondered whether he had been unwise as a level voice said: "No, Alf here."

Alf, thought Nick bitterly. Not *Alf*, but . . .

"Yes," he said, and saw that Niora was listening. "Oh, Alf, what is it?"

"I'd like to see you."

How well it was done, Nick thought. His fingers tightened imperceptibly on the phone. "I can call at any time you like, Alf." That let Niora know where he was going, without needing to say anything and so make a point of it so that she asked questions. If anything happened it might be useful for her to know.

"Right, I'll be at the site in half an hour." He hung up.

The light-blue eyes met Nick's. "So you see your continuous interference cannot be permitted. It is unfortunate, but necessary."

A group of wiremen were talking by the other small tables, drinking and smoking. Nick felt a cold finger pass up and down his spine.

"It will be arranged in such a way as to cause no suspicion," the other said.

Nick looked at him. Behind the eyes was an expression which would never have appeared in Alf's face. Except for that he might have been with Alf.

"We've never harmed you," Nick pointed out evenly.

The other emptied his glass smoothly. "You would do so. No, not purposely, but because it is your nature. A century ago you reached adjacent planets and civilised them. Very well, they benefited in some ways. But we are not anxious to be victims of the same process. You merely want to travel farther and faster; build higher and bigger. The only time you approach contentment is when you are striving to attain some ideal—which is in itself a form of discontent." He leaned forwards, pointing a finger at Nick. "We are content, wishing only to remain as we are. *Project 13* gives you the means to reach our world. We do not wish to be colonised. We do not want a senseless, useless trade as you scratch out planets for the metals you term valuable, or pick our brains for processes you can apply to your own industries."

Nick felt his spirits sinking. "I cannot believe *Project 13* is such a threat to you."

"It is. We have ways of knowing."

Nick did not argue. Everything he had so far seen indicated the other was a member of a race technically far advanced beyond Earth level. He did not doubt that they had—ways of knowing.

"As your superiors, we are not prepared to let you undermine our stable society," the other said quietly, his gaze now upon the table. "Man, represented by you and your fellows, is not high in the evolutionary scale. We have superior intellects, and superior bodies, both obtained through selective genetical control, with some surgical intervention. Your bodies depend upon each individual part. We have arranged that ours do not."

"I could disclose what you are!" Nick interrupted.

The blue eyes passed over the tables. "Try, if you wish!"

Nick knew that his statement had been bluff. No one would believe him. No one would even bother to examine the man so apparently Alf Somers.

"No ordinary examination would reveal that we are different." The other seemed to have followed his thoughts. "You would find it very difficult to convince anyone."

"So you will smash *Project 13*?" Nick said thinly.

"Yes, but not so obviously as you suggest. Preliminary tests will make it apparent that the vessel is unworkable, and that the design is not practicable."

Nick nodded slowly. That was the way they would do it. "Why tell me all this?" he asked.

"Because the fewer who suspect our presence, the fewer unnecessary deaths will arise." He leaned forwards, and his gaze locked with Nick's. "Have you told anyone of your suspicions? Acquaintances, or your wife?"

The eyes held latent power, and Nick knew that concealment would

have been impossible. No one could have passed this scrutiny. Luckily, he did not need to lie.

"I've told no one," he said. "Take my word for that."

"Good." Nick saw how confident of his ability to remain undeceived the other had been. "That's all. Good-bye."

Nick rose stiffly, wondering what had been planned. It would be something quite unexpected, and likely to cause the minimum amount of suspicion. The beings from the circular ship did not want curiosity aroused.

He went through the crowd to the door, suddenly awake to the danger which had always surrounded him, but which now had a different meaning. Death was a thing that happened to *other* folk, *until now*. . . . Lorries were backing into a yard adjoining the offices, and he waited until they had gone, his hair prickling and his hands damp in his pockets. A track-rod could break, or a driver accelerate carelessly. . . .

He gained the door of his own small private room, and looked back across the concrete square. The second Alf Somers was watching him from outside the refreshment room. Nick shivered involuntarily, entered, and locked the door. He seated himself, his plan crystallising, and reached for the control switch of his tape-recorder. Sam Cordy suspected, he thought. He could put everything he knew on the tape and have it passed on to Sam. . . .

His finger stopped an inch from the switch—insulation *could* break down; shorts *could* arise. It would not be the first time a man had been electrocuted like that.

He depressed the switch with a rubber eraser, and the recorder began to run. He relaxed imperceptibly and began to talk into the desk mike, marshalling his facts. Those who had come intended to make *Project 13* look a failure. The new Alf Somers and Judge Henson were spies of a kind never fought before. . . .

When he finished he saw that almost an hour had passed. He ran back the tape on to an empty spool, placed it in a large envelope, and tied it. The less important it appeared, the better, he decided, and wrote on it: "For Sam Cordy", and in brackets: "Remember our party, Sam?" That should do, he thought. But Sam would be curious, and play the tape. There had been no party.

The phone rang. He picked it up and found the site gate-keeper had been put through.

"A man here keeps saying he must see you, Mr. Riordan."

Nick frowned. "Who is he?"

"A Mr. Sanedrin."

Nick's frown deepened. The name was familiar, yet one he did not completely recognise.

"Shall I send him away?" The gate-keeper sounded as if he had endured a long and tiring argument. "Or will you see him?"

Nick considered quickly. Every step now seemed full of imminent

personal danger. "Have him brought in," he decided at last. "Take the usual precautionary measures, of course."

He rang off and settled back to wait. The site was ringed by an electrified fence, as securely guarded as when top-secret preparations were conducted in time of war. Sanedrin would be brought in under open guard. He repeated the name, and his brows suddenly rose. Niora's radio programme had included Sanedrin the Seer! That was why the name was familiar.

Knocking vibrated the door, and he admitted a little man, dark and quick, who bowed as if to an audience. But a keen look of inner tension was in the black eyes, which flickered round the room and returned to Nick.

"I intrude, Mr. Riordan." He made an expressive gesture, hunching up his shoulders and raising his palms. "But I presume you would consider the intrusion justified."

Nick examined him as he closed the door. "I've heard you on the radio," he said. "Seen you on television, too, now I think of it."

Long, delicately white fingers flitted up to a silk bow-tie, and Sanedrin's head bobbed as if he demonstrated some trick to an admiring audience. He produced a card as from nowhere, and Nick glanced down at it.

Sanedrin looked momentarily uncomfortable. "One must live, Mr. Riordan. There are times when I have—felt things strongly. I employ trickery; I admit it to you. But there were times when I did not debase my powers to obtain definite results. Programme managers expect such results."

Nick felt his interest quicken. He saw that the newcomer's manner, automatic in its showmanship, only half-concealed a grave inner tension. He nodded encouragingly.

"I had a dream, Mr. Riordan, a dream." Recalling it caused pain to flicker across the thin, dark face. "It resembled those I had experienced before I had debased my art for money. There was a vision of the long road east through the green belt; of a sedan, and a passenger vehicle, both crushed like paper. Of faces I knew—one I had seen in news-casts about this great vessel." He waved towards the project rocket, just visible through the window. "*Your* face, Mr. Riordan. The feeling was so strong I could not quell it. I had to tell you."

He ended lamely, and Nick saw how difficult it had been for him to make such a point of a thing most men would laugh into silence. Instinctively he pressed the other's shoulder.

"You've done a great service by telling me that—perhaps a greater service than you'll ever know."

When he was alone Nick sat pondering on the desk. He had planned to take the east road that evening, ending up at the little white-and-red house. There could be an accident. The sedan might be crushed like an egg-shell by one of the fast articulated passenger vehicles which swept along the arterial roads. It seemed possible that the—*newcomers* to Earth could engineer just such an accident.

The suite was locked, and Nick let himself in. A note was propped on the table, and he opened it with sudden apprehension.

*Gone round to see daddy as you said you might be late.
Niora.*

The paper trembled in Nick's fingers, and he folded it automatically. This he had dreaded, yet expected. He gnawed a lip, then dialled Judge Henson's number. He rang twice, with no result, and hung up. He frowned, then asked the project-site co-ordinating office for Sam Cordy. Sam had not been in.

Frustrated, he went down to the sub-level garage. One thing seemed clear. Everything centred on Alf's house, and that was where he would go. He had got into the sedan before he remembered his visitor at the office and his warning. Both had been crowded from his mind by his fear for Niora.

Articulated six-wheeled buses, roomy and silent, were on their evening routes through the green belt. He got a ticket from the slot-machine at a halt barrier. A vehicle which would take him by Alf's was stopping, but he froze. Sanedrin had not said he was in the *sedan*! The same accident could arise if he were a passenger in the articulated bus, and with fatal results.

He watched it leave, and turned back to the flat. Suddenly it seemed dangerous to be out at all. Possibly *they* had engineered the whole thing, beginning the plan with a call supposedly from Judge Henson, to take Niora away. It was not difficult to deduce that he would then phone Henson's number, get no reply, and decide to go to the white-and-red house where everything had begun.

He paced the flat in indecision, twice rang Henson's number, and twice asked for Sam Cordy, all without result. He wondered whether he should risk the drive out to Alf's. The clock chimed ten, and he switched on the news-cast, wondering if there *had* been an accident. . . .

There had. A sedan had crashed into an articulated bus travelling east, and seven passengers had been killed on its near side as it mounted the path, sheared off two trees, and toppled down the embankment into a park. "Among the killed was the well-known universal network artist Sanedrin the Seer," the announcer said. "His death will give a feeling of personal loss to many of our listeners."

Nick struck off the radio and stared from the window, not seeing the city lights, his face suddenly like weathered brown stone. He always sat on the near side. Blue, gold, red, and green were reflected on his concave cheeks and in his eyes as an advertiser's legend spelled itself along the building opposite. Immobile with thought, he stood outlined by the brilliance of the city below. All this, he thought, made by man for man, was in danger. And the eager people did not *know*. His gaze turned sideways. The beacon lights still burned on the point of *Project 13*. For a moment he had almost expected they might have gone. He wondered whether he should go to Judge Henson's. *That* journey could be taken on foot, and should be safe.

CHAPTER V

HE went down and through the busy streets, where folk always hurried. Every building blazed with lights; neons of every natural colour, plus some devised by man, zigzagged their abrupt messages, then disappeared in blackness. Cartoon figures bowed and gesticulated; comic strips flashed through brief-lived sequences, and behind all was the sound of many vehicles and the voices of many people. Many laughed; most were gay. Only at Nick's heels did danger seem to walk, and he often looked back.

He went down side streets between high buildings, and came out upon a boulevard with fountains playing along its centre. He wondered whether Sam Cordy had received the tape. Probably. And Sam had suspected nothing, Nick felt sure. The knowledge that Sam knew, and would help, comforted him.

Judge Henson's house was beyond a second intersection. Nick crossed under the trees and slowed his step, eyes and ears alert. A man with a package under one arm was standing motionless outside Judge Henson's gate, his back to Nick. Nick felt excitement and relief. The little package *might* have been anything; but its shape and size suggested recorder tape. And the man, characteristically without a hat, was unmistakable. Nick's step quickened, a sudden fear coming into his mind. His hand fell upon the waiting man's arm.

"Sam! You haven't told Judge Henson what was on the tape?"

The man jerked round; street-lights shone on his bare, sandy head, and rounded, boyish face. A smile twitched the corners of his mouth.

"Nick! This is a lucky chance. What brings you here?"

Nick froze, his nails biting into his palms. His mind cried out, and his lips almost followed as hope died. Alf Somers, Judge Henson, now, outside Henson's house. . . .

"You're not Sam," he said thinly. "What have you done with Sam?"

Brows exactly like Sam's rose quizzically. *How well you do it*, Nick thought bitterly. The other transferred the package to a wide pocket.

"That's a question we prefer not to answer," he said.

Nick was glad there was no attempt to maintain the deception. He knew that perhaps everyone except himself would believe this man to be Sam Cordy, and only a sixth sense whispered he was not.

"Are there—scores of you?" he asked, his lips tight.

The man who looked like Sam Cordy smiled. "That, again, is a question we prefer not to answer."

Nick felt baffled. His gaze turned to the house, but no lights illuminated the windows. His dismay became anger.

"What have you done with Niora? She came here."

Shoulders rose and fell, but the second Sam Cordy did not speak. Nick's blood ran hot in fury, then cold at the look in the other's eyes.

"You're—*devils*," he said.

"The desire to survive is a hard taskmaster. Other things become secondary to it. I thought the matter very clearly put." The man tapped his pocket where the package rested.

A light suddenly came on in the hall-way above and the door was opened from inside. A large man speaking with Judge Henson's voice stood momentarily outlined. A girl came past him, adjusting her hat and exchanging farewells. Nick's heart stood still. Niora! By some miracle she had not noticed the change; by some ultimate lucky chance was coming out now, unharmed—not in danger, because she did not suspect.

She came half-way down the steps, saw Nick, hesitated, then smiled. Her eyes turned to the second Sam Cordy, and she nodded.

"Hello, Sam."

Nick, all his consciousness centred on her, felt new fear dawn in his mind. One hand on Henry Riordan's box, in his pocket, he stepped forward, looking up, his face white.

"Niora——?"

"I'm coming home right now, Nick."

His fear became alive, crawling through his mind. Here were Niora's face and form; her voice and gestures. Yet though they were the colour, he knew the soft golden eyes looking into his were not his wife's.

"*What have you done with Niora?*" he whispered.

The golden eyes turned upon the man like Sam Cordy, and the latter shrugged. Both stood, not speaking, looking at him, and something in Nick snapped. He turned and ran. His steps echoed from the residential buildings, and as he ran he knew, now, what form his *accident* would take. As far as the world knew, there would still be a Nick Riordan. That would make the complete circle—Alf, the Judge, Sam, Niora, and himself. Perhaps no other human would ever know.

He halted at the first junction, listening, but no steps followed. They had either decided it was unnecessary to give chase, or were following silently. He thought of Niora, and his cold fury grew as he went on quickly, his face white and bleak in the street-lights, not hearing the careless voices of the people.

People must *know*, he thought. They could not overcome an enemy they did not realise existed. The newcomers had worked secretly, and valued secrecy so much they would go to any lengths to maintain it. The greatest weapon to turn against them would be mass publicity—and there was one man alone who could use that weapon effectively and without delay. Nick's hurrying feet turned towards the city centre. That man was Marsh Wallace, of the universal network news syndicate.

Men came and went through the offices. In three-sided cubicles columnists and feature-writers snapped into tape-machines. Youths

hurried by with copy, and a continuous drone of activity filled all the long rooms. Nick knew he had been admitted only because *Project 13* was always news, and because his name, like that of those who held important positions in the project-site offices, was known. He passed through a frosted door lettered "Marsh Wallace". Quiet came as it closed behind him. From his broad, circular desk a man with a wide, brown face looked up. He made a sign of recognition, drew a file towards him from a side swivel, and leaned back, staring at Nick from under his eye-shield. He indicated a chair.

"I was told you wanted an appointment, Riordan." His voice was clipped, staccato, and clear above the quiet hum filtering from the outer offices.

Nick sat down. He knew his face showed the heavy strain he was enduring, and the look that had been in the golden eyes so like Niora's remained in his memory.

"You've always covered the news relating to the project," he said.

Marsh Wallace nodded, his gaze keenly appraising. "I have. No project-site item is used until it has passed through my hands."

He was abrupt and impersonal, and Nick wished he knew Wallace better—that would make things easier, and more certain. But their acquaintance was slight, and Wallace had already looked quickly at the clock, where a red second hand turned relentlessly.

"The project is being sabotaged," Nick said quietly. "There is real danger to the ship."

He would have to choose his words carefully. An appearance of panic would only hinder him. Wallace's face was slightly downturned, his eyes hidden behind the eye-shield as he leafed the pages of the file.

"There have been other reports of that, in the past," he said without tone to reveal his thoughts. "All proved unfounded—were mere suspicion or rumour."

"This is not rumour!"

Wallace nodded, not looking up. "So you say. I should need proof before I passed a story. Universal network news does not favour sensationalism. No story goes from this office without my permission, and I pass no story until I am satisfied it is based on truth."

He glanced up quickly, and Nick found himself meeting dark, cool eyes. He had heard that Wallace was a man of inhuman efficiency, and knew that without his aid the story he wished to tell would lie unpublished. If Wallace decided against it, no one would ever know. . . .

The cool, dark eyes strayed again to the clock with momentary impatience. "Tell me the facts as you believe them."

Nick hesitated, searching for words and realising just how unconvincing his story could appear. Wallace must have listened to many fake sensationalists in his long, busy life; must, indeed, have shown many protesting to the door.

Wallace leaned back as Nick finished. "An odd story, Riordan." Nick tried to read the expression in the cool, dark eyes, and failed. "It's true!"

"So you have said." Wallace consulted the file silently, and his gaze flicked up. "I see you had reported the death of Alfred Somers, but that he was later found well."

"I've explained that!" Nick felt his spirits sink again. "The person everyone believes to be Alf is really one of them!"

"You say the similarity is exact?"

"Yes."

"Then you can offer no proof?"

Nick was silent. There was no proof, he thought. He was only someone who *knew*. That was all. Just *knowing* was not enough for Wallace.

"It might be possible for you to see the alien vessel above Alf's house," he decided at last, eagerly.

Wallace appeared to consider. "You guarantee I should see it?" he asked finally.

Nick hesitated. "No."

"Then I can't come. I want the promise of definite proof—*proof*." He closed the file with a snap. "Proof, not rumour. Fact, not possibility. If I ran a story like this and it was faked, I should be out. Out. Yes, even I. The universal network does not encourage mistakes."

Nick saw that his interview was closed. He leaned over the desk, his face set.

"You ask for *proof* while Earth is in danger!"

Marsh Wallace pressed a stud on his desk and nodded at the door, as it opened to disclose a youth in shirt-sleeves.

"Show Mr. Riordan out," he said.

Nick looked back from the door. "At least promise you'll not forget what I have said!"

Wallace was jotting something on a slip of paper. He made a tiny motion with his head, but Nick did not know whether it was in assent or curt dismissal, and he went out through the offices and into the street. The midnight sky was high and clear, and passing vehicles and people reduced to a fraction of their earlier volume. Many windows were dark. Only from the great news syndicate building glared unbroken rows of lights, showing dawn would see material ready to pour through the thousand channels afforded by radio, television, and the Press. That news would contain no item of the threat from outside, Nick thought bitterly. Marsh Wallace would spike it, waiting for proof when none could be found.

Nick felt exhausted when he reached his rooms. Someone was moving inside, humming quietly in a voice which sounded like Niora's. His face thin and his lips compressed, he let himself into the study and locked the door. Niora's voice did not come, calling him, and he did not speak, but dropped the couch end and lay down to rest. At

last, after a long time, the voice that sounded so exactly like Niora's grew quiet, and Nick strove to sleep, his mind and body demanding rest. He wondered what had happened to Niora and the others. There seemed only one possibility: they were dead. At last he slept uneasily.

CHAPTER VI

HE awoke after what seemed moments and heard the end of the early news-cast coming from the next room. "The body has been identified as Alfred Somers, a technician at *Project 13* site. It is reported death appears to have taken place some days ago, though Somers has been seen recently."

The radio was silenced, and footsteps went into the bedroom. Nick got up. So Alf was dead, he thought, and shivered, recalling the other three people who had been substituted.

As he went down to street level he decided the police would now wish to question him again. The discovery of Alf's body altered things. He wondered whether those responsible for its disposal had made a mistake; whether there was some purpose in this development, or if it would throw suspicion on himself. The police might assume he knew more than he said, and he might be held for questioning. There could even be a case against him, he thought, if evidence turned out that way.

He stopped at the exit to the flats. Judge Henson was down the road. Nick glanced the other way quickly. The new Sam Cordy was coming from the other direction, and as if the two were aware of each other's presence despite intervening traffic and distance, Henson began to come with his characteristic rolling gait, heavy yet purposeful, towards the flats. Nick ran back lightly to the lift. Only when he had got out at his floor did he realise that there was no safety here. Sounds of movement came from inside his room, and a voice like Niora's sang softly to itself.

The indicator showed the lift was coming up. He sprinted for the stairway, and looked down. Judge Henson was mounting rapidly, and without breathlessness, despite his weight and the stiff climb. Nick turned the other corner and began to run up the stairs. There was only one lift and one stairway, and the building stood isolated from those around. *They* had come for him, and would apparently succeed.

He gained the flat roof with its tiny garden from which there was no escape. From its edge he saw that something was happening in the streets below. People hurried, or talked in groups, and traffic seemed momentarily disorganised. A confused murmur drifted up. A news delivery van had stopped at a corner, and the papers were passing quickly through the crowd. Somewhere a news reproducer was

trumpeting, but the words echoed across the road and were unintelligible. Nick strained his eyes down from the corner of the building. Several minutes passed, then a tiny group came from the flat, walking quickly. The new Cordy, Henson, and Niora.

Nick went down into the top-floor corridor. The lift was at ground level and would not rise. He took the stairway, reached his rooms, and found them empty. He hesitated, wondering what had happened, and switched on the news band.

"These startling revelations by Marsh Wallace were as unexpected as they were amazing." The announcer's voice seemed to hint at personal panic. "A report was made by two persons familiar with *Project 13*—Nick Riordan and Sam Cordy. Cordy's written report has only come to hand immediately before this bulletin, confirming Riordan's remarkable statement, made in person to Marsh Wallace late last night. Further confirmation arises in the fact that autopsy reveals Alfred Somers met his death over thirty hours ago, while many reliable witnesses state he was seen yesterday evening on the project site."

As he listened Nick thought of the enormous vessel he had seen above Alf's house, and of the technological superiority of the beings who operated it, and a new unease replaced his momentary triumph. Anyone who *knew* was in danger. Now, *everyone* knew! Many further developments would certainly centre round Alf's little white-and-red house!

Much traffic was on the road, and three military lorries passed Nick, the soldiers in them riding expressionlessly. He wondered if chance alone took them east with him. He drove fast, not thinking of individual danger, and the green belt slid away behind. The sedan mounted the hills, sped into the top roads, and he came out upon the far hillside. His gaze flickered immediately across the valley.

A transparent dome centred on the little white-and-red house and enclosed a large part of the undulated slopes around, including a section of the nearby road. Nick braked quickly to a stop at the roadside, where other vehicles had parked, and gazed down over the wooded hillsides. The dome looked like glass with a faint yellowish hue. It was spherical, and seemed to have shorn through the trees and hedges at its perimeter. Inside, the house and garden stood like minute toys in a huge bubble.

A police car came up the road, an urgent, amplified voice halting traffic and turning idle sight-seers back. Nick drove the sedan quickly into an unused lane and got out. With the heavy suit-case he had brought in one hand, he set off tangentially across the fields towards the dome. He had expected things to happen, but scarcely this.

The military lorries had stopped high above him on the hills, and the soldiers got out, staring down across the fields. An officer in a radio-car came. They saluted, then all gazed down again into the valley.

Nick went along behind a high hedge, and through trees. A faint

humming, almost inaudible, came from the dome—a sound he considered very like that which had come from the space-distorter. No one was visible inside, though he could hear a man shouting far away up on the hills behind him, and he drew near to the golden wall, which stretched high above the trees. It shimmered and moved so that it was difficult for his eyes to focus upon it, and he put down his heavy case and opened it.

The apparatus he had built was a replica of that he had seen in the bedroom. He suspected what it might do, but hesitated, thinking of Niora, Sam, and Alf, before depressing the switch. Very slowly a humming that chimed and blended with that of the dome came from the case. An area of the dome in front of him scintillated and abruptly vanished, the jagged edges drawing back, curling and twisting. Smoke began to rise from the suit-case, and Nick sprinted for the gap. An abrupt, quick thunder-clap of displaced air came at his heels, and he rolled upon the grass, looking back. The suit-case was burning brightly, its contents fused from the overload, and the interrupted edge of the dome had snapped back into existence. He got up slowly. High overhead the sky had an oddly different tint. In the centre, directly over the house and dimly seen as behind mist, floated the huge, circular vessel Nick had glimpsed once before from the garden. As he gazed at it, his ears still ringing, powerful arms fastened themselves round him, pinioning him.

Inside the house the furniture had been cleared from one room and a complex chair stood under a powerful light. In it was strapped a man with a wide, brown face, his head in a curved rest, his eyes closed. Around him moved three figures, their true features still concealed by a fading resemblance to those they had imitated. A man who had once appeared fat and aged, but whose face was taking on youthful lines, delicately manipulated the controls on the headpiece above the chair. Probes scarcely more than a molecule in diameter sank down through skull and brain. Never hurrying, and with infinite care, he proceeded, not looking up, his thickly lidded eyes keenly on his apparatus.

From his chair Nick watched, eyes sometimes on the three and sometimes on the unconscious Marsh Wallace. He had ceased trying to struggle.

“This means one of us will have to stay behind as Marsh Wallace,” one of the three said.

The heavy man by the headpiece sank another probe. “You believe it will be possible to kill this disclosure of our presence?”

“Of course. Those who saw nothing will not believe in it. Even those who have seen the dome will begin to disbelieve their own senses. It can be dismissed as an illusion, an atmospheric phenomenon, or the result of some experiment being carried on in Somers’ laboratory.”

Nick tried once more to move, but could not. The use had not yet

returned to his numbed muscles, which were frozen and useless from an unknown drug.

"It is unfortunate you needed to put on the continuum distorter," the big man said.

"It was necessary—we should have been over-run by police and soldiers. You think me most suited to take Wallace's position?"

"We do."

"Very well."

The second donned a headpiece joined to that above the central chair, and Nick watched it being adjusted. Apparatus began to murmur, and Marsh Wallace's features twitched as if in sleep. Nick closed his eyes, trying to overcome the dizziness left by the hypnotic. It had all been too quick, he thought bitterly. The concussion of returning space-distortion had scarcely echoed away before arms had locked round him and a needle slid into his arm. He wondered how long he had been unconscious. Certainly he had no memory of being placed in the chair.

He opened his eyes again. There now seemed to be two Marsh Wallaces in the room. One, the real Wallace, was still unconscious in the complex chair. The second lifted off his headpiece and rose briskly.

"Universal network news will kill this story!" he stated crisply. "I'll see to it!"

The large man began to withdraw the probes which Nick assumed had drained thought patterns from the unconscious man's brain. "What do you plan?" he asked.

Marsh Wallace's characteristic short laugh sounded in the room. "It won't be difficult! When you're gone I shall be alone here—on the spot, and can issue an authoritative announcement that what people saw was merely an unusual atmospheric phenomenon!"

Nick shivered, and felt that his blood was stirring and his tongue less like wood in his mouth. He wondered how long it took these agents of a superior world to learn how to mould their features by conscious will.

For a few moments he was still, wondering what he should do. He was conscious of the pressure of the box his grandfather had given him, in his pocket. Now, *now* was the time to open it, he thought. If he had the chance! Or was it . . .? He bit a lip. There was an element of doubt. "Don't open it until you're *sure*," Henry Riordan had said. He wasn't sure, yet. That meant the time had not come! He opened his eyes.

"Why don't you—leave us alone?" he whispered hoarsely.

They all looked at him, and brows fully as thick and bushy as Marsh Wallace's rose expressively.

"Would *you* leave a threat from an inferior life-form unchecked?" the new Wallace demanded coolly.

Nick knew that the question could receive only one answer. Time was when men had been the superior, and he thought of the use men had made of that superiority. Mankind had made himself master by slaying or over-riding every other living thing. Now that was changed—man suddenly found himself lower down on the evolutionary scale, and did not like it. It was nice to be top-dog, he thought. But easier to see the other viewpoint when one became under-dog.

"If you go outside the dome you'll be arrested," he protested. "You can't touch the project rocket!"

The man who looked like Marsh Wallace considered him gravely. "It would be a sound plan for a second Riordan to accompany me," he said, and his eyes went to the chair where his prototype still sat, white and unmoving. "We could find another volunteer willing to stay behind—as him?"

They nodded. "Easily, if necessary!"

"Good. We will do that. Alf Somers is officially dead. Sam Cordy can disappear. A second Nick Riordan and myself can remain here to clear things up."

Nick felt cold dismay run through him. They planned to leave a new Riordan who would speak, act, and move as he did—who would be admitted into the *Project 13* site without question. Whose very finger-prints would undoubtedly be his, by some imitative process these beings understood and controlled! The new Riordan would speak with his lips, framing thoughts as he would express them, and no one would ever know. . . .

"We must not forget Judge Henson," the large man pointed out, swinging away the headpiece from over Wallace's head.

The new Marsh Wallace nodded. "I can see to that. A bathing accident can be reported. With strong tides bodies are easily lost. He was a frequent swimmer."

They took the inert form from the complicated chair and lifted Nick into it. He tried to struggle, but his limbs were heavy and did not respond to his will, and bands were fixed round his legs and arms. His head was dragged back into the curved rest and a retaining semi-circle of resilient steel drawn tightly round his forehead. A dark bandage was placed over his eyes.

"Mankind's way of dealing with opposition has often been quite ruthless," Marsh Wallace's voice pointed out. "You should feel no anger if we kill you."

There were sounds of preparation round Nick in the unseen room. A vivid fear burned in his mind, radiating outwards in a circle of apprehension.

"Can't you—leave Earth alone?" he pleaded, his voice sounding unnatural even in his own ears.

Wallace's short laugh came without humour. "Mere distance through ordinary space is no safeguard for us. Second-stage space is different—a fact you and the others working on *Project 13* have almost guessed. We don't wish to be subject to the old troubles, or

exposed to the old contagion. The people of your millennium have played their part, and it has been as important to us as the ape was to men. No one can reach the high stages without ascending from the lower. Higher life-forms may supplant the lower, but they could not arise if those from which they had sprung had never existed. We have no enmity for you, just as you probably have none for the ape. Nevertheless, you would not permit savages to tear down the civilisation you have so laboriously constructed. You would realise that your worth exceeds theirs. Similarly, we, with our mental and physical stamina perfected by many millennia of culture and genetical control, know ourselves to be superior to you. Therefore we must safeguard ourselves from you."

A prick made Nick's arm tingle. He tried to speak but could find nothing to say. Time was, he thought, when man had always expected to be great; time was when men supposed the race would always go on, even though individuals were mortal. Mankind, he had always liked to think, was collectively immortal.

"Like other savages, you are often noble, but often irrational," the voice murmured. "Often splendid, often great. But often weak, often self-seeking. . . ."

The voice receded as if to a great distance, and Nick's consciousness ceased.

CHAPTER VII

FOR a long time in a deep, central recess of his mind the knowledge of *being* continued to exist, though isolated from every sense. Feeling had ceased, as had all sense of passing time. Within remained the single spark of living mind, oppressed by strange fears, dreads, and expectations as a questing came through his brain, as if his memories and thoughts were being taken as a model. A murmuring began and continued intermittently—how long, he could not tell. He did not realise that he still sat in the complex chair with its intricate apparatus low over his head. He did not know when the headpiece was slowly raised, and a replica of himself rose stiffly from the second chair, looking down at him, and smiling with his own slightly crooked smile.

"Time still is when a man can make sacrifices and risk danger for his fellows," the replica murmured, and went out. The others went with him, talking. Then with the second Marsh Wallace at his side the new Riordan went into Alf Somers' laboratory workshop. The door closed behind them.

Nick did not feel himself being lifted from the complex chair, or carried out into a small craft that had come down from the circular ship. He did not see the military massing on the hill, or realise that they could see no ship or craft rising quickly to it as they looked down

across the slopes. He did not feel the acceleration of the circular ship. Nor did he hear the murmur that drifted all along the hills as the golden dome suddenly ceased to exist, and two figures, immediately recognised by many of the watching people as Marsh Wallace and Nick Riordan, came walking out from behind the house, going up the slopes towards the high-ranking official who stepped forward to meet them.

His mind turned slowly like a sluggish wheel, and did not register the miracles of advanced technique with which the circular vessel was fitted. A thought grew, dimly at first. Somehow the race of mankind must survive. A species could not build so near the stars . . . then perish. Though individuals died, the race must continue. That alone gave purpose to living, his grandfather had said.

Nick awoke slowly as if from a deep and relaxing sleep. Isolated phrases that had been incomprehensible when taken alone began to join up in his mind, developing new meaning. His level of mankind was essential, they had said, because the lower stages in any evolutionary process were essential to the attainment of the higher.

Feeling returned to his limbs, and he lifted himself slowly. He had lain upon a green couch, resilient and soft, with a pillow of similar spongy material under his head. The room was as clean and fresh as the inside of a polished plastic cube, and only a faint humming showed he was in a vessel. The window was flush, apparently a transparency fused into the wall, and the light coming from the ceiling shone from no visible source. He got up and looked through the window, pain momentarily forgotten by wonderment at what he saw.

Far below was the Earth. Midday sun made white, the clouds, and shone on the towns and hills seen between them, picking out the roads like long loops of tape. Pointing up like a silver finger was *Project 13*, reflection glancing off her near side like white, living fire.

"Man is a great building animal," a smooth voice said quietly.

Nick turned from the window, startled, and wondering if the man before him had been Judge Henson. If so, the resemblance had gone, as had the dark clothing. The newcomer wore a light, sparkling garment of plastic, and his face was brown, lean, and noble. The eyes were kindly yet cautious, stern yet pleasant.

"Without his building ability, man would be nothing," the man said, coming to the window. "Man is what he has made himself. Other creatures are merely what they have become. That is the essential difference, and why man is the greater. And the noblest and most fine of all."

"And *Project 13*?" Nick asked, looking far below at the silver spear.

"She will never fly. It has been arranged."

Nick sighed. He had always felt the project rocket a great attainment and symbolic of man's expansion. The other followed his gaze and nodded.

"One dare not leave half-understood power in a child's hands. For

you, a few thousand years of progress have passed. Think, then, what men can become in the fullness of all futurity."

"There was something—odd in her drive," Nick said, suddenly understanding.

"Exactly." Keen eyes met his, then returned to the window. "In second-order space there is no time; there can be none, since no sequence of events exists there. But you will leave your own system and colonise planets near other stars—when the right moment comes. That time is not yet."

The window blinked dark. Nick looked out, but the Earth had gone. No sun shone across the heavens. No stars burned distantly above. Instead was only empty blackness, surrounding the great circular ship like a void, and lacking any distinguishing feature.

"Here, there are no incidents to run concurrently, and consequently no time," his companion pointed out as if feeling an explanation necessary.

Voices came outside the door, and Judge Henson, with Niora holding his arm. Nick quivered as if from a shock, his eyes searching their startled faces, then a great relief came. It was all right. This *was* Niora. Her clear golden eyes lit up eagerly, and she ran from her father, who was breathless from walking.

She clung to Nick. "Nick! Oh, I was afraid I'd be alone!"

Two voices were arguing outside the door. Sam Cordy came in, his eyes twinkling and a grin on his round face. Nick's gaze flickered past him. The other man *was* Marsh Wallace.

Light blinked on in the window, and they looked through. An unfamiliar sun burned in an unknown heaven, and below was a planet very like Earth.

"Behind us exist almost uncountable millennia of technical knowledge and advancement of every branch of science," the man in sparkling plastic said.

Nick felt momentary doubt. "But Alf's dead!"

"An accident. He killed himself trying to escape. We could not explain, then. We dared not. We naturally regretted it." The other paused. "Time, like space, is not concurrent when the distances are vast and made through different regions of space. Back there, your little corner of the cosmos is experiencing time in our past."

The strange sun shone on a splendid heritage built by men who had indeed reached the stars, Nick thought. Mankind's past was now far away. Man had struggled and won his way through to this. The cities below were not alien—only futuristic. He looked into the eyes of those who had gathered around him and who lived because *his* mankind had reached the stars, and felt proud. It had been worth while. The future men were right. *Project 13* must never stumble across space and through millennia of time to this, man's most splendid heritage, once again introducing barbaric customs, greed, self-seeking trade, disease, and every seed of disaster. The first ship had come, in its due time, but had not been *Project 13*.

"You are descended from the old people of Earth," he said. "From the people of my day, through their sons, who first came out to new star systems!"

"Of course."

High, noble buildings glowed under the sun. Far beyond the city boundary a space-ship glinted in a long arc, taking off for the heavens.

Nick nodded to himself. This was what he had always dreamed of, for man.

The invaders had not been an alien race, bent on conquering Earth. They had been men who had travelled through space and time, coming back to the old Earth to prevent the *Project 13* rocket leaving—because that was dangerous to them all.

But he and the others could never go back to old Earth, Nick knew. The people on old Earth must never know what had happened. He sighed, looking through the port.

His life was here, now—amid the stars and cities built by this new, superior branch of mankind.

CHAPTER VIII

THE city of the New Men shone under the rose-tinted sun. High buildings pointed at the sky, where summer clouds drifted. Slender vehicles sped along the busy streets, and flitted into momentary view on the long bridges spanning from block to block. A murmuring pulsation rose, coming more and more faintly to the higher and higher balconies rising tier upon tier to the sky.

Nick Riordan turned his back on the scene, went along the twentieth level corridor, and stepped into the shaft of the anti-gravity lift. As he floated down he examined his companion closely. The young man, clad in sparkling plastic, was brown, lean, and noble-featured. He had been Nick's close friend since the first hour of their arrival.

"But all this means absolute security," Nick pointed out. "You should all feel content—safe——"

Timberley nodded, his eyes alive. "Absolute security," he agreed. "Yes. Yet man's every invention has arisen because men were *not* secure and satisfied! Only because of want arose new techniques, or improvements to old."

Their descent slowed, giving a sudden feeling of weight, and they alighted at the foot of the shaft. Nick led the way out into the sparkling street.

"You mean that absolute content causes stagnation, and that out of stagnation comes—death to a race," he said. "If growth and progress cease, decay must set in."

"Exactly. We needed to prevent your *Project 13* rocket from reaching us and introducing old customs. But that is not the only problem."

They entered one of the sleek vehicles which followed a route to the city centre. It started automatically, and illuminated tunnel-ways and rosy sky with streets below alternated as they flashed along the raised ways. Nick wondered exactly what his wife Niora thought of it all.

"But suppose the content and quiescence comes because the ultimate level of progress has been reached?" he asked. "*That* might be different."

"No." The young man shook his head, staring moodily out from the autocar's windows. "Mankind can never reach the ultimate point of progress. Every discovery suggests others; every invention opens new fields for exploration. It is a sequence without end."

Nick understood the bitterness in the words and voice. Timberley was one of those who always looked farther ahead, no matter how far he went, and always saw that the end to progress had not been reached.

"Progress is a stairway that tops infinity," Henry Riordan had once said. Nick agreed.

Timberley had tried to step too far—and been halted with an unpleasant jerk. . . .

"You think Wyndham will help?" Nick asked.

Timberley's gaze remained on the streets. "He may. I hope he will. His ideas are not stagnant. He does not regard stagnation as safety, but as the beginning of rot and disaster. He had always been progressive."

They emerged on a long, curving viaduct which spanned a break in the city. The autocar's wheels hissed on the rails, and Nick gazed outwards from the buildings. Far in the distance beyond the town stretched the huge space-port which was always a source of wonder to him. Huge vessels, tiny with distance, rose from it with apparent silence. They glinted in the sun, then were gone, speeding through the scattered clouds, which rolled turbulently like smoke in their wake. The buildings at the space-port edge, huge as the ships themselves, looked like toy bricks dropped upon a creamy carpet, and the men who moved around them were minute dots.

"And all those ships go on closely scheduled journeys," Timberley said with feeling. "Not during my lifetime has an exploratory trip been made. Authorities say we know all that we need to know—that exploration may uncover something dangerous, upsetting our stable society! Explorers landing on new planets might bring back unknown diseases. The known section of the universe contains all we need, they say. So searching for newer worlds is not permitted."

They sped into a tunnel, and Nick wondered whether the man they were travelling to see would help. If he did not, there appeared to be no way out.

The autocar stopped before a huge cream-and-green block which rose a full thirty stories against the heavens, and they alighted. The vehicle disappeared on its circuit, and side by side they went into the

lift shaft, floating up, their speed increasing, until they came to the tenth floor. Round the corner of the corridor, offices bore Wyndham's name on every door. A young man sat behind a reception desk, but shook his head.

"Commander Wyndham isn't seeing anyone today."

"I'm a personal friend," Timberley pressed. "This is important."

The other looked harassed. "He—isn't in."

Nick saw Timberley grow tense. "Not in! He's always in at this hour!"

The clerk's opposition collapsed. "He—hasn't been here today, sir."

Nick felt a tiny shock. This was the last thing he had expected, and Timberley's face was suddenly pale as he leaned over the desk.

"Not here today?"

"No, sir. He hasn't been seen for twenty-four hours."

They were silent as a desk communicator rang. The clerk snapped the switch and repeated mechanically, "Sorry, sir, Commander Wyndham isn't seeing anyone today." Then they looked at each other, and Nick saw that something very near sudden panic had appeared in Timberley's eyes.

"Twenty-four hours," he breathed.

"Yes, sir. But please don't repeat it. We hope he'll turn up. Every effort is being made to find him."

They went out, leaving the anxious clerk repeating his statement into the communicator.

"Not in," Timberley repeated. "And they *won't* find him. Of that I'm sure! That was how it began with the others."

The others, Nick thought. The significance of the words remained with him long after he had parted from Timberley and taken his way, alone, to his suite. There had been others, he remembered now. They had vanished. Undramatically, silently, yet absolutely. A few had been ordinary people, and scarcely made news. Others had been better known, but their disappearance had not aroused wide interest. Reviewing the details, Nick thought that perhaps someone behind the scenes had arranged that there was no stir in public interest. Wyndham, the city civil commander, would make headlines, however . . . unless that same someone behind the scenes hushed it up. Nick frowned. There had been quite a dozen disappearances in all, so far as he knew. Others, about which he did not know, could have taken place.

Niora was sitting on the foam window-seat, and her golden eyes greeted him. Nick hesitated as he closed the door.

"Something's happened," he said abruptly.

Niora's beautiful face wore an expression he could not define. She nodded. "Marsh Wallace has been here."

"Which means——?"

"That everything isn't quite what it seems, Nick. He wonders why people have vanished. In a perfectly balanced community there should

be no misfits who want to drop out. Then again, why can't the missing people be found? That's what Marsh Wallace wants to know. He's been looking long enough, and found exactly nothing."

Nick felt amazed that these words echoed so nearly his own thoughts. But the unease on Niora's face worried him. "It's a question many other newsmen must have put to themselves," he said easily. "Is that all?"

"Not quite, Nick. He wanted you to go to see him."

Nick's interest quickened. Wallace was a busy man, and had soon won an important place in a busy concern—the Planogram Syndicate, which dealt with all the news of two hemispheres. Wallace would not want to see him unless it was something important.

"When?" Nick asked.

"Soon as you can go round."

That was Wallace too, Nick thought. Get moving. Hunt your facts down. Don't waste time. He wondered why Niora looked uneasy; why there was a thin vertical line between her pencilled brows and a shadow in her eyes.

"You're happy here?" he asked.

"Of course. Who wouldn't be? Everyone has everything they want or need."

She did not meet his eyes. Her words meant exactly nothing, Nick decided, as he went down and took an autocar speeding on an unending circuit which included Marsh Wallace's office block. Niora was hiding something. And granting that to be so, two new questions arose. What was she hiding, and why?

Marsh Wallace appeared to have been waiting. He dismissed an assistant and leaned back in his chair, his wide, brown face expressing welcome. A quiet hum from the adjoining offices, and the levels above and below, filtered in.

"Glad you've come, Riordan." His voice was clipped, his eyes keen under bushy brows. "Didn't expect you'd be out when I called."

"I'd gone to look up Commander Wyndham."

The keen eyes flashed a question.

"He was gone," Nick said flatly. "Been missing twenty-four hours."

Marsh Wallace's expelled breath hissed in the sudden quiet of the room. "Now he!" He walked jerkily round the desk. "You know he's not the only one?"

"I've heard rumours——"

"They're more than rumours: they're fact!" Marsh Wallace made an expressive gesture. He sat on the edge of the desk. "Listen. No news reaches the public until it's been through the Syndicate offices. We're big. So big even I, after working here so long, only have a hazy idea just *how* big. News comes in through a myriad channels, and goes out through thousands more. There are so many bosses no one knows who controls what—or if a few know, they don't talk. Three times I drew up copy and passed it on to my next department, and three times that's been the last I've seen or heard of it! Those facts never

became news. And their removal was arranged in such a way that no one knows at which stage the copy vanished."

Nick considered carefully. "Someone in the Syndicate buildings is suppressing facts they want soft-pedalled."

Marsh Wallace nodded, but not wholly in agreement. His tufty brows drew close.

"You over-simplify." He gestured at the machine set on one end of the desk. "My news, views, and copy are recorded. They go by land-line to the editing section. I worked here a long time before I found where that section is. It's among thousands of others, nearly half a mile from here." He paused, and from the look in his eyes Nick knew the crux was coming. Wallace got off the desk and began pacing. "The land-line signals come off a teletyper as a script the staff can snip and handle, their end. Yesterday something arose which happens only once in a lifetime in an up-to-date office like this. A complete power breakdown lasting half an hour. I took time off and went round to the office where my copy goes. The teletyper there was still working."

Nick experienced a shock. "*Working!*"

"Yes—while the sender mechanism, on my desk here, was out of action because of the power failure!"

Wallace gestured at the complex machine, and Nick realised how intent he had been on every word, and frowned.

"The land-line has been cut and teletyper impulses fed in from elsewhere——"

Wallace shook his head. "It hasn't! The cables are coded and have been checked. The engineers have no cause to lie. A second man, who didn't know the circuit had already been gone over, gave the same report."

Nick expelled his breath. "And—why do you want to see me?"

"Because you understand these things! Check those cables! I'll wangle you a technician's pass. Set about it as you like, but remember these two points. First, to help you, I shall send no copy from my machine for an hour, from eight this evening." His eyes went to the wall-clock. "That gives you time to collect your gear."

He returned to his chair. Nick got up stiffly from the mushroom stool, but stopped with his hand on the door.

"You said there were *two* points?"

Wallace nodded jerkily. "There are. The second may mean as much—or as little!—to you as it does to me. It's this—a paragraph I wrote saying progress was hindered by no one being permitted to make any further exploration, development, or invention was among those never published." He paused, his eyes on Nick. "So was a paragraph on Barratt-Maxim, a name you'll have heard."

Outside, Nick's head whirled. He felt he was required to remember too many things, each important, too quickly. The teletyper which worked with no signal; the land-line that was not tapped, yet acted as if it were; the disappearances; the curtailment of the inventive

faculties of mankind. And, last but not most shocking, the cryptic words about Barratt-Maxim, venerable, respected, and universally admired civil leader of the city. Nick felt dazed, as if a complex puzzle had been thrown down before him, with no hint of the rules upon which it was to be reassembled.

CHAPTER IX

THE clocks along the corridor stood at a few minutes to eight. Nick walked slowly towards the door behind which the teletyper operated from Marsh Wallace's office snapped at high speed. His feeling of tension grew. He had familiarised himself with the run of the cables to Wallace's machine, and had spent an hour examining them without result.

The machine in the office hesitated, was momentarily silent, then the rapid clicking recommenced. Nick's eyes went to the nearest clock. The second hand had just passed the hour. His lips compressed, and a feeling of unease drew taut his nerves. He pushed open the office door.

A wide strip of paper was unrolling slowly from the teletyper. A guillotine edge cut across rhythmically, and the sheets were passed to a curved desk where two men sat with shades to their eyes. One looked up, hand poised over a page.

"Well?"

"Sorry—wrong room."

Nick withdrew. The machine was operating. It only remained to find where the motivating signals arose. He opened his kit and took out a meter which would show the strength of the currents anywhere in the line.

They were strong in the annex adjoining the office, where the cable issued through a conduit. Strong, too, at the next junction point, and the next. Conscious that time was passing too quickly, Nick went to an observation junction near Wallace's office, hoping to get the other side of the point where the current was injected, and work back. The signals were strong there, too. He frowned, took two more readings, and saw that three-quarters of an hour had passed. No observation junction remained between the point of his last test and Wallace's machine.

It was a long way round, and when he reached Marsh Wallace's office Wallace was talking into the machine. Nick's eyes flew to the clock. The hand was just on the hour.

"So you didn't stop?" he asked quickly.

Wallace looked up. "I've just started! An important item. I gave you an hour."

Nick withdrew, puzzled. In the corridor, he reconsidered the blueprint of the land-line circuits, engraved on his memory. From the

office to the first junction the line ran through a conduit built into the walls of the block. It would be a major engineering job to tap them. It was odd, he thought. Very odd. If the impulses had not been coming from Wallace's machine all the time—*from where?* It did not make sense.

Puzzled, he slowly left the corridor, settled to street level, and went from the building. Outside, he stood in thought, momentarily letting the stream of people flow round him.

The city was modern, bright and pleasant, he thought; the people happy, with useful work and ample and interesting leisure. No one lacked anything. Medicine had reached a high level. Diseases were few, and there was ample opportunity for a full and happy life. Very different from Old Earth, he thought, where there had been want, disease, failure, and misery. Here was plenty, health, success in whatever branch of work and play each individual chose, and universal content. Sometimes he felt a little out of place, as if too strongly rooted in the past. Perhaps he looked at things differently from the people passing around him, he decided. Perhaps Wallace did, too.

He realised that it was growing late, and mounted a raised way to board an autocar for home. Still in thought, he stopped on the narrow platform. A man was just boarding a vehicle which had slid to a standstill. The man was elderly, with mobile features. His white beard, smooth as silk, made him conspicuous. Tall and slender, he stepped easily into the car, moving to one of the seats in its deserted interior. The door was closing, the vehicle Nick should have taken already hissing to a standstill on the other side of the platform. But Nick's eyes were on the solitary passenger. *Barratt-Maxim*.

His feet carried him through the door just as the autocar started forward. He sat down, wondering whether his impulsive action would prove pointless.

Barratt-Maxim sat three seats ahead, facing the way they travelled. He had not looked round. Unmoving, his eyes were directed straight ahead, and Nick felt an inexplicable unease. The rows of double seats stood empty. An illuminated disc showed Nick he was on the Q71 route, one but little used, and which would carry him away from his destination. Lights twinkled through the windows, and the city sped past, below, around, and above them.

"So was a paragraph on Barratt-Maxim," Marsh Wallace had said.

Those words had keyed the impulse bringing Nick into the car, and he wondered if he had come on a fool's errand. He began to calculate how long it would take him to get home, and wished he had not come.

They passed between huge buildings, through a tunnel, and over a long bridge. Below were boulevards where floodlights had snapped on, illuminating fountains sparkling in ruby, green, blue, and yellow. The hues shone on the silken head of the man in front. Nick looked away from him, directing his gaze downwards. He never failed to marvel at the beauty of the city, and no smoke clouded the starlit sky.

They swished over a second bridge, and high buildings showed

ahead, penetrated by a tunnel through which they must pass. A shock ran through Nick from head to toe, seeming to twist every cell in his body. His nerves jumped, his muscles knotted, and he lurched forwards in his seat. Then the tension eased. . . . Breathing heavily, he sat upright, cramp still twisting his limbs, and gaped—Barratt-Maxim was gone. No silken head showed above the back of the seat. The Q71 route vehicle, just flashing from the tunnel, was empty except for himself.

He got up, stumbling drunkenly along the autocar. Every seat was empty. No one slumped in the place the old man had occupied. Nick walked to the front of the vehicle, looked through the curved nose at the rail streaming above, and went back to the tail, where bridges and buildings receded rapidly. Nowhere in all the vehicle was there space for even a child to hide.

When the autocar stopped he alighted shakily, his head spinning, and watched it speed away. Barratt-Maxim had vanished during that fraction of a second when the strange feeling of shock to nerve, mind, and flesh had come, he was sure.

Evening air stirred through the city, and Nick felt it on his brow, cooling the perspiration standing there. He slowly sought a platform serving the route which would take him home. *He had had enough*, he thought. *Plenty for one day!*

For an hour Nick watched the flickering reflections of street-lights upon the ceiling, and searched for a meaning to what had happened. It was after midnight when he knew that he must go out again. Niora awoke as he finished dressing.

“You’re not going out, Nick! What for?”

“To ride the Q71 route!”

He left her frowning as if she thought him mad, and reached the platform where he had seen Barratt-Maxim. Few people were about. Minutes passed, then a vehicle sped from the opposite tunnel and halted. Nick slipped in. He had expected the seats to be empty, and they were. The autocar moved away, gaining speed, and he sat down, the feeling of tension strong upon him.

Arched tunnel entrances sped up and shot behind. Streets stretched far below. Tense on the edge of his seat, Nick strove to remember every feature of the route. The boulevards swept below, still floodlit, and the vehicle sped on to a bridge. High buildings loomed ahead, their windows dark, and Nick half-rose. He had not expected it so quickly: between those buildings, for a second, his eyes had strayed from Barratt-Maxim. During that second he had disappeared.

The autocar swept through with a murmuring echo. Nick relaxed, looking back. He had not known if something would happen.

He alighted at the first halt. The position of the high buildings was clear, now. He took a short trip on an adjacent route, then walked, choosing a footway level with the Q71 lines.

The buildings appeared to be deserted offices. That fact alone seemed odd, he thought. Such central premises should be in demand. The footway ran close under one row of windows. Near the end, in the shadow of girders flanking the Q71 track, he pushed in a pane of glass and entered, thankful that fire regulations made non-breakable windows illegal.

Office furniture stood under dust-sheets, and he passed through unused offices. Beyond the last a short corridor led to the rooms adjacent to the wall beyond which the Q71 route lay, and his feeling of excitement mounted. This, he thought, was the testing point.

The end door gave access to a single long room. It was empty, but Nick's first feeling of disappointment vanished quickly. The emptiness was *odd*. The room might once have been a store, situated where the sound of passing vehicles would not matter. But it had no air of disuse. The floor was polished; so were walls and ceiling. Nick examined them and knew why the feeling of strangeness had come. All were coated with a hard, brilliantly smooth, brown substance which could have been a high-frequency insulator. There were no windows, and the only break was at the door, through which reflected light made all the room glow.

Nick shivered. The room seemed to be a *cavity*. No other word could be applied. Oddly enough, whoever had adapted it for the unknown purpose which it fulfilled seemed to have always intended that it should be empty: its function lay in emptiness. . . .

When Nick left he knew that he had never felt so puzzled or so uneasy without being able to give a reason. Why should a room be prepared with such elaborate care? For what purpose did someone desire that vehicles on the Q71 route should pass near that strange insulated cavity in the building? It was inexplicable.

Two days passed. Nick returned home to find Niora awaiting him. She raised a finger to her lips and indicated the closed door of the inner room. Nick thought her expression troubled.

"Two men to see you, Nick," she whispered. "They're waiting. I don't wholly like the look of them."

He closed the outer door. "Who?"

"Never seen them before. They didn't seem anxious to give names, but wanted to wait."

"I see." Nick did not move to the inner room. He wondered what this could mean.

"They're an odd pair, Nick," Niora said. "The one is a cripple—quite dwarfed—"

"A cripple!" Nick almost forgot to speak quietly. "Surely not! These days, with manipulative and surgical treatment at the level it is!"

"*He is,*" Niora persisted. She moved towards the door. "The other is a huge man—and I don't like his manner."

Nick passed in and closed the door. A huge man with jet hair, a large face, and eyes that seemed to dart everywhere at once, rose heavily. In a second chair was the cripple, his feet not touching the carpet. Though tiny, Nick saw he was quite old, perhaps almost sixty. One shoulder was raised; his arms were thin as sticks and his hands tiny. Nick felt pity for him, followed by revulsion as he saw the face. It was mean; the eyes were black and pin-pointed, the lips thin with cruelty. Nick stopped, his back to the closed door.

"This is unexpected, gentlemen."

The big man put out a hand. His grip was hard. It, too, could be cruel, Nick decided, though apparently the big man wanted to be friendly.

"My name's Wells," he stated. "We want to talk private business. This is Kern Millay—you'll have heard of him."

He indicated the dwarf, and Nick's interest quickened. The name was familiar, though momentarily he could not place it. Both were watching him, evaluating him by some personal standard, and he did not like it.

"I have little time——" he said.

"You'll have time when you hear what we've come for," Wells stated. He sat down, and the chair sank beneath his huge weight. "Kern Millay has money—bags of money—and he's willing to spend it. That's why we've come."

Nick got himself a drink from the side cupboard, gaining time to think. The two waved his offer away. "Why to me?" he asked.

"Because you don't take things for granted. We've heard you look into things for yourself and form your own judgments. That can't be said for many of the other folk, here. And you're well up in electronics."

Nick nodded. "Maybe." He did not point out that money had a limited value when no one lacked any necessity or reasonable pleasure. His eyes strayed to the dwarf, who was watching him with an expression only described as avid, and he remembered why Kern Millay's name was familiar. Millay had often spent fortunes on matters that interested him, and that had made news. The little man strove to speak.

"Sometimes he's half-dumb," Wells stated with frank brutality. "It's part of his deformity. But his mind is one many could envy."

A look passed between the two, and Nick strove to decipher it and their relationship. Kern Millay seemed to hate Wells, yet respect his strength. Wells could be a paid bodyguard, or have a more equal status.

"Even now occasional throw-backs to a more primitive physical state arise," Wells said, examining Nick closely. "Sometimes all our surgical and medical science can do nothing. Mr. Millay is such a case."

Kern Millay squirmed on his chair. His lips quivered.

"T-tell-him——" he said.

Wells raised a big hand. "I'm coming to it." He scowled, looked at the carpet, then at Nick. "We can rely on your silence?"

Nick thought perhaps Kern Millay was master, after all.

"Of course."

"Good." Wells breathed as if in relief, and Millay's eyes settled on Nick watchfully. Wells began to search for words with obvious care. "Mr. Millay will pay, if you do what he requires—will meet any figure within reason most generously, I may say." He gestured. "The matter is secret. Mr. Millay would remain anonymous, and I would be intermediary. We should take a very poor view indeed of any—*betrayal of trust* on your part."

The eyes met his, and Nick knew that the big man was no fool. A keen intellect lay behind those eyes. Nick shrugged, ignoring the threat.

"If I take on a job I abide by its terms."

"Good." Wells appeared satisfied. "You may recall a certain process, never perfected, which was denied further development by the Board. Mr. Millay wishes you to continue investigations in that subject. His payment will amply compensate for any danger of discovery. Secrecy will be to your own advantage, as the Board severely disciplines those who disregard its orders."

So that was it, Nick thought. It all came back to what Timberley had said: stagnation could be irksome.

"What process?" he asked tensely.

"It will be one you will not personally have encountered."

Nick felt his tension grow. "And it is . . . ?"

"That to which its full and technical name is seldom given."

The eyes watched him carefully. Nick kept his face expressionless. "Yes?"

Wells hesitated. "That of transmens-substitution."

Nick felt as if the big man had struck him. He recalled the enormous advances in surgical and allied subjects made by the New Men. They could copy a person's mental activity patterns—had done so, in the past. But this was more: was momentarily terrifying.

"The T.S. process!" he breathed.

"You have read of it?" Wells did not wait for the nod. "Then you realise the need for secrecy—and can gain some idea of the size of your reward!"

Nick felt Kern Millay's eyes hungrily, avidly, upon him, and wondered exactly what the set-up was. He nodded slowly, thinking of Barratt-Maxim, though he did not know why.

"I'll consider it." He knew as he spoke that he would take the task on—not because of the money, but because it seemed to lead towards the clues he sought. "I'll let you know tomorrow."

Beyond that he refused to go. Wells helped Millay to his feet. When they were gone Nick mopped his face, and decided not to tell Niora of the offer: if she did not know, she could not worry. There might arise other reasons, too, why it was best she should not know. . . .

Next morning he went through the teeming city to Timberley's suite. Timberley worked three days each week, and the tiny busts of translucent plastic dotting his rooms showed how he spent much of his leisure.

"Commander Wyndham, now Barratt-Maxim gone," he said flatly. "The news has just broken."

Nick nodded. "Any details?"

"None. Just that he hasn't been seen. The exact hour when he vanished seems unknown."

Not to me! Nick thought. He wondered where they went. But that was a question an increasing number of people would give a lot to answer.

"I want you to tell me the background of the T.S. process," he said quietly.

The other started. His eyes clouded, filling with strong curiosity. "The transmens-substitution process! You're not——?"

"I am," Nick said. He sat down. "I'd rather get the background from you than enquire elsewhere. People talk."

"Very well." Timberley went to the window, gazing down on the sunny streets, not looking at Nick.

"It's one of the few things I agree was *rightly* stopped," he said. "T.S. could upset our whole society. Once again money could count—if one had sufficient. Where money failed, crime might try to accomplish. If there is one thing which could turn men again into beasts, it could be that. It developed from the simple copying of thought-patterns, which was used on you. Briefly, the brain is drained clear of all memory, then the memory and personality patterns of another person poured in. There you have it!"

Nick shivered. He had seen the copying of thought-patterns. Micro-probes scarcely a molecule in thickness penetrated through the skull, and the minute fluctuations of the brain-waves drained away into complex apparatus.

"With T.S. a person's whole consciousness could be removed to another brain," he murmured.

Timberley looked bleak. "That's it! And the dangers of the abuse of that power cannot be exaggerated. A rich man whose years were numbered might buy a young man's consent. The rich man's consciousness—his *being*—would be transferred to the other body, while the young man's mind would find lodging in the old man's body. Think what that could mean to a man of fabulous wealth who was near death! A cripple might covet a sound body, a criminal find security as a helpless victim."

"A cripple!" Nick breathed. Abruptly the look in Kern Millay's eyes seemed to have new significance. It would be necessary to be careful, very careful indeed, he decided, and nodded. "As I thought. It opens up endless possibilities. It was refused permission?"

"In strong terms. Some experiments were made, however. When the results became news, bedlam resulted—panic, from some, and

frantic efforts, half-underground, by a few money magnates who wanted new lives. I recall Millay the crank, as they called him, trying to get the process legalised. He said if a man could afford to buy a new body, then let him have it!"

Nick felt sickened. The idea of thus transplanting a person's memories, thoughts, and consciousness itself into another body repulsed him.

"There were some rumours that Millay has tried to get the subject reopened," Timberley said.

Nick saw that he had learned all the other knew. It was as he had suspected. There *could* be subjects in which man could quest too far, and this was one. Only with the most careful control could such a technique be permitted. It was, alas, a technique which came so near to fulfilling a dream that abuse could not be eliminated. A rich man might obtain a new period of life: might almost aspire to immortality. With such a prize, anything might happen.

Nick began work as Wells directed, and his instructions were simple. He was to study T.S. technique until he could build the necessary apparatus. A simple order, but not so easy to execute, Nick thought. Secrecy hid the methods employed, and only piece by piece, in the most laborious manner, could an over-all picture be formed. Nick decided that the apparatus which he had once seen would form a good starting point. In a simpler community it could have offered the perfect disguise, but the recording of electro-encephalograph patterns as identity checks had ended its unlawful utilisation in that way.

In a week he had a good over-all picture of the T.S. procedure; in two, an idea of apparatus which might achieve the desired result. He began to build, eager now, as he always was when developing something new in his chosen field of scientific investigation. Often he worked long hours, urged on partly by Wells, but largely by his own intense curiosity. There were snags to clear. Unanticipated difficulties arose. He worried at them until a solution was found. The hours he spent away from the workshops Kern Millay had lavishly provided grew daily more few. Often he was so tired when he arrived home that he scarcely answered Niora's questions. As he realised success was in sight, and definitely attainable, his excitement mounted, preventing rest.

Timberley met him one evening on his way home—a meeting that might have been contrived, Nick thought. Excitement made vivid his youthful face.

"I've seen Wyndham!" he said.

Nick felt shaken. "*Seen!* You mean *found?* Where?"

"I don't mean found," Timberley declared, and fell into step beside him as they crossed a raised way. "It hasn't made news, and won't, because there's no proof." He frowned. "It's odd—strange. You know why I went to see him originally?"

Nick nodded. "They stopped your experiments into absolute zero temperatures."

"They did. Snap, like that. No reason given. I fail to see how my experiments were illegitimate. The authorities denied permission for further work. I wanted Wyndham to get the decision reversed. When we went to see him he was gone. I've seen him since—once. In an empty room—the chamber of my freezing apparatus!"

Nick halted. A chill ran through him, coalesced on his spine, then dispersed along his limbs. "In your freezing chamber?" he echoed.

"Yes! I went there to look up some data—at least they can't prevent me *thinking* of it. I opened the door—and there was Wyndham standing in the insulated chamber."

Timberley halted, an odd pallor to his cheeks. He licked his lips.

"I could see straight through him," he said.

Nick could think of no remark. A glance at his companion told him one thing: Timberley was speaking the truth. He would never make a mistake like that.

"You've no explanation," he said at last.

"None."

They gained the upper level, and Timberley gripped his arm. "My workrooms aren't far. Will you look?"

Timberley wanted him to look, Nick realised. Desperately wanted him to—his tone revealed that. Even though no explanation would be forthcoming, he still wanted Nick to look. Nick nodded.

"Let's walk," Timberley said.

CHAPTER X

THEY went along the raised way above the streets. A diffused murmur of people and traffic drifted up, only occasionally lost as a railcar sped by at a higher level, its hissing wheels over-riding the background of muted sound from below. They went along a slender bridge and through a tunnelled building. At the exit, they turned right, and Timberley unlocked a door. They passed through a small office and a workshop littered with equipment.

"The freezing, or sub-zero, chamber is next," Timberley said. "It was there I saw him. I simply opened the door."

He turned locking levers and swung open a door of ponderous weight. The walls were feet thick; the chamber beyond perhaps six feet square, resembling, by chance, the cavity by the Q71 track. A shock ran through Nick; his throat grew dry.

Standing motionless in the chamber, still as a figure cast from glass, was a man of upright, severe yet kindly bearing. The light from behind them, passing through the door, shone on him, burnishing his outline to sparkling fire.

"Again," Timberley breathed.

The figure turned with infinite slowness, as if time did not exist for it, and the kindly eyes regarded them across the empty floor. Nick raised a hand to speak. . . . Then there was nothing. The chamber was empty, and Timberley staring at him.

"You saw it?" he pressed.

His voice shook, and Nick nodded:

"I saw—it."

"*He looked at us.*"

Nick did not answer. He knew that if he returned home his mind would dwell upon this development, seeking an explanation.

"I'd like to stay here—to watch," he said.

When he was alone he examined the chamber. Its walls were heavily insulated, reminding him of the *cavity* in the building beside the Q71 rail-track. He waited outside, but nothing reappeared. Two hours passed slowly, and he felt that valuable time was being wasted. Lights shone on the buildings opposite, and moved in the streets below. At last he took a final look into the sub-zero chamber, closed its door, and went out. Wells was leaning against the corridor wall. He pushed himself upright, filling the passage.

"The boss don't like divided interests," he said.

Nick felt anger. He balanced on the balls of his feet, eyeing the large man with distaste.

"What I do with my free time is my business."

"You're kiddin'." Wells laughed. The sound echoed along the empty passage. "When Millay pays a man, everything he does is his business. Remember that if you want to stay happy."

Nick swore. "There are two opinions about that!"

Wells eyed him, his face ugly and his lips set close. "Remember there are things it's best not to look into," he said, and his gaze strayed momentarily past Nick. "There are others, too, who you might not like hurt."

He scowled, and Nick knew what he meant. Niora. She could be a weak link. He glared at Wells, not speaking. It would be best not to show his thoughts too much.

"Millay feels it's about time we had some real demonstration," Wells said. He moved to one side of the corridor. "He pays well—but expects value."

"He shall have it," Nick snapped.

He pushed past and went out. He did not look back to see if Wells followed, or whether he went into the offices. *I'm in it up to my neck now*, he thought. He knew there would be no going back: it was too late.

The silence of his rooms laid a cold hand upon his heart. He looked for a message, knowing he would find none, then stood in the lounge, face frowning immobility, and eyes cold as blue ice. The rooms were

quiet, silent—lonely. He wondered where Niora was. There were no signs of a struggle, but that could mean nothing. The buzzer on the communicator in the outer room sounded.

“Riordan there?” a voice asked. It was Wells.

“Yes.” Nick’s voice was thin as plucked wire.

“Remember I said we wanted results? Millay expects them tomorrow. I advise you plan something.”

The instrument went dead. Nick swore. This could mean Wells had acted at once; the words could be a threat. Nick wondered how long Niora had been gone, and fancied her perfume still lingered. He sat down, pondering. She had been strange, somehow tense, the last few weeks. He remembered it, now, and cursed himself for not noticing before. He frowned and got a drink. If he followed that line, it meant Wells’s threat did not mean what he had first supposed it must.

At last he went to sleep, dog-tired, and knowing attempts to find Niora that night would be useless. The city was big. Ten thousand hiding-places could exist among its teeming millions. Worse, hasty action might endanger Niora. His last thought before sleeping was of the teletyper which functioned when it should not, and he wondered if Marsh Wallace lied, and had been sending all the time.

Nick decided it wise to see Millay and Wells early. They sat in his basement workroom, sometimes watching him, and sometimes looking at the equipment. Kern Millay followed every word with close attention. The little face, slightly twisted by the same sport of nature, was a creamy white under the ceiling radiance. The eyes glinted, and tiny droplets shone on the forehead. Only once did he speak:

“Y-you believe it—completed, Riordan?”

“I do.” Nick stated. “I have not needed to develop a new apparatus, but only copy an old. The T.S. process is not greatly different from that used in recording a person’s thoughts. The dissimilarity lies in *withdrawing* the brain-waves and leaving the memory-banks vacant to receive the new impulses which will be fed into them.” He felt chilled—a feeling which always came when he remembered the power of the apparatus he had made. There was something terrible in this ability to drain a body of memories and personality.

“You can do it?” Wells pressed, his face set.

Nick nodded. “As far as can be ascertained, yes. Everything is completed—but no actual test has been made, of course.” He wondered if this were the moment to ask for Niora.

Kern Millay rose with the aid of his stick and limped slowly to the apparatus. Two complex chairs stood side by side. Above them, suspended on counter-weighted arms, were enormous headpieces containing the microprobes which penetrated bone and tissue to the brain itself. Behind, connected by heavy cables, was the mass of units which stored and transferred the brain-waves. Nick had explained it

all, and he wondered whether the moment had now come when he should demand that Niora be returned. His part of the bargain seemed to have been fulfilled.

Wells got up, his hands loosely in his pockets. He was twice Millay's size and a foot taller. The expression on their faces halted Nick's question. Wells was *purposeful*; Millay was eager—yet afraid. Nick's tensed muscles released themselves instantly, and he sprang to the door, jerking at the handle.

It would not open. He remembered, too late, that Wells had come in last. He turned, ready to fight. Wells had withdrawn one hand, and it held a paralysing.

"You've made a mistake, Riordan," Wells murmured.

Nick saw the anticipation in Millay's eyes, and felt horror. He knew, now, that he would not have come so unprepared, and alone, had he not been worrying about Niora. The thought came, and knowledge of his danger, and he sprang towards Wells, his arms reaching out to grasp the paralysing and tear it away. . . .

A faint blue radiance played round the weapon, and Nick felt his limbs crumble. Use went from arms and legs, and he fell like a dummy. Consciousness did not go. That, perhaps, made it worse.

Wells put the weapon away. "Mr. Millay always expects—good value for money," he said.

He dropped Nick into one of the complex chairs, expertly snapped the metal retaining clips over his arms and legs, and dragged back his head, securing it with a band across the temples. Triumph was added to the fear and anticipation on Kern Millay's face. He mounted the second chair, squirming into place.

Nick felt sickened. *Good value*, he thought. The real meaning of those words was apparent. The body that had always been Nick Riordan was strong, and whole. Kern Millay's was twisted, dwarfed, and ineffectual.

He felt the enormous headpiece sinking on its levers to enclose his skull, and his thoughts became incoherent. Dimly he realised that Wells was manipulating the controls on the apparatus, working with an expert efficiency which proved he was no stranger to such equipment. As in a daze he realised that Kern Millay was motionless and half-hidden by the second headpiece.

No sensation came as the microprobes sank through bone and tissue, but his thoughts no longer remained under his control. Instead, they ran with fantastic speed through strange sequences. Memories bubbled up like water in a vacuum, until he was nauseated. Slowly all feeling went. He was no longer aware of sitting in the chair, or of the cruel constriction of the clips Wells had dragged around his limbs. Memory seemed to dwindle, and sensation . . . he did not even realise that he could not remember, now, and his last coherent thought was one of gladness that Niora was missing . . . better thus, *now*. . . .

Consciousness came back slowly, and with it a sensation of strangeness which for a long time Nick could not place. His limbs seemed shrunken, his blood to flow more slowly, and his strength to be changed to palsied weakness. For a long time he sat with eyes closed, his brain curling, as he recalled how he had come down into the basement, and how he had been trapped.

His eyes flicked open. The workroom was empty, as was the chair beside him. He felt momentary surprise that he had been moved from one chair to the other. Then complete awareness returned. *He had not been moved.* He now occupied the chair where Millay had sat.

He swore, trembling. His feet did not touch the floor. One shoulder was permanently drawn up. His hands were white and thin, not the strong and capable hands he had owned.

He got up awkwardly, almost falling. Accidentally or through a cruel jest Millay's stick was against the wall near the door. It took him many minutes to reach it. He stood crookedly, breathing heavily, his face agonised and his thoughts gaining coherence. Kern Millay had had good value, he thought bitterly.

He hobbled to the basement lift-shaft, rose to street level, and went out. Already he felt exhausted, and realised why Millay had kept Wells in close attendance. At last he gained a seat on the boulevard and almost collapsed into it. As he rested he searched his pockets. One bulged, and he extracted a thick roll of currency: the exact amount Millay had promised. When he had counted it Nick laughed without mirth. The commission had had terms of which he had not been aware! The other pocket contained Henry Riordan's box, placed there, he supposed, with an honesty which mocked him. His fingers trembled momentarily on the seal, then he returned it unopened to his pocket.

He would go to Timberley, he thought. There, at least, might be found help.

He went on, painfully boarded an autocar, and alighted near Timberley's rooms. Exhausted, he leaned against the corridor wall, a finger on the push. Finally, the door opened, and Timberley's brows rose.

"Mr. Millay!"

Nick forced himself upright, and staggered through the door. "I'm—Nick Riordan," he grated.

Disbelief, amazement, and comprehension passed through Timberley's eyes. He closed the door.

"The T.S. process——?"

Nick nodded, sinking into a chair, his breathing uneven. "T-tricked me," he said. Words came with difficulty, but he found speech not impossible, and was glad. Perhaps Millay's impediment had been partly of the mind. "Millay—is—me," he said. "Must find him—make him change back."

He read the emotion on Timberley's face. How could they find a man in all the great city, when that man had every reason for hiding? Timberley looked grave.

"Thought I saw you half an hour ago. That would be——"

"Kern Millay," Nick said thinly.

Timberley frowned. "Yes. I wondered why you didn't reply."

Nick expelled his breath. "Where was he?" He leaned forwards, feeling everything depended on the answer. Millay must be caught.

"Boarding a vehicle on the Q71 route," Timberley said.

CHAPTER XI

A SENSATION of hopelessness swept over Nick, almost overwhelming, as he repeated Timberley's words. Barratt-Maxim had ridden the Q71 route, passing by that strange cavity of unknown purpose. Millay would not go that way from chance.

"He might have ridden up anywhere along the east side of the city," Timberley said pensively. "Or gone on the looped circuit south."

"I think—*neither!*" Nick wondered just how far Millay's planning had extended. He considered. The shock of knowing that Millay was *gone*—gone as completely as the others—shook him. To plan an effective counter-move seemed impossible. He sat unmoving, his chin on his chest, conscious that Timberley was standing helpless by the window. Then he looked up.

"Get me Marsh Wallace!"

"He'll be busy——"

"Get him. Tell him enough. He'll come."

Alone, Nick tried to integrate the isolated pieces of knowledge which must surely form one whole. It was difficult. So many sections of the puzzle still remained unknown.

When he had been admitted Marsh Wallace leaned back in his chair and regarded Nick under heavy brows. His eyes held pity. "If you never find Millay you're finished. And he'll not let himself be found! He's been planning this a long time."

Nick licked dry lips. "How do you know?"

"Rumours circulating through Planogram say he's sold out all his stock and property. Big people are news, so we watch them. Millay was big. He was ready to clear out."

"And has gone," Timberley added thinly.

Nick felt his dismay sharpen. He had hoped that by some miracle Marsh Wallace could formulate a plan. Wallace was one of the few men he could rely on.

"I feel we've missed up on something we should realise," Wallace mused. "As Timberley said, the trouble seemed to begin because limits had been set on searching for further knowledge, or exploration. If that's so, we shan't find a solution in the mechanisations of mere individuals, even if as powerful as Millay."

Nick wondered what men would do if they were prevented from exploration—*by order*. Go elsewhere . . . ?

He took up his stick. "I've an idea. It may come to nothing." He rose with difficulty, supporting himself crookedly, and paused at the door. "If Niora is found—tell her about me."

Wallace halted him. "I'm in this too, Nick! You'll need help." His gaze went over the deformed, weakly body.

Nick shook his head. "No one else is in on this. I wouldn't ask them."

He went alone from the building, and painfully through the city. It needed an hour for him to reach the point where the Q71 route passed by the cavity, and his exhaustion was extreme. Unshakably determined, he went slowly through the offices, still empty, and into the insulated chamber. There, he closed the door and sat down to wait and think.

Apparently Kern Millay had cashed in on something bigger than himself, taking the chance which arose. The others who had ridden the Q71 route—and vanished—were men of a very different character. Wyndham, the civic commander, was kindly, generous, and honest. Barratt-Maxim was justly a respected leader. Millay did not fit with them, Nick decided.

He listened, but no wheels whined on the Q71 route rail. He would not need to wait long, he decided. The route was not busy, but its vehicles kept their regular schedule, even if empty.

He wished he could have copies of the material coming from Marsh Wallace's teletyper during the intervals when the signals apparently did not originate from Wallace's machine. They might repay study. A secret coded message in the public Press would never be suspected. Millions of words poured hourly from the Planogram Syndicate buildings, and only those who knew where to look would look in the correct place.

Wheels swished outside, and Nick tensed, nerves tight as strained wire. The swish passed—only a vehicle on the level above.

He expelled his inheld breath. What Timberley had said, repeating his own words, was true. Man's search for new knowledge and new worlds could never be ended. Men would refuse to be contained in such limits. Mankind must always expand. The thought was exciting; gripped by it, he scarcely heard the first sound of wheels on the Q71 route. Then the noise swept near, and he knew the moment had come. Simultaneously a ringing began, coming from nowhere. Beginning very low in the register, it mounted up and up to a humming like a deep gong; became a continuously ringing bell, a shriek, a whine, and was gone above audibility. Came the sound of the auto-vehicle sweeping through the tunnel. Lights jumped from nowhere and curled and bobbed in the chamber; a man stood beside him, miraculously come through the wall from the Q71 track, then chamber and man vanished. Nick felt he was falling headlong through space. Consciousness went; the sound continued in a high-pitched *ping*, then that, too, ended.

He seemed to be falling into real darkness, and staggered to his knees, clutching at his stick.

Simultaneously he realised that turf was beneath his feet, a gentle wind in his face, and stars above. He turned slowly, striving to orient himself, and failed. Lights twinkled a long way off, but he did not recognise them. He looked at the heavens again, and froze. The constellations were unfamiliar. Many times he had looked at the night sky, enjoying the stillness, and comparing the vista of stars with the view seen from Old Earth. The hemisphere above was neither. Unfamiliar stars stood in unfamiliar groupings. Two tiny moons were chasing towards the horizon, and the air was subtly different. The gravity, too, was reduced, and made movement easier. But the galaxies above were unrecognisable—unknown to him, or, if known, now seen from a totally unfamiliar viewpoint.

He went slowly towards the lights. The buildings from which they shone were few, and quite different from any other buildings he had previously seen. One was topped by a lattice tower, where a complex array of radiating antennae pointed at the heavens, pivoted about both vertical and horizontal axes so that the planetary rotation could be cancelled and power always be directed at the same point in space. A second building resembled a giant inverted staple, and others were obviously power-houses. He limped nearer, eyes and ears alert, and passed between two buildings. Ahead, the narrow alleyway opened into a wider road. A faint humming came from it and drummed between the high, sheer walls above his head. He slowly approached the alley end, looked out into the lit street beyond, and found himself face to face with an elderly man of upright bearing. The features were kindly, but alive with surprise.

“Kern Millay!” the man breathed.

Nick felt dismay, and the shock of recognition. “Wyndham!” The man who, in shadowy, unreal outline, had stood in the activity chamber of Timberley’s sub-zero apparatus.

The kindly face grew bleak. A hand surprisingly strong settled on Nick’s arm, preventing his retreat. Nick struggled and almost fell, but knew he could not escape. As Nick Riordan—yes; but not as Kern Millay, whose body was softened from inactivity and handicapped physically.

“We’d heard rumours that you were *interested*, Millay.” No friendliness eased the tone. “Our plan is too big for us to permit that mere individuals jeopardise it.”

Nick writhed with the pain of the other’s grip. “I’m—not—Mil-lay!” he stated, panting.

Wyndham frowned. His gaze passed over Nick with contempt. He shrugged.

“A likely story.”

Nick protested, was silent, then asked: “Where are we?”

Wyndham laughed shortly. “Why pretend you don’t know, Mil-lay? It won’t pass.”

The street was deserted. They skirted the high building whence came the humming, and approached offices near the living-quarters. Nick tried to drag himself free, but failed.

"You'll find a very different set of ruling principles apply here, Millay," Wyndham declared. He rapped sharply on a door. "Money means nothing; nor does personal prestige, unless backed up by ability. More: the old standards of non-progress mean—nothing."

The door opened. A man Nick did not recognise sat at the end of a desk. Beyond him, in a swivel chair, leaned a second man who drew Nick's eyes, and he remembered the time he had slipped impulsively into the Q71 route coach. Barratt-Maxim examined Nick sternly.

"He was near the east side," Wyndham stated. "He's an individual unlikely to have an aim other than personal profit."

The man at the end of the desk leaned forwards, consulting notes. "A disturbance in the A2 cavity field was reported," he said. "The presence of an unanticipated object in the cavity could be responsible. There was a high momentary overload." His gaze flickered to Nick. "Where did you arrive?"

"J—just beyond the city——"

The man nodded. "It could happen. Your presence caused just enough displacement of the field to throw us that much out."

"But I'm not Millay," Nick objected in the silence that followed. "We were—exchanged."

Three pairs of eyes examined him critically. "Could be a lie," Wyndham said.

Barratt-Maxim nodded. "Have we the means of checking?"

The other shook his head. "Nothing short of the brain-wave pattern check would prove or disapprove his words. We haven't the means to do that test, here—or the records of Millay's patterns. They'll be back in the civic archives."

They fell silent. Nick saw how it was. These men had heard of the T.S. process; were, indeed, ready to believe him if they had proof. But without proof they would not believe. Dared not, because Kern Millay himself would have personal aims which did not tie up with their own. They were wholly just, but could not take chances.

"Put him with the other," Barratt-Maxim ordered abruptly.

Two men conducted him from the office and to the next building, apparently serving as a prison. Lights showed in a few windows, and Nick supposed it to be unused. He was pushed into a room, and the door closed. A lock clicked.

"This is unexpected—*Millay*," a voice declared.

Nick turned awkwardly and gazed up into the rugged, browned face which had been his. The eyes that were his regarded him with contempt. Nick's blood ran hot. A red mist of fury came, and his lips twitched.

"I'll—get—you," he breathed.

Kern Millay did not move from near the barred window. "Don't try anything—or you'll get a beating."

Nick met the eyes, and saw that they had an expression he had never had, and which the soft, diffused lighting could not hide.

"You'd—kill me?" he said.

Millay nodded. "I am considering it. As a precaution."

Nick bit his lips. Millay intended the *exchange* to be for always. That provided ample reason why he should fulfil his threat.

"Then why not—in the basement?" Nick said unevenly.

"Who can say? Perhaps because some of the joke would have lost its savour."

Millay shrugged, and turned back to the window. The action showed his confidence, and Nick knew it justified.

"You're captive too," he pointed out at last.

Millay did not look round. "Only temporarily. My coming caused a disturbance in the field, which was noticed, and I was caught. The field was set to transport one man only, from the Q71 vehicle. But they're checking my records. Nick Riordan was trustworthy and progressive." He laughed briefly. "I expect to be freed at any moment. They even think I will be useful here. My imprisonment is merely token."

"They'll find out you know nothing of the subjects I covered!" Nick grated.

"Unlikely." Millay regarded him momentarily. "My plans are too well arranged."

They were silent, and Nick felt the hopelessness of his position. Kern Millay had planned every action and considered every development. Nick himself was unprepared.

"You didn't ride on the Q71 route by chance," he said.

"Obviously not. I do not operate according to rules of chance, but by pre-arranged plan. I pay many men to watch many things. One saw discrepancies in certain Planogram Syndicate items. From there to discovering what those discrepancies meant was easy. I pay men whose job it is to find out such things. So I came here, where there will be no brain-wave records to prove your claim."

The lock clicked and the door opened. A man beckoned to Millay.

"We're satisfied, Riordan. Commander Wyndham would like to ask you a few more questions—but nothing important."

"Good." Millay's eyes were triumphant. At the door he looked back. "I understand there have been *three* displacements of the field."

They went out. The door closed and the lock clicked. Nick stared at it. Millay's final words echoed in his mind. *Three*. That meant three people had come. Millay, himself, and —? He did not know. He wondered whether it could be Niora, and hoped it was not. He supposed that whoever purposefully rode the Q71 route would sit first in the vehicle. Niora had often liked to sit at the front. But that could mean nothing, and he could think of no reason why she should use that route at all.

He looked from the window. Too small to permit escape, it gave a limited view of lit windows opposite. He gazed out for a long time,

until the pain in his legs forced him to sit down. The couch was a fixture and the room bare. He lay full length, closing his eyes to think, but no plan formulated itself. At last, after a long time, his fatigue asserted itself and he slept.

Nick awoke knowing something had disturbed him, and saw that the door was open so that a thin streak of light penetrated from the corridor. He rose slowly, wondering if this meant danger, and edged along near the wall to peer through the crack.

The corridor seemed empty. He opened the door with infinite care and looked out. No one was in sight, and he listened. This chance of escape seemed too lucky, he thought. It *could* mean danger, or be a plan formulated by Millay to secure his disposal. . . .

No sound came. He edged through and moved slowly along against the wall until he reached a corner, beyond which was a second door. His scalp prickled as he went through. The next room was empty. A window was open, and he waited by it a long time, listening. If Millay *had* planned this, perhaps he was waiting until the fugitive came through the window.

Ten minutes passed in complete silence. Abruptly Nick swung himself awkwardly over the sill and dropped to the ground in shadows. No shout came, and no weapon burned through the gloom. He went quickly along the wall, round the building, and into a narrow alley. There, he leaned against the building, to rest and listen. His unease did not pass, and at last he went down the alley and round several corners, often stopping to listen and look back. No steps came in pursuit.

His idle flight must become purposive, he decided. A low humming sounded in the distance, and he followed it until a high building blackened out the stars, then went in shadows to the back, seeking a way in. Ahead, the antennae array stood, a glow surrounding it showing that it radiated power to some point in the heavens. Nick wondered what incalculable distance lay between him and the shining city where he had worked.

The building was not guarded; locked doors seemed superfluous. Nor was any door inside secured against his passage, and he crept from corridor to corridor and room to room, always ready to hide, and often pausing to listen. The night was quiet, and he saw no one. As he moved he examined the apparatus around him. His retentive memory noted the details, and he strove to deduce what purpose the many units had. The picture was incomplete; but he realised that here were new developments not seen back in the shining city. *Not seen there*, he thought, *because they had been suppressed!* But inventive man would not be suppressed, and had taken himself elsewhere to continue his endless search for yet further knowledge.

Low voices came from behind a door. He opened it so slowly no watcher would have seen movement, and listened. He might lack strength, now, he thought bitterly. But he still had stealth and wit.

One voice sounded oddly like his own, and Kern Millay stood with his back towards Nick and near a panel of meters and dials. Wells sat on a mushroom stool, his heavy face in profile against the reflected light.

"It'll be easy with the best men gone," he said.

Millay grunted in assent. "We'll not be over-confident. That could be dangerous. You believe it will work?"

"So far as I can decide—yes. There must always be an element of doubt until a thing is actually tried. Practical tests back up theory. Apparently when one object equals another absolutely the two no longer remain different. One *is* the other. They co-exist. This is how the transmit apparatus works. Each cavity exists simultaneously in two widely spaced localities. Each is the *same* cavity. So what is in one must obviously be in the other. Hence our apparent instantaneous transit across light-years of space. Actually, we scarcely move. Short-range projection places the individual into the cavity. The cavity exists both here and there. With a further short-range projection out of the cavity, the apparent transit is completed."

Millay waved a hand around. "That's how all this apparatus was transported?"

"Probably," Wells said, and Nick felt increased respect for the big man's intellect. "They may have mined useful ores since. But undoubtedly the early stages of the scheme consisted in transporting here necessities for setting up and developing this terminal of the transit apparatus. The personnel is following. As a foolproof method of informing those in the know their method of using the public Press was nearly perfect. I have located the interferer apparatus—it's in the next chamber. It induces teletyper signals directly into the cables in the Planogram Syndicate building. It could be used during quiet periods, or even over-ride the local impulses."

He had expected something like that, Nick thought. He was glad to clear away the suspicion that Marsh Wallace was playing his own game, and had lied. Nick wondered what he should do. New and amazing developments had obviously been made in many branches of technology, and Barratt-Maxim, Commander Wyndham, and all those disappeared leaders whom he had felt most honest, wise, and reliable were willing parties to the trick.

"You're sure the transit can arise both ways?" Millay asked, unease in his voice.

Wells nodded heavily, almost with contempt. "I deduce it must! There is no real movement. The cavity exists both here and there. Through it, we can return as readily as we came. That the procedure works in one direction proves it can work in both."

He was silent, and Nick saw why Wells had so long held his position as personal bodyguard to Kern Millay. His knowledge was immense—would have indeed seemed more suitable in a thin, wizened scientist. Wells's brains matched his brawn. Neither must be underestimated.

Wells swung himself off the stool. "Plans to enter the building by the Q71 route are completed?" he asked.

"Yes. It cost a great deal. The heavy machinery is also ready, stored only a few blocks away."

Nick wondered what was planned. Something for the personal benefit of the pair, he supposed. Millay did not spend money on projects to benefit others, insisting always on value for self. *Value for self*, Nick thought, and a hot rage came and went abruptly. Millay did not care how *others* fared in his deals. . . .

CHAPTER XII

MILLAY and Wells grew silent, and turned towards the door. Nick withdrew, limped down a side corridor, and slipped into a room near its end. He listened for them to pass, but heard nothing. Abruptly, from nowhere, a hand fell on his shoulder.

"Looking for trouble?" a cool voice asked.

Nick spun on his best leg. Dark eyes under bushy brows looked at him quizzically. A smile played over Wallace's face.

"It comes often enough, without looking—Nick," he said.

Nick felt relief. "You—opened the door?"

"No." Wallace apparently did not understand. "I'm simply searching for copy, let's say. Personalities are news. News is my business."

His voice was grim, and Nick wondered how much Wallace knew or guessed. There would be copy here—but such as Wallace could never use! Nick felt his elation passing.

"Kern Millay and Wells have known what's happening for a long time, and planned to profit from it," he said slowly. "What the real situation is—as planned by Wyndham and the others—I don't know. It must be something *big* for men of their calibre."

Wallace listened at the door. "I can help you to understand at least a little," he said. "Deductions again. Whatever it *is*, it's bringing all the best men out. Millay may plan to slip back, take advantage of their absence, and prevent their return."

Nick experienced a shock. This tied up with what he had been thinking. "Take advantage?" he repeated.

"To gain personal power." Wallace gestured. "He's smarted under his physical handicap until it's twisted him. He aims to get even with society, and with all those who feared him, because of his power, yet pitied him, for his deformity. He smarted under contempt, hating it. He planned the whole thing simultaneously on several levels—including the T.S."

Nick looked down at his thin limbs, crooked jointed, and his body, small as a child's. Yes, he thought, Kern Millay's mind would work

that way. He had hated everyone who was whole of body with a burning, overwhelming hate. It fitted.

"The twelve leaders of the Civic Council disappeared before I came," Marsh Wallace murmured.

Nick started. The quiet words meant that the climax of the plan envisaged by Barratt-Maxim and the others was near. With it would come the time for Millay to act!

"I passed a report on for wholesale distribution," Wallace murmured. "It should have reached the public before I came away, but did not."

Nick thought of the teletyper controlled across all the vastness of space so that its leaders could slip silently from the shining city.

Doors were opening and closing, and footfalls echoed suddenly down the corridors. Nick abruptly felt that there was strong danger—they had no knowledge of the hour when the operatives would return to the building, or whether warning systems existed. He saw that Wallace was uneasy too; his face was lined, his eyes mere slits as he listened.

"We're not safe here," he whispered.

Doors round the chamber opened simultaneously. Men stood in each, paralyzers in their hands, their faces stern. Nick wished he could fight or run. He hoped Wallace would leave him, not jeopardising his own safety by trying to help. An officer came warily across the floor.

"Don't move. Orders are to take you both, preferably alive."

The tension went out of Marsh Wallace's figure. "It's no use," he said.

Nick knew he had realised that from the beginning. They were trapped, outnumbered, and defenceless.

"Better to be taken—alive," Wallace added.

The men marched them away, others following closely behind, weapons ready.

"Apparently they've orders to take no chances," Wallace breathed. "There will be no escape this time, but guards warned to extra vigilance."

Inside the council room Barratt-Maxim was flanked by men of severe countenance. Every eye was closely upon them as they entered, and Nick instantly realised that here was every leader from the whole of the shining city—men renowned for their logic, fair judgment, and wisdom. Some he recognised as familiar to every news-cast viewer. Marsh Wallace nudged him, his brows high.

"What this lot decides—that will be done!" he whispered.

A lean man with eyes of blue steel silenced him with a look; a whisper passed round, and Wyndham leaned back in his chair.

"We cannot permit individuals to meddle with our plans," he stated. "The latter are too important to ourselves *and to all mankind*. Your presence alone is annoying, as you are not upon our list. We cannot tolerate interference."

He dropped silent, brows bent heavily upon them. Nick wondered what it was these important men planned. Marsh Wallace expelled a deep breath and indicated Nick.

"He is not Kern Millay!" he stated. "You've heard of the T.S. procedure?"

One of the men nodded. "It was rightly outlawed."

"But rumours suggest that Kern Millay spent a great sum on privately developing it," a second added.

"He has—here is the result!" Wallace pointed at Nick his eyes alight. "The procedure *was used*—Millay is free, *as this man*, Nick Riordan, who himself redeveloped the T.S. technique!"

Silence came, broken for the first time by Barratt-Maxim. "Then he has earned the death penalty by using the process."

Nick felt chilled. "I deny you right to set limits to the fields I explore!" he said thinly. "I intended no unlawful purpose—would not have permitted it to be so used."

The circle conferred. Nick moved uneasily. "Millay and Wells plan to make your Q71 terminal useless," he said at last.

The eyes returned to him, and Wyndham leaned forwards. "How?"

"That I don't know! They plan to go back and move in machinery which will somehow render the chamber useless, then take the opportunity afforded by your absence."

The whispering recommenced, and Nick tried to catch its significance across the ten paces of floor.

"We accept your explanation," Barratt-Maxim stated at last. "You should know several things. We are rebels, believing no limit should be set to man's knowledge. It is not the knowledge itself that comes into error, but the way that knowledge is used. Almost every process can further killing, war, or crime, if perverted. To deny power to mankind is weakness, instead, men must be taught to use that power wisely." He leaned forwards, a flush suffusing his face. "We say there should be no end to man's search for knowledge! We say a target at infinity is not one too distant for men! Therefore we have begun again—here! Those who stay behind in our shining city will follow their old ways, and travel to their known worlds. We seek new and unknown worlds. We set no limits. The universe is illimitable, and so is mankind. We do not wish to stagnate, fearing to search beyond known limits." His voice rang like a gong. "We see no end to man's invention, or to his expansion! We are adventurous, because sometimes to adventure is to win. We are pioneers, and name ourselves the best of men and truly brave!"

Nick felt the blood flow fast in his veins. These noble men were building for a new humanity never to be confined within prescribed limits of safety!

"One of us invented the instantaneous transportation technique," Barratt-Maxim continued. "It was suppressed. The law-makers thought it would give the adventurous power to go anywhere within the cosmos. It will. So they suppressed it. But we have used it—and

shall use it more, until no world remains unexplored and no corner of space is unvisited by man. It had brought us here, and will take us to new planets under strange suns. Here is no place for the timorous or the weakling. We wish ill to none; have planned so as to harm none——”

“But those back home *will* be harmed by Millay and Wells!” Nick interjected. “They intend to make use of your disappearance!”

Wyndham nodded. “It is true,” he agreed.

A shudder quivered through the ground, shook the room, and grumbled away in a low undercurrent of heavy pulsations. Nick started as a communicator on the desk buzzed.

Commander Wyndham leaned towards it. “Yes. Committee here.”

“Something odd has happened, sir!” Excitement trembled in the relayed voice. “We cannot maintain the hyperspatial cavity by the Q71 track!”

Barratt-Maxim paled. “*Not maintain it?*”

“No, sir! The energy drain has leapt to an enormous level, yet the cavity has failed! Commander Taylor, scheduled to arrive through it several minutes ago, has not appeared.”

Chairs scraped back, and Nick found himself and Marsh Wallace among those hastening through the corridors. Outside, his gaze flew to the high antennae, and he halted. Electronic fire played round the radiating elements, now glowing golden and red in the heavens. Burning insulation and scorched metal tainted the night air, and his mind flew over the data he had accumulated. The pieces fitted: he understood, and felt the knowledge filling him with authority. A technician from the conference table brushed past him.

“How was the cavity maintained?” Nick demanded.

The man hesitated. “By co-ordinating the motions of every molecule in the distant cavity with those in the cavity here. When they became identical the cavities were wholly equal, and co-exist.”

Nick knew this fitted. “As I thought. Millay and Wells have moved heavy machinery—lumps of matter so dense enormous power is being dissipated trying to control the orbits of their atoms—into the Q71 cavity! While they are there we can never maintain the identity of the cavities!”

Their gaze switched to the aerials, surrounded by lightning and continuous thunder. The technician was white in the reflected light. Abruptly he disappeared, running for the great power-house. The static surrounding the aerials vanished.

“They’ve cut off power,” Wallace said thinly.

Nick went slowly towards the building. “Which means any possibility of instantaneous transmission from here has ceased! We’re isolated—can never reach the Q71 cavity while it’s occupied by so much heavy equipment. That’s what Millay intended. With the city leaders gone, his plan to gain personal power may well succeed!”

Millay’s scheme would doubtless be sound—flawless. Millay did not

make mistakes, Nick thought bitterly. As he limped on, leaning heavily on his stick, he felt he had a personal and very particular quarrel with Millay.

Wyndham was standing silently in the building. "The interspatial cavity cannot be restored," he said helplessly.

The power was again on, and indicators stood past maximum. In the insulated room beyond, huge shapes of apparently transparent machinery glowed and shimmered. A perspiring technician knocked off the power.

"We shall damage our equipment! Identity of the cavities cannot be restored—a dissimilarity too great to overcome has been introduced into the Q71 cavity."

Silence followed. "You once had a fault in alignment of the projection beam, when Commander Wyndham was in the cavity," Nick said. "Can you duplicate it?"

"Perhaps, but——"

"Then do!" Nick suggested. "It won't harm your equipment."

The man shook his head. "No." His gaze went to Barratt-Maxim, who nodded.

"Do as he suggests," he ordered.

There was a second cavity chamber they might use, Nick thought. One about which Millay did not know. It was that Timberley had built for his temperature experiments!

As adjustments were made Nick knew that he was playing with death. When he stepped into the chamber, here, he would be in its remote extension—and the first rule of physics could cause his annihilation. The same space could not be simultaneously occupied by two pieces of matter. If he tried to materialise in space already occupied by buildings or machinery—it would be too bad. The pointers slowly reached their operational marks, and Marsh Wallace's hand came on his shoulder.

"Don't try, Nick. It's dangerous."

"Don't, Nick!"

He turned at the voice. Niora was at the door, one arm outstretched to halt him. He hesitated, confused.

"*I was one of those chosen, Nick,*" she said. "We were sworn to secrecy. I had to come. I hoped you'd be brought in later. I didn't want to come without you."

Nick looked down at himself—at his fragile, twisted limbs, and his face twitched. "I'm better gone, like *this!*"

"No, Nick." She clutched his arm. "It's *you*—how you act, your character—that counts."

He drew himself away. "I'm not prepared to stay like this. Better—to fail. . . ."

He grasped his stick and limped between the silent watchers through the chamber door. Every cell of his body quivered. He went spinning down through immeasurable distances. Suns flamed in sweeping cones of light, receded, and were gone. He felt something must be wrong . . .

coming had not been like this . . . then stumbled to his knees, fingers clutching at an insulated floor.

When his wits returned he knew that he had failed. Every limb was bruised and aching. His head sang, and light danced before his eyes. Crumpled on the insulated floor, he knew that he had scarcely the strength to rise, and certainly no power to find Millay and Wells and undo the evil which they had done.

He moved slightly, and found something pressing into his side. For a moment he did not know what it was, then realisation slowly came. Henry Riordan's box, still in his pocket.

This was the time, Nick thought. His danger could never be greater. He was already very near the end.

Gasping, he forced himself upright and with difficulty pulled the box from his pocket. An intense curiosity grew, and his fingers tore ineffectually at the seals. What could the box contain, he wondered. *What?*

The lid opened smoothly. Knowing not what to expect, he felt dismay and disappointment. Inside was a folded slip of yellowed paper. He rested a moment, remembering Henry Riordan's gravity and wisdom. It couldn't be a joke, he thought. *It couldn't be . . .*

Fingers shaking, he opened the paper. There was a single line of writing, in a clear, upright hand which he recognised.

"With *courage*, you and other men can be masters of the universe."

He closed his eyes. *Courage*. He could almost hear Henry Riordan's grave, kindly voice whisper the word. *Courage*.

"Never give up," Henry Riordan had once said. "When you think you're beaten, Nick, stand up and fight."

Stand up and fight, Nick thought.

The phrase seemed to steady the trembling of his twisted limbs. *Courage*. He breathed the word, bit his lips, and rose slowly, staggering. He forced himself to the door.

Yes, he thought. Henry Riordan had given him the greatest gift—the decision to fight on, never to give in.

He wondered whether the door would be locked on the outside. But it opened at his pressure. He was glad that the Q71 route was not far from Timberley's workrooms.

It was a full hour later, and dark, when he heard footsteps along the raised way which he had reached with so much difficulty. Wells came first, followed by Millay. They were going to assure themselves nothing had arisen to upset their plan, and that the Q71 cavity continued to be useless. Nick permitted himself no regret as he felled both, unexpectedly and from cover, with stunning blows of his paralysing, bought a bare half-hour before in Millay's name. They deserved to be dealt with according to their own code, he thought. He painfully dragged Millay towards the outside footway, now deserted, and hoped that the message he had sent to Timberley had reached him.

As he rested Timberley came up the steps. "This is a job I'll be glad to help in," he said grimly.

Millay moved as he was strapped into the T.S. chair. Nick clipped him on the jaw, and felt savage triumph. His own last thought before Timberley hesitantly began to manipulate the apparatus was one wondering if the identity of the cavity in the temperature chamber could be maintained long enough. He hoped so. He wanted to go back to the others, and to Niora. . . .

When he rose from the second chair he rubbed his jaw where the blow still stung. "This isn't good-bye, Timberley," he said. He flexed his strong arms. "You deserve to come too. You're one of those who set no limit to man's expansion."

They entered the temperature chamber together. Hyperspatial stresses shook them. Suns seemed to wax and wane. At last, through greyness, they stepped out almost into the arms of Barratt-Maxim and Marsh Wallace. Nick looked back through the door. Like figures of glass, Kern Millay and Wells were materialising. Each held weapons. Wells's face was twisted in fury, and he half-supported Millay with his free hand.

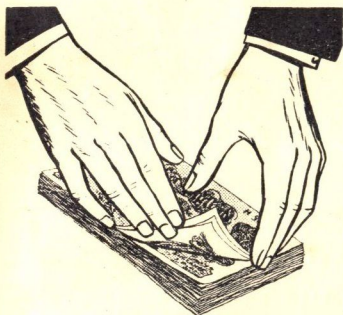
"They're quick workers," Nick said.

"The power won't last," the technician breathed.

A scream came through the door, seeming to recede through vast distances. It ended in utter silence. The shapes had gone, and Nick shivered. The void between the stars was vast and frigid. . . .

THE END

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