

SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

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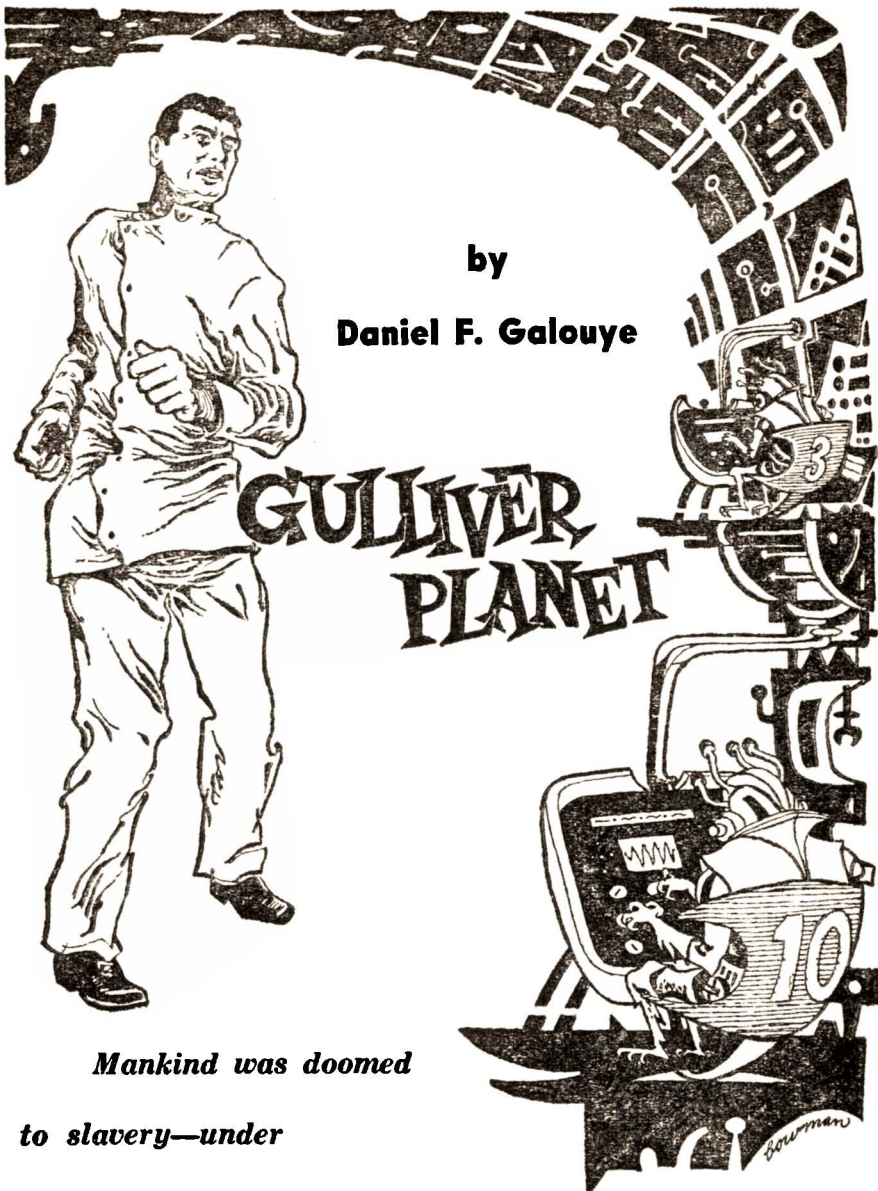
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by
Daniel F. Galouye

GULLIVER PLANET

*Mankind was doomed
to slavery—under
microscopic masters!*

Illustrated by Bowman

Gulliver Planet

by Daniel F. Galouye

CHAPTER I

THUMP-THUMP . . . *thump-thump* . . . *thump-thump* . . .
“Infernal noise!” Thaul stared exasperatedly at the irregular gray walls.

Kolar displayed a casual indifference consistent with his authority. “You’ll get used to it.”

They went cautiously down the dismal corridor with its crude, pulsating floor.

“Enough to drive a cosmocontrol crewman crazy,” Thaul complained dispiritedly.

They carried two-pronged picks with lines threaded through eyes in the handles and secured around their waists.

Thump-thump . . . *thump-thump* . . .

“I suppose,” Kolar conceded grudgingly, “we could have better located control headquarters here. But no matter how carefully you pick your site, you’ll always run into the cross-pulse factor.”

They entered a large compartment dominated by a huge instrument console. Thaul paused to watch his crew securing leads to terminal posts at the rear of the cabinet, which was suspended on shock-absorbing springs from a tri-axial mount.

But suddenly there was a mighty trembling of the floor and the walls heaved about them.

Shouting, the workmen hurled themselves from the instrument console as it swung around on its axes and danced on its springs.

Thaul brought his pick around in a sweeping arc and buried its blade in the calcified floor. He grasped the lifeline and hung on precariously as the chamber tilted and swayed.

But the convulsions stopped abruptly.

“Thought it was going to be a rough one,” Thaul said, freeing his pick and securing it under his belt.

Kolar brushed himself off. “I’ve seen enough here. Everything seems to be in order. You’ve done a good job on Beach-

head Seven. I've got five more to inspect before I get back to Number One."

"How are the other subjects coming along?"

Kolar headed toward the main vehicular access tunnel. "They're all in various stages of preparation, with Number One almost ready for permanent activation. His name's 'Jamison,' incidentally."

"Have we learned anything about the macrosurroundings?"

Kolar shrugged indeterminately. "A few things. I've tapped One's visual and auditory system from time to time—enough to determine that One through Seven are bunched together in some kind of institution. I suppose they're being observed. Our operations inside them affect their behavior considerably, you know."

They entered the large tunnel and Kolar drew up next to one of three shuttle cars.

"If they've gathered only seven macrocontrol subjects here," Thaul reasoned, "that leaves thirteen crews unaccounted for."

"They're all in the greater vicinity." Kolar climbed into the vehicle. "Communication is difficult, but I've been in contact with each of the thirteen crews at least once. They'll all deliver their subjects here as soon as they establish complete control over them."

BACK IN THE MAIN COMPARTMENT, Thaul supervised the neuro-electricians as they ran other leads in from various tunnels of Beachhead Seven.

Muted voices welled in one of the corridors and he turned to watch his assistant lead three haggard workmen into the control chamber.

"Nasty time," Boren said wearily. "The anesthetic burned out and we severed a capillary. That's what caused the convulsion."

DANIEL F. GALOUYE is one of the brightest new stars in the science-fiction galaxy, and in GULLIVER PLANET he proves our contention that action science fiction can be based on new, thought-provoking, scientific concepts. Notable for its fast pacing and suspense, it is nevertheless a story that any magazine—bar none—would have been proud to print!

Thaul surveyed the crew solicitously. "You stopped the flow?"

"Yes. But it hemorrhaged into the corridor before we could throw up a patch. Then, for a while, we had our hands full with a leucocyte attack—until we brought up the cauterizers."

"What about the connection?"

"We'll have to detour to motor fiber forty-six. We'll clean up and get right on it."

"No you won't," Thaul protested. "You'll get yourself some rest first."

Boren shrugged and led his men off toward crew quarters. Dispiritedly, Thaul strode around the compartment examining neuro-control connections. A hell of an expedition! Something that only Kolar could dream up and justify under the convenient patent phrase, "For the Greater Glory of Valvarez." Valvareziens weren't made to live like burrowing animals! They weren't intended to be the parasites of gigantic hosts on an alien planet!

A neuro-electrician came over. "Locomotion Trunk C hooked into the Central Selector Circuit," he reported.

Thaul went over to the control console and strapped himself in the padded seat.

"Video Circuit connected?" he asked the nearest workman.

"Connected and ready."

"Audio?"

A crewman on his left nodded.

Thaul punched a button and waited for the central screen to flicker to life. As the herringbone pattern became brighter, he threw on the audio switch.

Then he turned a dial labeled "Vocal Associative Counter-Transfer," depressed a stud designated "Interpretative Feedback" and made a final adjustment on the "Duo-Intellectual Correlator" control.

Finally the screen washed itself free of interfering patterns and produced a sharply focused image. . . .

ROD FELTON TENSED at the girl's bedside as her face wrestled with a pained expression.

"Yes?" he asked tentatively.

"Just another ache." She smiled feebly.

A slim brunette, she seemed even smaller in the hospital bed. Her face was pale and her hands flaccid as they lay on top of the sheet.

Dr. Morgan Crockfield, stout and misproportioned with middle age, stared up from the other side of the bed. "That headache still bothering you, Miss Baldwin?"

She nodded. "It's a corker, too," she added lightly.

Crockfield felt her forehead and looked up. "Same syndrome as Jamison, Sellers, the others."

"No fever, then," Rod said.

"None whatsoever. That's the strange part of this whole business, Dr. Felton. Not a one of them has ever run a temperature."

He turned toward the door. "I'm going to check the others."

Rod studied Irene. Her disturbed face was ashen, but not unattractive. He could imagine how she might look with make-up.

"Did I have a bad time last night?"

"Muscular convulsions. Delirium. The usual symptoms . . . Oh, you're following in the footsteps of the other six, all right . . . copycat." He gripped her hand.

She winced and sat up unsteadily. "A million ice-picks—all sharp and pointed." She felt her temples. "Any idea what it is?"

"Some sort of neurosis—maybe." He lit a cigarette. "On the other hand, it could be organic."

A nurse entered. "Sellers is acting up again."

"I'll be right there, Miss Nelson. Have you told Dr. Crockfield?"

She shook her head.

"Report developments to him first," Rod instructed. "He's still in charge."

The nurse nodded dutifully and left.

But Irene caught his arm before he could follow. Her lips moved hesitatingly. "Rod . . . whatever's ahead for us—will it be better or worse?"

He turned and stared out the window at the undulant hills that swept toward the city in the distance.

"Sellers is going through a crisis—one Jamison seems to have already passed. It's logical to assume that the other five, including you, will follow the same course. But we believe

Jamison is now showing some improvement."

"But suppose Jamison—dies?"

He seized her shoulders reassuringly. "If he dies it'll be very unfortunate, but not *all* tragic. We'll at least have a chance for a post mortem."

She cried out suddenly and clamped her hands over her eyes.

"Irene, what's wrong?" he demanded.

"I—I started seeing everything double!"

THAUL SNAPPED OFF the visual and audio switches and swung around. "Anybody disturbing the optical coordination circuit?" he demanded.

"I was," one of the workmen admitted, coming from behind the control console. "Just testing to see whether we were pulling enough psycho-amps. I didn't know you were hooked in."

"Then be more careful the next time." Thaul unbuckled his safety harness. "The mental flux—is it strong enough?"

"It's more than sufficient. Seven has a high-level psycho-output."

Thaul leaned back in the chair and stared abstractedly at the dull gray wall. "High enough to serve the needs of the grand and noble Valvarez?" he asked sarcastically.

The inter-unit speaker on the console erupted gratingly. "I take it you don't approve of our operational plans?"

Lurching, Thaul swung around to stare at the inter-unit screen, where Kolar's face glowered out from the beachhead in the subject called Jamison.

"I've suspected all along," Kolar went on brusquely, "that you weren't fully in sympathy with the project. But I trust you'll be wise enough not to let your personal convictions interfere."

Thaul squirmed. "I had no intentions—"

"What you haven't realized," Kolar interrupted, "are the advantages we stand to gain if our test project is successful. Imagine—microscopic and macroscopic intelligence, going arm in arm in perfect symbiosis . . ."

Perfect symbiosis all right, Thaul thought . . . with only the parasites benefitting, with the hosts serving as machines who would respond to switches and dials in carrying out the

quest for the necessities of the new Valvarezian civilization.

"If it can be proved," the other went on, "that our culture can be transplanted into biological hosts, a new, glorious civilization lies ahead for all Valvarezians!"

Thaul nodded with a forced show of homage.

"Our world is the only one that can support intelligent life the size of ours," Kolar said gravely. "But in just a few thousand generations Valvarez will be lost to the full fury of an exploding sun. We would not last long on any other world—except under the protective mantle of a native life form."

And what, Thaul wondered, lay ahead for the "protective life form"—a hollow, meaningless slave life, with each locked up in the prison of his own mind until insanity gave him release? . . . And, in some respects, these prospective hosts were *so much* like Valvarezians!

He was suddenly aware that Kolar expected a reaction.

"I understand," he said profoundly.

"Very well, then . . . Now, I want you to leave Boren in charge at Beachhead Seven and get over to Number Two. Lako has his directional signal on for you to follow. The subject—name's Sellers, by the way—is ready for permanent control. I'll want you in charge temporarily for post-activation tests. Afterward you will return to Seven."

CHAPTER II

"**A**CTUALLY," CROCKFIELD said disconsolately, "it frightens me. Diagnosis is apparently hopeless in Jamison's case and all the others."

Rod stood thoughtfully by the window, looking across into Jamison's room in the right wing. "It is beginning to seem that the symptoms have leaped from the realm of neurology to God-knows-what."

Crockfield dropped down at his desk. "I think this whole matter is now open to psychopathic investigation."

"An epidemic psychosis?" Rod asked skeptically.

The other shrugged. "All right, then. Let's go back to the theory of an infectious disease."

"An incommunicable infectious disease without fever?"

Crockfield slapped the desk. "Very well, Dr. Felton. I give up. It's your worry anyway."

Rod was still staring into Jamison's room. The patient was seated on his bed now. His body was stiff and his arms extended over his head. He brought his hands down to touch his shoulders. Now he raised them again. Down once more.

"You're wrong, Dr. Crockfield. You're still in charge of your clinic. I'm merely here as a Public Health Service observer. . . . Isn't Jamison still showing improvement?"

The other elevated his hands. "It's one of those things you can't put your finger on. Physically he's all right, except for a lingering trace of muscular mal-coordination. But—well, there are periods of morbid apathy which you wouldn't hesitate to pin down as schizophrenia."

Rod glanced back out the window at Jamison. The man was still exercising. "And Sellers?" he asked.

"Following the same pattern—but experiencing each symptom a day or two later."

Rod leaned pensively against the window sill and considered it. A patient shows up with symptoms that stump the doctor. Then another. The investigation turns up five more cases. The Public Health Service is consulted and recommends isolating the cases for observation. The agency sends out a representative. But that accounts only for seven cases who were medical-minded enough to seek a doctor's help. How many *unreported* cases were there?

Crockfield sighed and rose. "Guess I'll make the rounds again. Boardman and Walker will be coming through the Jamison crisis soon."

IN ROOM 205, ALEX SELLERS sat motionless in his chair, his arms hanging. He was young and lean, but muscular—as though he might have been an athlete.

The door opened softly and a large man with coarse features entered. He was half bald and wore a clinic robe.

"I'm Jamison—Number One," he said.

"Kolar?" Sellers asked cautiously.

Jamison nodded, crossed the room.

"Thaul coordinating in Number Two," Sellers reported mechanically.

"How is the subject handling?"

Sellers tried to rise, but his legs were wobbly and he fell sitting again. His head dropped to one side and lay at a wry

angle, as though the neck were broken.

"Trouble with muscular control?" Jamison asked.

In jerky motions, the head struggled to erectness. "Just a matter of circuit balance. I'm increasing amperage now. Let's switch over to inter-unit communications."

The other shook his head quite authentically. "We'll use inter-unit as little as possible. We need practice manipulating the subjects. Walk around, Thaul. Let's see how well you can coordinate."

Sellers rose shakily and limped across the room. On the way back, the impediment worked itself out.

"Excellent!" exclaimed Jamison. "However, I observed several basic mistakes. You should have looked in my direction when you heard me enter."

"I considered it, but—"

"You *considered* it! Aren't you using the Supplementary Auto-Reaction Circuit?"

"No. I thought—"

"Confound it, Thaul! That's what the circuit's for—to automatically supply authentic movements and gestures! It lets the subject *help* us control him—just like the Vocal Associative Transfer translated our words into their language. Without the SAR circuit we could never nail down our position here."

Chastened, Thaul made Sellers look up obsequiously. "What does nailing down our position consist of?"

Jamison paced, gesturing enthusiastically. "As soon as all seven beachheads are under positive control and the other thirteen report in, we're going to build macromodels of our weapons. We'll provide personal shields for all our subjects and throw up an ultra shield to seal off the city." He nodded out the window.

Sellers stared at the distant skyline.

"Then," Jamison continued, "we'll conquer the isolated segment and make the population build a macroship so we can take the twenty host units back to Valvarez for experimental colonization. We'll determine just how many of us can subsist in each host and how many thousands of subjects we'll need."

Jamison sat on the bed. "I came here with an assignment for you," he said disappointedly. "But I'll have to carry it out

myself, now that I see you've been practically wasting your time with Sellers."

"What is the assignment, Kolar?"

"The one called Felton—know him?"

"He was in here twice this morning."

"From his conversation with Crockfield," Jamison explained, "I gather he's not with the institution at all. He represents some vast grouping of Earth society. Of all people here, he alone can call down formidable opposition before we're ready for it."

"What are you going to do?"

"Kill him. I can't risk anything that might lead to our premature exposure."

"Kolar!" a frantic voice broke in on the inter-unit circuit. "This is Beachhead Three. My subject's door is open and I can see the one called Crockfield outside Sellers' room. He's listening to what you and Thaul are saying!"

"Very well," Kolar acknowledged calmly. "We'll take the necessary action against him too."

ROD FINISHED THE ROUGH DRAFT of his report, put it in his pocket and stepped into the main corridor.

Down the hall, Crockfield stood rigidly beside Sellers' partly open door, his back pressed to the wall, his face tense with what might have been incredulity or fear.

He saw Rod and started forward. But he stopped, smiled weakly, turned and continued down the hall.

Shrugging indifferently, Rod went on to Irene's room.

Her back was to him as she stood looking out the window. Then he saw she was trembling. Solicitously, he called her name.

She turned and he saw only apprehension on her face.

"I—I . . ." She made a gesture of futility. "I found myself here by the window when just a second ago I was in bed."

She nodded toward the clock. "Only it wasn't a second ago. It was over an hour!"

He brushed a disheveled strand of hair off her forehead. "Just a memory break. All the other cases, from Jamison on down, have experienced them."

Compassionately, he studied her face . . . The other cases—they, too, had experienced the dejection of helplessness and

fear of what lay ahead. But they were all men. She was only a frightened girl.

He led her to the bed.

"When I woke this morning," she said distantly, "I was bending my knees and straightening them, bending them and—"

He laughed lightly. "And you found out you had no control? That's the involuntary muscular activity we were telling you about. It's just a phase."

She lay in bed and stared rigidly at the ceiling.

Watching her, he frowned uncertainly. "Irene—"

She didn't answer.

"Irene!" he called loudly, passing his hand over her eyes. But there was no reflex blink.

He drew up a chair beside the bed and sat watching.

Almost an hour later she turned toward him. "And I'm just starting to go through that phase now?"

He nodded, sidling between her and the clock so she wouldn't notice the time lapse.

But she lurched up suddenly. "Rod! My hands—I can't move them!"

Her arms hung limp. As she whirled frantically to face him, they flew out with centrifugal force and plopped down against her thighs.

Then she brought her hands up in front of her and studied the palms, horrified.

"There," he consoled. "They're all right now."

"But *I'm* not moving them!"

THAUL SAT ATTENTIVELY at the control console in Beachhead Two. For the moment, the large screen that relayed his subject's visual impressions was dead, with Sellers temporarily immobilized.

Rather, Thaul's attention was on the inter-unit screen, which displayed a picture of Boren at the control console in Beachhead Seven, the girl. In the background of the scene was Boren's large visual-interception screen, which showed a pair of slender hands, with palms forward and trembling.

"But *I'm* not moving them!" rasped the speaker on the distant control board.

"Cut her loose, Boren!"
Thaul ordered severely.

Boren started, apparently not aware Thaul had established contact. He nimbly assaulted a bevy of switches. The Number Seven visual-interception screen faded to a lifeless gray. The background hum died in the audio-interception speaker. A string of "positive-control" indicator lights blinked out.

Then Boren turned toward the inter-unit screen. "Was I doing something wrong?"

"Kolar's first rule is not to activate any control circuits without first shunting out the subject's perceptive faculties."

Boren guiltily slapped his head. "And I've been doing it off and on for half a work period!"

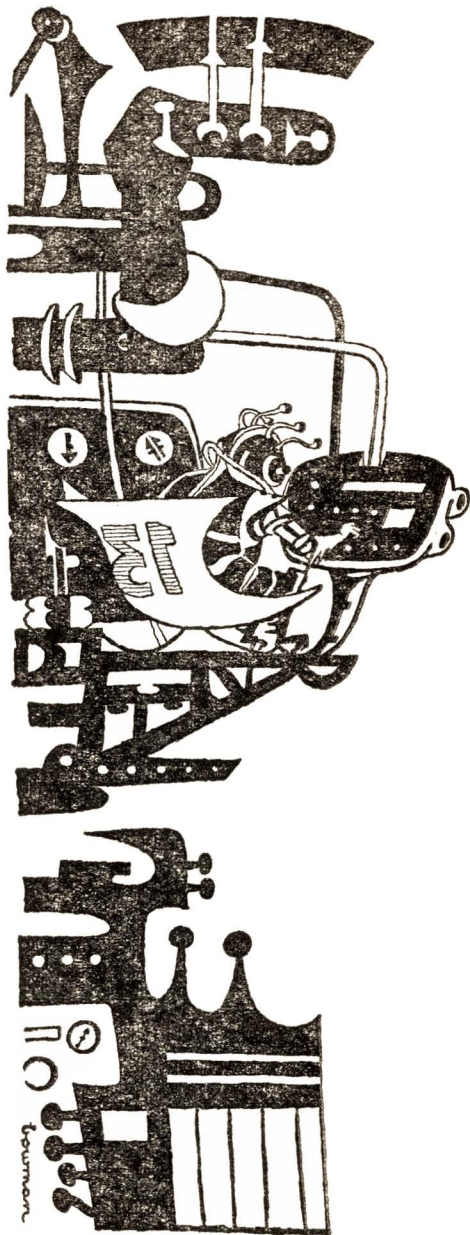
"Don't you see what it does?" Thaul reproved. "It lets the subject *experience* involuntary manipulation."

"And that might tip them off that they're being controlled," the other mused with delayed comprehension.

"To say nothing of scaring the daylights out of them."

"I had trouble hooking up Motor Circuit Sixteen," Boren explained, "and I decided to run field tests."

"Well I hope you know the procedure now. Check visual-



ly' first, without over-riding the subject's control. Then wipe out her conscious perception by turning on the Master Sensory Erase switch."

"But I thought they had to be aware of what's going on so their psycho-output would run our equipment."

"True. But we started out with fully charged batteries. That should be enough juice for all tests—until we activate the subject permanently."

"Oh," said Boren. "And by then it's too late for them to resist, even though they're aware of what's happening."

And that, Thaul thought as he nodded, was the hell of it—for the subjects. But he masked his sentiments as he switched off the communicator and turned back to the controls.

He activated the audio-video-kinesthetic system, punched several studs to bring Sellers to his feet, and selected a semi-automatic behavior pattern that sent the subject pacing about the room. From time to time he over-rode the actions with manual control while he practiced ocular-motor coordination.

Eventually, like a subtle whisper almost hidden in the background sibilation of the speaker, Sellers' terrified thought stream spilled over into the audio-interception circuit. It was like the wailing of a thousand ghosts hopelessly lost in the infinite reaches of space.

Thaul turned on the Master Sensory Erase switch, drawing a merciful curtain down over the subject's flow of conscious thought. With enough of a charge built up in the batteries for a while, there was no point in torturing the man needlessly.

He put Sellers on full-automatic pace behavior and sat back, thinking of his first subject—Number Seven—so small and helpless. Then he laughed at the ironic thought, wondering, actually, how many millions of times larger she was than he. But still, in her world, compared with the other macrohumans about her, she was insignificant—just as Meva had always seemed so helpless and inadequate on her own world.

Somehow Seven and Meva were much alike. Of course, there were the Valvarezians' quadrifocal optical and tripod locomotion systems. And Earthmen had only two arms. But such differences were superficial at the most. The inner qualities of character were really all that counted. And, compared on the broad basis of that fundamental standard, Meva and the Earth girl were indeed similar.

WHILE HE WAITED IN THE OFFICE for Crockfield, Rod finished his report to the Surgeon General. He sealed the envelope and dropped it in the outgoing mail basket just as one of the patients entered. It was Jamison.

The large man drew up hesitantly in front of the desk. "You're with the—government, aren't you?"

Rod nodded. "I'm trying to find out if there's any particular bug causing your trouble."

"Bug?" the other repeated densely.

"Micro-organism."

The patient stiffened. His eyes explored the room, darted toward the door and back to the desk, fell on the ivory-handled letter opener.

"You mean sentient but unintelligent microbes, of course—germs, viruses?"

Rod frowned. "What else?"

Jamison picked up the letter opener and absently studied the carvings on its handle. "Is there a furnace here?"

"Of course there is."

Jamison's features were rigid, his eyes steady. And he gripped the letter opener so firmly now that his hand was trembling.

Suddenly apprehensive, Rod brought his arms up.

Jamison sprang. The lunge, however, fell short as he screamed and collapsed.

Confounded, Rod knelt and examined him. Jamison was dead.

When he looked up, Crockfield was there, demanding an explanation. Two of the patients peered inquisitively from the hall behind him.

Rod recounted the incident. He added, "I guess you were right in suspecting Jamison was unstable."

Crockfield dabbed at his brow with a handkerchief.

Rod rose. "You have detention rooms?"

"On the second floor."

"I'd move the other six there until we can find out whether violence is a general symptom."

"Of course," the other agreed readily.

"In the meantime, we've got something we can sink our teeth into—a subject for autopsy. We might find something the X-rays haven't turned up."

"DEAD?" THAUL REPEATED incredulously before the inter-unit screen.

Kolar's face in the kinescopic tube was lined with frustration. "He pitched over when I tried to kill Felton."

"But how could that happen?" Thaul wondered, half amused, whether they had overlooked some basic fallacy in their operational plan.

"We made a vital mistake in theory. At crisis, apparently, the subject's emotional flux was enormously amplified in the converters and discharged back into his neuro-electric system. It blew out every neuron, every synapse in Jamison's body!"

Thaul immobilized Sellers and turned his full attention to the videocom.

"Does that mean we may have to abandon our beachheads?" he asked, concealing his enthusiasm over the prospect of an early return to Valvarez and Meva.

"Not at all. We'll simply install circuit breakers. That'll keep a feedback from building up."

"Oh," said Thaul, with more disappointment than he showed.

"I want all crews to install type-C breakers. We'll cut down on other activity until the modifications are made. We don't want to lose any more subjects."

Thaul turned to summon his crew and relay the order.

But Kolar held up a hand. "I'm going to strip the heavy equipment out of Number One and leave the lighter stuff behind. Since we don't want to chance discovery, you'll destroy Jamison's body as soon as I'm through here."

"But how?"

"There's a heat generator in the basement. It operates on the raw combustion principle."

Kolar smiled. "In the meantime, since I have no subject, I'm going to establish Beachhead Twenty-One."

Thaul looked up sharply.

"The government man," Kolar specified. "I'll want each crew to contribute four workmen to the project so we can complete it on an A-priority basis."

THAUL STARTED AS THE SUBJECT-AUDIO SPEAKER came to life. "Sellers! Wake up!"

Kolar, still in contact, looked up tentatively from the inter-unit screen.

Concerned over the excitement in the macrovoice, Thaul activated Sellers' optical circuit, set the vernier control for conversational-tracking and lifted the subject's eyelids.

The image of Crockfield flared on Thaul's main screen. The institution director stood anxiously before Sellers, pointing a blunt object with a tubular protuberance at the subject's chest.

Kolar stared apprehensively out of the kinescope at Thaul's visual-interception screen. "That's one of their weapons!"

But even as he said it, a third kinescopic tube on Thaul's control console displayed a shifting montage of conceptual images. The Cross-Index Rectifier was drawing pictorial knowledge from Sellers' mind to illustrate the characteristics of the "revolver."

Crockfield was smiling complacently. "I know I probably can't hurt you, *Thaul*. But I can kill Sellers. I don't think you'd like that."

Thaul cast a worried glance at Kolar. "Is this the one who was listening in the hall?"

Kolar nodded. "I've had him under observation since then. But—"

"I know the setup," Crockfield went on eagerly. "I heard you and Jamison—that was *Kolar*, wasn't it?—talking in this room. Where are you from? How are you controlling Sellers and those other eighteen?"

Kolar swore. "Keep him there! I'll contact Parneiv. His subject should be under positive control by now."

"I won't give you away—I swear it!" Crockfield whispered intently. "I want to be *with you!* I want to help!"

Still, Thaul kept Sellers silent. Of Kolar's image in the videocom, he asked, "What'll I do?"

"Talk it out and see what he wants while I get Parneiv."

"Here . . ." Crockfield extended the handle of the weapon towards Sellers. "You take it. See? I'm sincere!"

Thaul controlled Sellers' hand as it reached out and took the revolver. Anxiously, the clinic director stared at the weapon, then relaxed as Sellers pocketed it.

"Why do you want to help?" Thaul asked soberly.

Crockfield lowered his head humbly, but there was still an insidious excitement on his face. "I concede superiority to the Valvareziens. And I don't want to be one of the mindless ones."

"You heard Kolar say we'd probably need only a few thousand. Why didn't you simply escape to safety among the millions?"

"Because of the shields and the weapons. They'll be like nothing on Earth! I want them. After you take all the hosts you need, there'll be millions of potential ones left—millions I can control as easily as you're controlling Sellers—if *you give me the power to do it!*"

Thaul, tiring of the display of cowardly treachery, sent Sellers' hand back into the pocket for the revolver as he used the Cross-Index Rectifier to cull from the subject's mind a kaleidoscopic montage of instructions on how to use it.

But Kolar stopped him. "Cut me in on remote control."

Thaul threw the Master Relay and leaned back.

"Are you sincere in wanting to serve us?" Kolar asked with Sellers' voice.

"Would I expose myself like this if I weren't?" Crockfield reasoned.

"No. I suppose not. And it'll be more convenient having you gather material for the weapons and shields. In return for that service, they'll be yours after we leave."

Thaul smiled inwardly. . . . Nobody ever came out on top in a deal with Kolar. And, naturally, Kolar wouldn't take the chance of leaving behind macroweapons that might greet him on his return from Valvarez.

LATE THAT NIGHT, Rod was still intently occupied in the clinic's microbiology laboratory, wishing impatiently that Crockfield would get back from town.

Once more, he moved the slide under the microscope. There it was: long and thin and wire-like, piercing the specimen of pons tissue from Jamison's brain like a thread of metal.

He had selected the pons for dissection because it seemed to offer the best hope of explaining all the symptoms, located as it was between the cerebrum and the medulla and between the two halves of the cerebellum.

Moving the slide, he studied the silvery hair as it brilliantly reflected the suffused light. He followed the strand until it terminated at a ganglion.

A giant virus, perhaps? A chain of them, bunched together longitudinally so as to present a visible whole in the field of the instrument?

Perplexed, he leaned back, wondering whether such a structure could offer an explanation. Could it transmit nerve impulses so as to interfere with normal functions? By shorting ganglia, could it immobilize motor trunks, interrupt consciousness, cause memory lapses?

He steered the dissecting needle into the microscope's field and directed its blunt end, mountain-like in comparative size, toward the thin strand.

The object, suddenly exhibiting magnetic properties, sprang from the pons tissue and pasted itself against the needle!

Frowning, Rod ran a hand indecisively through his hair. Perhaps he could determine the extent of the substance in the pons. . . . He straightened abruptly. There was one way to find out—a radioactive tracer!

He uncradled the phone and put in a call to the state university; then asked for the residence of Professor James Haggerty of the physics department.

"Good to hear from you, Doctor," Haggerty said. "I was told you'd be on research out at the Crockfield Clinic. I'm supposed to stand by in case I can give you a hand."

"You can. I need a therapeutic drink. Can you cook up one?"

"Depends. What do you have in mind?"

"Something with not too short a half-life—say about twelve hours or so. And it has to gravitate to magnetized metal."

"Magnetized metal!" the other repeated, surprised.

"Yes. Don't ask me to explain."

Haggerty was thoughtfully silent. "We got the pile going. I suppose we can cook up some Fe-60. That stuff has a half-life of just under nine hours—about the closest we can get."

"Can you prepare it in a colloidal solution of filings small enough for intestinal absorption?"

"I suppose so."

"Good. Get it out as soon as you can."

Rod hung up. But when he turned around, Jamison's body and the mobile table on which it had lain were gone.

HE STOOD THERE CONFUSED for a moment. Then he realized Crockfield must have returned, seen him busy at the phone, and trundled Jamison back to the morgue.

But when he glanced out the window, the clinic director's car was still missing from the parking area.

He went to the morgue. The body wasn't there. Perplexed, he searched the empty rooms on the first floor.

Determined, he went on to the second floor—and discovered that none of the detention room doors was bolted! In the first three rooms on the left, the patients were asleep.

He tried Boardman's room. It was empty!

More puzzled, he went on to Irene's room. Indecisively, he stood staring down at the sleeping girl. Then he continued on to the final room.

Sellers was missing too!

Going back down the hall, he met Sellers coming from the other direction. But when he drew up to speak with the patient, the man continued indifferently past him.

Uncertainly, he watched him enter his room. Then he smiled in sudden relief. Of course! The nurse had probably wheeled Jamison back into surgery.

But Jamison wasn't in the operating room. And Miss Nelson, at her station in the reception room, knew nothing about the incident.

But where was Boardman? And where had Sellers been?

Back in the microbiology lab, he found the mobile table—exactly where it had been before he discovered the body missing!

Irrately, he started to return upstairs. But an automobile drove up outside and he went to the window and watched Crockfield, in the glare of the spotlight on the corner of the building, begin unloading crates from his car.

Boardman was with him!

Rod hardly noticed the minute speck of dust, caught in the beam of the overhead bulb. Like a mote balanced on a shaft of sunlight, it glistened a second. Then it floated beyond the periphery of his vision.

He watched the director and the patient unload aluminum tubing, coils of wire, two objects that resembled huge transformers, and several cardboard boxes.

But abruptly he brought his hands up to his temples as there

was a sudden pain in his ear. He stiffened as he realized all seven patients had recalled ear-aches only a short while before the other symptoms showed up!

And, even as he stood there, the roaring, shattering pain began. It was a relentless torture that sent him reeling down the hall and into his room where he fell helplessly across the bed. . . .

CHAPTER IV

ROD, STILL DRESSED, stirred and opened his eyes to intense sunlight. His head was afire. He bracketed his temples with shaking hands and rose weakly. . . . There was something he must tell Crockfield. But what?

Squinting, he faced the window that framed the skyline of the city, the less distant factories. But the smokestacks were lifeless—like unlit cigarettes standing on end. It was Sunday—and he had no memory beyond Friday night!

Then he saw the bars on the window and realized he was in one of the upstairs detention rooms!

But why?

He tried the door. It was locked.

He pounded on it. But with each blow a bolt of pain shot through his temples. He gave it up and went back to the window.

Crockfield was in the parking area again, unloading more equipment. Sellers, Boardman and Walker were helping. But what were the *patients* doing down there?

Rod noticed that the fingers on his right hand were twitching nervously. He tried to steady them, but the motion only became more pronounced. Then he saw that it wasn't a nervous reflex. The hand was opening and closing—and he couldn't stop it. Then the disease was communicable!

The bolt slid back and Crockfield's fifth case entered stiffly, carrying a tray of food. Elrich, who was a foreman at one of the assembly plants, seemed to be all shoulders, supported by inordinately thin legs and hips. He put the tray on the table.

"What am I doing in here?" Rod demanded.

But the man, who was supposed to have gone through the Jamison crisis Saturday, gave no answer as he backed toward the hall.

Rod started for the door.

The pretense of sluggishness fell away from Elrich as he flashed a shiny cylindrical device hardly larger than a pen.

And a river of icy pain erupted along Rod's arm. Myriad needles stabbed into his biceps. Each finger seemed frozen brittle in the grip of incredible, stinging cold.

Elrich continued backing toward the door, but misjudged his position. His shoulder struck the jamb and the jolt was transmitted through his body, temporarily unbalancing him.

Rod lunged forward and brought his arm swinging around in a backhanded blow that toppled the patient. Then he sprang through the door and rammed the bolt home.

For a moment, he only stood there, desperately alert as he cast apprehensive glances down the corridor. His head was aching and his arm throbbled with returning sensation.

The door boomed and shuddered and Rod wondered how long the panel could hold up under the onslaught of the man's stout shoulder. Long enough for him to get to the phone?

HE PAUSED AT THE FOOT of the stairs. Someone was coming!

Lunging into the shadows beneath the staircase, he watched the sixth patient enter the hall from the main corridor.

Morrel, small and stocky, was carrying Miss Nelson's limp form across his shoulder. The nurse was obviously dead.

Shifting his burden, Morrel opened the cellar door and started down the steps. Ahead of him, the gloom of the basement was lessened by a fitful light—the furnace was open.

And suddenly the disappearance of Jamison's body didn't seem to Rod like very much of a mystery any longer.

Bewildered, he considered easing down the hall. But Morrel dropped the nurse and whirled around, his expressionless face offering no explanation for the action. He sprinted into the main corridor.

From the second floor came the sound of the door splintering off its hinges. Elrich lunged downstairs, following Morrel outside.

Most of the numbness had left Rod's arm as he went cautiously down the hall toward the reception room. Through the glass door of the clinic's main entrance, he saw Elrich, weapon in hand, sprinting up the shell road, a pace or two behind Sellers.

Morrel was thrashing the dense shrubbery inside the iron fence while Boardman and Walker raced up to join in the search.

But how, Rod wondered, could they have all sprung into action spontaneously?

He slipped into the reception room and crossed toward the phone on the desk. The door opened from Crockfield's office and a slightly proportioned nurse entered. Her uniform, much too large, bore the embroidered name "Miss Nelson" on the left lapel.

If the woman was surprised on finding him there, she gave no outward indication as she stood in the doorway, her bony face unnaturally motionless.

Apprehensively, he cast a glance through the front window. The trio who had been thrashing the hedges stopped abruptly and whirled toward the building. They were all armed with tubular weapons now. Morrel and Boardman raced for the main entrance while Walker swept toward the rear of the clinic. Elrich and Sellers spun around on the road and spurted back.

Desperately, Rod turned to the phone. But the dead-pan





nurse was fumbling through one of the desk drawers. Her hand came out with a paralyzer tube!

Rod whirled and raced back upstairs.

The first door on the left was open and he could see Irene lying across the bed.

Heavy steps sounded at the bottom of the stairs and he lunged into the room, slamming the door.

Irene lurched up. "Rod!" There was confusion and fright in her eyes.

He seized a heavy metal chair and wedged its back under the knob. Then he leaned exhausted against the door, his head throbbing relentlessly.

She started to rise. "Rod, where were you? They wouldn't tell me what—"

Her face tensed and her eyes darted wildly about the room. Eventually, though, they became steady and calm.

Rod backed off fearfully.

BUT NOW THERE WAS THE SOUND of many feet racing about in the corridor and doors were slamming throughout the clinic.

The commotion stopped, as though on signal. The footsteps moved more lightly, more cautiously toward Irene's room.

"There's no sense in resisting, Felton," she said. "We are too many, too strongly established. Believe me, it's useless."

He stared confounded at the girl. . . . It was she who had spoken, and yet it wasn't!

"Open up, Felton!" Elrich's deep voice thundered through the door.

Then his weight crashed against the panel and it bulged as the restraining chair skittered back an inch.

Irene staggered toward the door and Rod started to lunge for her. But he couldn't move. It was as though his legs were ponderous weights.

She pulled the chair back and all the patients filed in, together with a man and woman Rod hadn't seen before. Their faces were puppet-like and each one was armed with a paralyzing tube.

Crockfield pushed his way through and turned toward Elrich. "Is Kolar listening?"

The other nodded with an erratic, unsure motion. "He's already established vocal and visual control."

Crockfield faced Rod. "Shall I give him another shot?"

Rod started, wondering why the man was addressing him.

"What will he do about nourishment?" Rod asked. "If he isn't free to eat, he won't be worth anything to us when we're ready for him."

Dismayed at the sound of his own words falling involuntarily from his mouth, Rod tried to shout. But he had no control over his voice!

The clinic director held up a hypodermic syringe. "This will keep him subdued, but semi-conscious, until you bring him under permanent control."

"Very well—we'll try it," Rod agreed. Then, "Thaul, have you finished with Number Seven yet?"

Irene nodded. "Positive control effected."

"Excellent!" Rod heard himself exclaim. "While you're adjusting coordination, you'll be assigned the job of watching Twenty-One until I establish permanent control."

Morrel and Elrich seized Rod's arms. Crockfield rolled up his sleeve and administered the injection.

In less than a minute his vision blurred and the sound of the voices around him became remote and barely distinct.

The out-of-focus outline of Crockfield's florid, grinning face hovered over him.

"Felton!" the director said melodramatically. "You've encountered the Valvareziens! Listen—I'll tell you about them, how they operate, what they can do, what they mean to me. . . ."

CHAPTER V

"**O**UR HOSTS ARE INORDINATELY stupid," Kolar was saying. "I thought their macroscopic size was their only disadvantage. But I find they're considerably behind us in scientific knowledge too."

It was his image speaking out of the inter-unit communication screen in Number Seven. Thaul listened wearily.

"Lako, in Number Two," Kolar went on, "has been probing Sellers' knowledge. He finds only one branch of science that we've apparently overlooked—something about sub-molecular building blocks of matter and some sort of weird forces enveloping them."

Thaul presented the appearance of attention, but he was watching the visual-interception screen on his control board. He had directed Irene to the window and had left her standing there several minutes earlier, with her eyes focused on the main gates. Thaul hadn't had a chance to move her since Kolar had established contact from his post in Twenty-One.

"How are you managing with Felton?" he asked.

"Splendidly! We're hooking up in record time, despite the disadvantage of a subject who's aware of what's happening."

"Didn't that injection subdue him?"

"To a certain extent. But he's still conscious enough to be obstinate when he experiences involuntary movement. His resistance has blown out a dozen circuits. But we're taming him now—whenever he balks or tries to wrest a limb free, we shoot a few psychovolts into a pain receptor ganglion."

Thaul looked away. Somehow it wasn't fair. Felton didn't stand a chance. None of them did.

"When will this operation be over?" he asked.

"We're well along," Kolar said elatedly. "Six of the subjects are assembling weapons. Four more are constructing individual shield generators. Five are working on the ultra shield generator."

"Are we past the vulnerable stage?"

"Not quite. A mass attack could still wreck us. But as soon as we provide personal shields and weapons for the subjects and isolate the city within the ultra shield, we'll be invincible."

"Have all of the other thirteen crews brought their subjects here yet?"

"All except two."

"I think I see your missing pair." Thaul altered the focus of Irene's eyes and watched the man and woman talking with Sellers at the gate.

"You're right. I'm getting a contact from Lako in Beach-head Two now." Kolar turned to another screen out of Thaul's range of vision.

Please, Thaul! I know you can hear me. Free me!

It was the girl. Her thoughts, mostly subconscious, were seeping into the audio-interceptor speaker from the Vocal-Associative Rectifier. They were calm, though. Despite everything, she was still rational. Made of good stuff, Thaul thought—just like Meva.

He turned the volume lower so Kolar wouldn't hear, wishing at the same time that they had refined the rectifier and eliminated the subvocal pickup. But, as Kolar had once put it, "That lets us know they're psychically alive and kicking."

Thaul! Please listen to me!

Kolar completed his contact with Lako and faced Thaul again. "I'm leaving my control panel unattended to supervise some motor connections. If you need me, just hit the alarm signal."

Thaul watched the other's image disappear out of the side of the communication kinescope.

Free me, Thaul! Just for a while! What harm can I do!

Deception? It was hardly possible under the cosmocontrol system. But he decided to see for himself. He hooked the Vocal-Associative Transfer in series with the Cross-Index Rectifier.

Her concepts of intentions, poignantly and desperately longing, flared pictorially in the smaller kinescope. Witnessing the sequence of imagined action, Thaul watched as she pictured herself burying her face against Felton's chest, touching his cheek, speaking his name—voluntarily, fervently.

There was a background symbolism of resignation and fatalistic submission, of servile pleading. But there was no evidence of deceit.

He freed her.

IRENE WAS WHISPERING his name desperately and the brush of her fingers against his forehead was cool and reassuring. She was evidently herself again.

The effects of the opiate had been wearing off for some time. But Rod had realized there was nothing to gain by displaying his return to normalcy.

He laid his hand over her head and felt the soft touch of her hair.

She looked up, startled. "Rod?"

When he smiled she cried softly.

He rose, realizing that the pain in his head wasn't quite as severe as it had been. At least, the opiate was having its beneficial effects too. He held her against him until her desperation had almost played itself out.

"Now," he said firmly, "is Kolar the leader?"

She brushed at her cheeks. "I—I think so."

"Is he—here?" Rod pointed to himself.

She nodded. "Jamison was his subject, until the emotional shock killed the man."

He looked up hopefully. "Then maybe emotional shock's the solution!"

"That was an accident," she explained disconsolately. "It can't happen again."

He paced, paused at the window, gripped the bars. "Are they watching, listening now?"

"Not through me."

"How do you know?"

"It makes everything look a little dimmer. Voices sound farther off."

Her severe self-control wavered and she lowered her face into her hands.

He seized her shoulders. "We'll find a way, Irene," he promised. Then, "Crockfield said control would be total and permanent—why are you free now?"

"I don't know."

He glanced challengingly at the door. But his determination sagged as he realized how weak he still was from the injection.

THAUL, DEEP IN THOUGHT at his control console, started, instantly concerned over the chance he was taking by letting his subject range free.

He cut in the visual-interception circuit and watched the field of the girl's sight duplicate itself on his main screen.

"No! No, Thaul! Let them!"

Thaul spun around. Kolar stared out, amused, from the videocom tube. Displayed on his cosmocontrol screen, visible in the background, was Felton's visual range. Kolar had returned to his control panel and tapped into Twenty-One's receptory system!

Flustered, Thaul tried to summon an explanation for having released his subject.

But then, Kolar didn't seem to be disturbed about it.

"Ingenious idea!" he commended. "Why didn't I think of it?"

Thaul smiled effusively, masking his confusion.

"Until Felton is under complete control," the other elaborated, "we'll let him and Seven have free movement occasionally. It will do nothing but endear them to each other. Then, should it be necessary to have him perform before he's ready, he will voluntarily do as we direct—provided he's convinced we'll take it out on the girl if he doesn't."

CHAPTER VI

TO ROD, THE FIRST MEMORY LAPSE was quite startling. It had been almost dawn. On the bed and still fully dressed, he had awakened with the headache more severe than ever. Irene had turned on the light a second later.

But it wasn't Irene . . . not then, as she stood by the wall switch and stared coldly at him.

"What is it you want to test, Kolar?" she asked.

"Irene! I . . . The Master Sensory Erase Circuit."

The sudden usurpation of his voice jolted him. "We're over-charging." The words continued to fall out. "If we don't cut off his stream of consciousness, we might get an overload of psychoamps—"

A sudden, subtle shock tingled through his body at that point. When it subsided, he looked around, astonished. . . . He was in the basement, and daylight was visible through the high windows.

Sellers, gripping his arm, said, "You're free for the time being—while Kolar hooks up another circuit. But it wouldn't be smart to try anything."

Rod looked around and hopelessly admitted the wisdom of the other's advice. Elrich was on his left; Boardman and Walker a short distance behind. Close by, Irene's slim figure was cast in statue-like immobility as she stared at the large workbench.

He counted nine men and women assembling various tubular devices. Two other men and a woman were busy at one of the transformers. Crockfield anxiously watched the activity.

One of the women straightened with a compact device in her hand. She clamped it to her blouse, as one would a pin. And immediately Rod imagined there was an indiscernible aura about her.

Sellers stepped forward. "There it is, Crockfield. Watch."

He aimed the director's gun at the woman and fired three shots. Three fiercely glowing lumps of metal materialized a foot away from her and dropped to the floor.

Crockfield drew back, amazed. "It will stop—anything?"

"Anything you call a weapon."

"That's marvelous!"

It would be easy to kill the man, Rod thought—if ever he got the chance.

But Crockfield's face sobered. "When will the ultra shield be ready?"

"Everything will be complete by this time tomorrow."

Rod watched Sellers select a long aluminum tube and balance it on his shoulder as a soldier would a bazooka. A multitude of coils was twisted so crazily around the cylinder that it was impossible to trace them visually.

He pointed the thing out the cellar window. The garage, a tractor and a sizable portion of the forest beyond disappeared, leaving only wisps of smoke.

Interested, the others crowded around to watch as he aimed the tube at a distant hilltop.

Rod counted them again. Not considering Crockfield, there were eighteen in the basement besides himself. One of the twenty subjects was missing. . . . Of course—the nurse who had replaced Miss Nelson in the reception room to present an authentic front!

Could he escape—now? What tolerance did the controllers and their instruments have against physical shock? Could he shake them up enough to nullify control? Could he take Irene with him?

The answer to the last question was obvious. She was in their midst. If he tried to reach her, he would have no chance.

Shaking his head furiously, he turned and bolted up the stairs. He raced through the clinic and out the main entrance—across the yard and through the gate.

"HE'S GONE!" SELLERS CRIED.

Thaul spun Irene around and focused her vision on the cellar stairs.

Then the others exploded into action, erupting from the basement.

"Come on!" Elrich shouted to Irene. "We'll need you especially!"

Hesitantly, Thaul sent his subject up the stairs and directed her through the clinic. He tried to put through a contact to Kolar in the escaping subject. But there was no response from Twenty-One.

Sending Irene into the yard, he trained her eyes on Felton, who was sprinting through the gate. But the others weren't racing after him!

Elrich, standing on the porch, cupped his hands around his mouth. "Come back! Or we'll kill the girl!"

As Felton faltered and looked around, Sellers pointed the destructor at Irene.

"We don't need her," Elrich shouted. "We can destroy her without damaging the equipment."

Meekly, Felton turned and walked slowly back to the clinic.

And Thaul felt a surge of sympathetic approval and admiration. It was exactly what he would have done had he and Meva been the principals in the tense drama.

Kolar came through weakly. "All units send disaster crews!"

"Are you all right, Kolar?" Thaul heard one of the others ask over the inter-unit system.

"A lot of our equipment got banged up." Kolar's voice was coming through stronger now. "But we can make repairs in a few hours. Meanwhile, I want all console suspensions doubly reinforced and the amperage increased fifty per cent in all control circuits!"

EARLY EVENING. Outside, the last glimmer of day retreated in the west, sinking behind the skyline of the city and losing itself in the intensifying glare of street lights.

It was a peaceful city now, Rod reflected as he stood before the barred window. Late workers were scurrying home; suppers were being spread on linen-covered tables while the glow of family conversation brightened thousands of dining rooms; children at play were watching the street lights go on and wondering whether they could hazard another ten minutes' freedom.

But how would it be tomorrow—when terrified people dis-

covered an invisible wall around them, through which nothing, not even the force and heat of the most powerful bombs—could pass?

He turned to stare at Irene. She hadn't stirred for an hour. Only her eyes moved. They were like the eyes of an animated billboard cartoon, following him relentlessly.

Dismally, he conjured up a kaleidoscopic procession of imagined, but inevitable, incidents. . . . The twenty subjects, invulnerable as no beings on Earth had ever been invulnerable before, ranging into the city. . . . Twenty Achilleses seizing control, conscripting labor with the lash of their tubes, requisitioning assembly plants, forcing slaves to build the ship that would take their hosts back to Valvarez.

Eventually, they would return to seize as many subjects as they needed. But those millions of Earthmen who were not required as hosts, Rod wondered—would they ever be free of the Valvareziens? Wasn't it only logical that the masters would transport their parasitic culture to the planet to which the hosts were already adapted?

Headlights pierced the darkness of the road and Rod's gaze followed the car in through the gate and around toward the building's entrance.

Fifteen minutes later the door opened and Elrich entered with Crockfield and Sellers. The latter carried a weapon of a type that was new to Rod.

Rod waited for one of them to speak, but it was he, himself, who did the talking, as Kolar took control of his voice.

"Man by the name of Haggerty insists on seeing you, Felton. So we're going down. But I'll handle the conversation."

Kolar was rapidly repairing the damage, Rod realized dimly.

"We'll get rid of him as fast as we can without arousing suspicion," he added. "If we don't, the girl won't be here when you come back."

Sellers shifted the weapon and took up his post beside Irene.

HAGGERTY WAS AN EXCEEDINGLY small man whose shoulders slouched off toward a moderate paunch. But his patience, it seemed, was in inverse proportion to his size as Rod entered the reception room, followed by Crockfield and Elrich.

"You Felton?" the professor demanded.

Rod nodded.

The nurse at Miss Nelson's desk, presenting an authentic appearance, rose and began filing papers.

"I don't like the run-around I've been getting," Haggerty complained, eying Elrich and Crockfield. "I'm doing business with you and nobody else, Dr. Felton."

"I'm sorry," Rod heard himself say. "But we've had a rough time these past few days."

Haggerty squinted suspiciously at Rod's retinue. "Is there anything wrong, Doctor?"

"Of course not," he answered mechanically. "Really, professor, I've got to get back to my work."

Indignation squared Haggerty's thin shoulders and he roughly handed over a vial in a regulation sheath.

"Here's your therapeutic drink—Fe-60; half-life of eight-point-seven hours," he said stiffly. "If you'll sign this receipt I won't *bother* you any longer."

Rod took the slip and bent across the desk, his back toward the others. He rapidly wrote across the bottom of the form: "Neurotic patients in revolt! Send police!"

Quickly, he folded the sheet twice.

But he heard himself say, "I'm sorry, Professor Haggerty. But this receipt has to be countersigned by my superior. It'll be mailed to you."

Haggerty stormed out.

A thousand ice picks dug into Rod's brain and the agony staggered him. He remembered now that just before he entered the room his vision had seemed to dim.

Elrich took the receipt, crumpled it in an ash tray and put a match to it. Then he snatched the vial from Rod and deposited it on a table next to a vase of wilted flowers.

The nurse came over and helped Elrich half-carry him back upstairs.

SUPPER WASN'T BROUGHT AROUND until almost midnight. Rod was vaguely aware of being seated on the bed as the door opened. His eyes swung erratically toward the sound of the sliding bolt. His head pivoted around jerkily. He rose like an animated toy that was almost run down . . . but none of the movements was his own.

Crockfield followed Walker in, each carrying a tray of food. The latter set his down on the table near Irene while the clinic director put the other on the bed.

Walker turned toward Rod. "How is the subject handling?"

"Nicely." Rod tried to keep his tongue from moving as the words came out, but he couldn't. "As a matter of fact, I'm glad we had that trouble. Gave us a chance to put in some modifications."

"Will we have a sleep period tonight?"

"I think not. I want the ultra shield up as soon as possible tomorrow morning. Then the city can begin accustoming itself to the idea of isolation."

Like a Gulliver, Rod struggled against the invisible chains. But his efforts were futile.

He used the blurred peripheral area of his vision to watch Crockfield. Like a fawning vassal, the director stood there grinning, seemingly waiting for a command so he could demonstrate his eagerness to serve.

"Will you be down shortly?" Walker asked.

"Not until we are almost ready to activate the shield." Rod stopped resisting the flow of words. "I'll need the time for coordination exercises. I'm going to cut Felton loose for a few seconds so we can hook in Concept Sub-Section C."

Freedom came instantly and unexpectedly—just at the moment that a surge of resentment and hate for Crockfield was reaching a decisive crest. Thus, Rod's reaction was almost instinctive.

He whirled around, squeezed his fury into his fist, and hurled it vehemently at the director's face. The man's head snapped back; he flailed against the wall and went down groggily on a knee.

Rod closed in on him.

"Felton!" Crockfield pleaded frantically. "No! Wait! You don't understand!"

Before Rod could pull the director to his feet, he felt Walker seize his arm and pull him away. The other's intervention, however, was wasted. For Rod had already drawn rigidly erect.

"It's all right, Parneiv," he said calmly. "I have him under control again."

Walker turned toward the door. Crockfield, dabbing at the

blood on his chin, followed him out.

Irene, who had started eating mechanically when the tray was placed before her, had ignored the burst of action.

Rod felt himself being forced back to the bed where his food waited. He knelt beside it and began feeding himself, powerless to halt the relentless procession of spoonfuls of soup to his mouth, the involuntary process of swallowing.

CHAPTER VII

SICKENED WITH THE REALIZATION there was nothing he could do in the hour that remained before terror descended on the city, Rod walked stiffly down the corridor behind Irene.

Columns of sunlight, thrusting in through the windows, limned the erratic dance of the floating dust motes which their feet stirred up from the unswept floor.

Dismayed, he stared at the girl, wondering what emotions were being experienced by the thing that was sharing his field of vision—sharing it and controlling it.

He wondered wildly whether he could break the bonds that held him. He'd done it before, hadn't he, when Kolar had first started connecting the circuits? But that, he realized hopelessly, had been before the control current was increased.

He found himself drawing to a halt at the head of the stairs and watching Irene disappear into the basement. Then, as though unsure of the steps, Kolar sent him treading down cautiously.

With a fierce desperation, he tried to twist an arm free—spring his head loose—wrest a leg from Kolar's control—

The leg had moved of his own accord!

Then he felt himself going off balance. He plunged helplessly down the stairs and a knife of pain stabbed into his ankle.

But the other leg was free!

The others came and stood around him.

"You all right, Kolar?" Sellers asked.

Rod listened to his own false laughter, which came despite the torture in his ankle. "Of course. I told you we were totally shock-proof. But it looks like I need more coordination experience."

Boardman and Elrich helped him up. The pain in his leg

became a torrent of agony—but he had to ignore it! He had to concentrate on following through with his left leg whatever motions were suggested by the right one, or Kolar would know his control wasn't complete.

"Sure you're all right?" Elrich asked.

"Stop worrying about me and let's get on with the work," Rod said automatically. "We were shaken up a bit, of course. But we were well protected this time."

Rod walked on into the cellar with the others, each step sending a bolt of torture through the sprained joint.

"You're limping, Kolar," Sellers observed.

"It's nothing," Rod assured. "Probably disturbed the adjustment on one of the pedal circuits. I'll take care of it later."

THE SOUND OF A ONE-CYLINDER auxiliary engine was a muffled *putt-putt* in the musty cellar. Its exhaust was directed out a window on Rod's left; it operated a generator that fed one of the transformers. This much he could see out of the corner of his eye.

With Crockfield and Irene following, he drew up close to the engine and watched the other subjects soldering coils in a seemingly meaningless array around the transformer.

One of the workmen backed off and brushed against Rod as he set his blowtorch on the floor. Then Boardman came around distributing the personal shield devices.

Rod took his and felt himself slipping it into his pocket. "Don't use them unless you need them," he relayed Kolar's instructions automatically.

The pain in his ankle mounted and he saw, at the lower limit of his vision, that the blowtorch had been placed too close and the heat of its stream was aggravating the agony of the torn ligament. If only he could shift his weight!

Three of the men began carrying destructors and heavier weapons out to a pickup truck in the yard.

Again Rod's attention was drawn to the torch as the throbbing pain became even more severe.

Suddenly he realized the stream of the flame was directed past his leg—almost at the gas engine! If he could nudge it an inch or two, the fire would be playing *on the tank!*

With his weight on his heel, he pivoted the left foot sharp-

ly. His toe, however, fell short of the torch's handle. He'd have to kick out. But when he did, it would be without having shifted his weight. And he couldn't expect to maintain his balance.

He kicked.

And, as he fell, he saw the flame begin to bathe the tank.

They lifted him erect again.

"I think we'd better hold off," Elrich proposed disappointingly, "until you get your subject functioning properly."

"Nonsense," Rod protested. "That fall may have been my fault. I guess I *don't* feel too well. We probably need rest as much as the subjects. But we're going to get the ultra shield up first."

Rod was hardly conscious of the words Kolar was putting in his mouth. Instead, he was trying to watch Crockfield on the periphery of his vision. The clinic director had seen him kick the torch!

And even now Crockfield was stealing an occasional glance at the gas tank.

Smiling, the director turned toward him. "You act like you had a drink, Kolar," he said obsequiously.

But he had put a veiled emphasis on the word "drink!"

THAUL'S REACTIONS were confused as he watched the others complete the final connections on the big shield generator.

Naturally, it would be a tremendous achievement for the expedition—and for Valvarez. But was it justified? Was it morally acceptable for one independent culture to impose itself on another?

As he sat at the control board in Number Seven, his eyes stared only absently at the visual-interception screen. Why should the subject Irene remind him so much of Meva when, actually, there was so little physical similarity? And why should he try to draw a parallel between himself and Felton?

Suddenly annoyed, he cast out the emotional thoughts. There was much to do.

Thaul! Listen, Thaul! Irene's subvocal impulses were sifting through the Vocal-Associative Transfer again—confound it! *There's something wrong with Rod; he's hurt—I know!*

Why didn't she shut up? Why did she have to make it so difficult?

He turned down the audio-interception volume until he could scarcely hear the voices of the other subjects. But still her desperate thoughts came through.

I know he's hurt! But—don't you see?—he can't show it! And he can't get through to Kolar, like I can to you!

He tried to ignore the insistent whisper. But somehow he couldn't. And then he realized it was because he didn't want to.

On his visual-interception screen, he watched the subjects who had been loading the truck return. Then he saw Morrel turn finally from the shield generator.

"It's finished, Kolar," the man reported.

When Rod didn't answer, he repeated, "The generator's hooked up."

Thaul's inter-unit screen flicked on, displaying a picture of Kolar in Twenty-One. But his features were sallow and contorted with pain and he was swaying weakly in his chair!

"Thaul!" His voice was barely audible. "There *is* something wrong! We're sick—all of us in Twenty-One are sick!"

"I'll have the other crews send rescue details."

"No! We might be running into some sort of natural biological defense." He retched again. "We can't expose any of the other crews until we're sure!"

Morrel, visible on both Thaul's and Kolar's visual-interception screen, demanded, "Kolar—are you controlling?"

Thaul watched the expedition leader manipulate the vocal circuit in Twenty-One. "Turn on the shield generator," Rod directed.

In the inter-unit screen, Thaul saw one of Kolar's crewmen stagger up to the Twenty-One control console.

"We—we found something else!" he reported, dismayed. "Metal! Large masses of metal in the macrosystem! Our trunk leads are attracting them through the tissue!"

The crewman retched and staggered, holding on to the control board.

Two more of Kolar's squad reeled in from a tunnel in the background of the screen and collapsed. The one hanging on the console lost his grip and sank from sight.

Kolar folded forward in his chair, but managed to stagger upright again. He stared helplessly into the inter-unit screen.

"Take over Twenty-One on remote, Thaul. Send a trouble-shooting crew—quick!"

He depressed the "control-transfer" stud and slumped across the keyboard.

Thaul reached out to throw the "control-accept" switch. But he hesitated and his hand slowly fell away from the toggle. He wouldn't take control of Twenty-One—couldn't! What had befallen Kolar had been justly deserved providence.

Calmly, he began turning off the switches on his own control board.

JUST AS ROD REALIZED he was free, two other things happened simultaneously:

Irene started, glanced around in fright, and screamed.

Crockfield stared frantically at the blowtorch, lowered his shoulder, and drove a block into Rod and the girl.

"Watch out!" the clinic director shouted. "The tank's going to blow!"

It did. As Rod fell with the other two, he saw the cap fly off and the pressurized gasoline gush out, bursting into flame as it sprayed the room.

On the floor, their nearness to the engine saved them from the bath of fire that had arched out and engulfed the others.

Crockfield crawled toward the stairs, drawing the girl along. Hardly conscious now of the pain in his ankle, Rod limped after them.

He caught the other's arm. "But—but I thought—"

"That I had sold out?" The director's grim expression gave way to a weak smile. "Who do you think slipped you Haggerty's therapeutic solution last night? Or had you noticed it?"

They started up the stairs leading outside, Rod dully trying to connect the Fe-60 with what was happening now.

"Give me credit," Crockfield went on, "for realizing that a radioactive tracer might have an effect. I wanted to slip some in everybody's food. But they were watching too closely. I was lucky enough to swipe the stuff from under Elrich's nose in the reception room and get it in *your* soup."

They reached the yard. The cellar behind them was an inferno, with great clouds of smoke and flame billowing from

the windows. Even at a distance, they felt the heat.

Rod limped toward the weapons in the truck.

"You mean," Irene asked incredulously, "that you were against them all the time?"

The director stiffened at her skepticism. "I overheard Sellers and Jamison talking. That's how I found out about them. But Boardman, across the hall, saw me listening. I had to pretend to play along and wait for a break. Or they might have killed me then."

At the truck, Rod seized one of the destructors and raised it to his shoulder. He faced the clinic.

"I tried to tell you all I could about them," Crockfield continued, "by bragging egotistically when I gave you that watered-down sedative. That was so you would know what it was all about while you might still manage something. But, God! They didn't trust me! Didn't let me alone for a minute! Even on those trips to town—"

Irene screamed.

The subjects were streaming out of the raging cellar, their clothes burning furiously, their faces and arms charred, their hair singed and smoking.

"Oh, God!" the clinic director moaned. "They're *still* under control!"

Rod aimed the weapon at the charging horde. Then he tensed, dismayed. "I don't know how to fire it!"

Irene's face lost its expression and her eyes became dull. She turned toward him.

"The large knob near the end of the barrel," she offered mechanically. "It controls the spread. Turn it full clockwise."

Seeing her suddenly under control again, he realized belatedly that she *had been* free for several minutes—and for no understandable reason!

Nevertheless, he twisted the dial.

"Now push that button by your left hand," she instructed.

He depressed the stud and the weapon began vibrating subtly. He played the invisible charge full on the advancing subjects. It was just as well; grotesquely burned as they were, they couldn't live.

When it was over, he aimed the weapon at the clinic and swept it back and forth until not even the foundation remained.

"Thanks, Thaul," he heard Irene whisper.

THAUL STEERED the equipment carrier clear of the last obstacle and tuned in on the directional beam. He engaged the collision shield and put the vehicle on auto-control.

Like an indiscernible mote, it headed toward the center of the city—toward the tallest building—toward a cornice of the structure, a particular cavernous pore in the concrete surface where the interstellar ship waited, unmanned.

Boren, beside him, stretched. "I'll be glad to head for home."

Thaul, too, was impatient—for Valvarez, for Meva. "We should have left long ago. But we had to wait until the level of radioactivity fell in Twenty-One."

Thoughtfully, Boren asked, "If the expedition was a failure—if all the other control crews died because of this radioactivity stuff—why did we have to remove the equipment from Twenty-One and Seven?"

Thaul lied with a shrug. "Kolar wanted it that way. He wanted every bit of equipment in one of the disastrous beach-heads taken back to Valvarez for comparison with the equipment in our own unit."

The other nodded.

"Helpless as we were," Thaul went on, "it was fortunate that I could learn enough about the radioactivity effect from Seven's mind to recover the equipment in Twenty-One too."

He had to watch his words; make certain one lie didn't contradict another. He couldn't tell them he had established contact with Irene and Felton and had assured them he would remove all the equipment; that Felton had explained about half-life and radioactivity level so the microcontrol crews wouldn't be exposed.

Boren looked at him suddenly. "Why weren't we affected in Number Seven?"

"We may never know. The expedition was a failure, anyway, so why bother with a post mortem? Anyway, Valvarez will be busy finding another, more sensible means of survival. There won't be time for looking backward."

