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SUPER SCIENCE STORIES

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...OOK OF SCIENCE FICTION

MINUS DANGER!
by GEORGE O. SMITH

A NOVEL OF TOMORROW'S DESTINY
MINION OF CHAOS
by JOHN D. MacDONALD

MARGARET ST. CLAIR
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SUPER SCIENCE STORIES

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THE BIG BOOK OF SCIENCE FICTION

VOL. 5 SEPTEMBER, 1949 No. 4

THREE UNFORGETTABLE NOVELS

MINION OF CHAOS ..... John D. MacDonald 8
Wisdom was his destiny—learn and conquer his creed . . . until in an atom-scarred universe there was but one thing left to overcome—Man;

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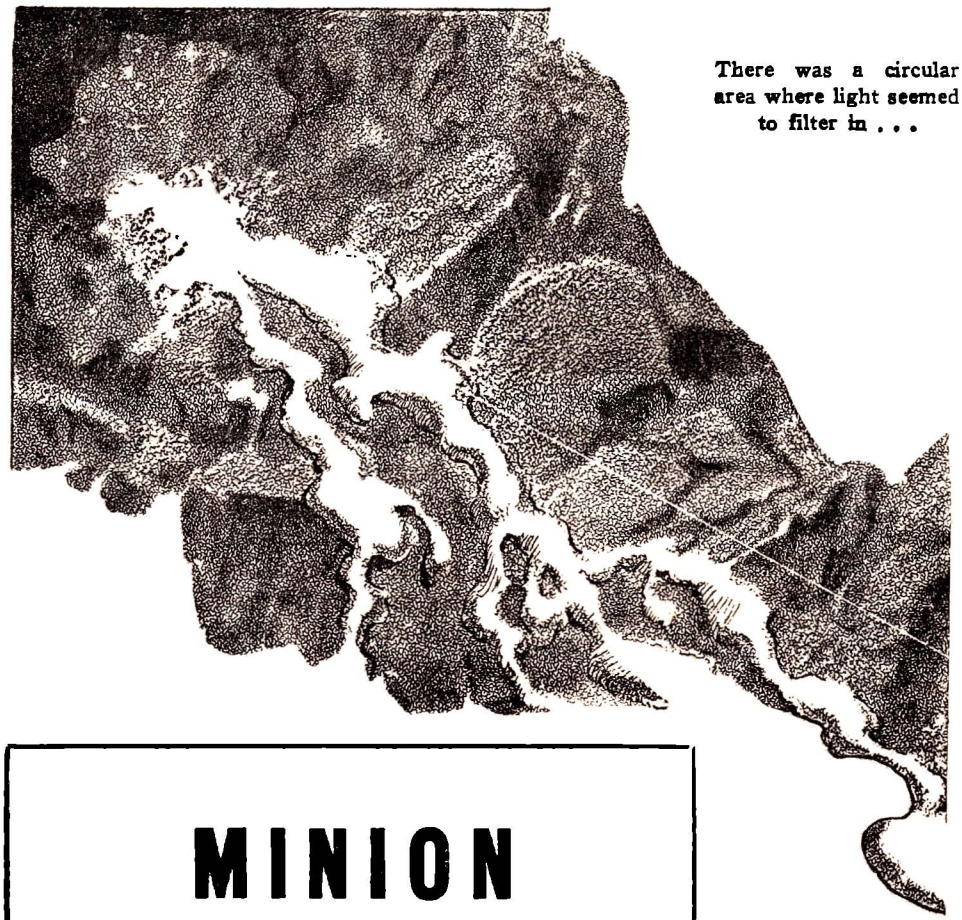

There was a circular area where light seemed to filter in . . .

MINION OF CHAOS

Wisdom was his destiny — learn and conquer his creed . . . until in an atom-scarred universe there was but one being left to overcome—Man!

CHAPTER ONE

The Global Rat Trap

IT WAS, he thought, very much like being a rat in a maze, with a very aseptic death around the next corner. The rat, being a rat, suspects the imminence of death, but can make no counter-offensive.

It had been building for a long time. He felt it in the studied casualness of his fellow-workers, and in the new

A Novel By John D. MacDonald

. . . He cut the tunnel rapidly ahead, recklessly letting the liquid run over his feet. . . .

alertness of the hated monitor, Miss Ellen Morrit.

A nice clean life, they had said, You'll be well-protected. The police won't let the nasty people tear you to death. We hope.

He sighed, turned on the stool and looked back over his shoulder, seeing his name printed in reverse, showing through the translucent glass of the laboratory door. Peter Lucas.

He wondered where he had slipped. And he wondered whether the danger of slipping, the fatal effects of a slip, were coloring his judgment. Maybe Ellen Morrit wasn't being quite so beady-eyed after all.

No, they were onto him the same

way they would be onto any other defective bit of material.

Ellen Morrit sat on a high stool beside the laboratory table. She said dryly, "Through working for the day, Mr. Lucas?"

He looked at her, wondering for the thousandth time why they didn't dress female employees of the Bureau of Improvement in a more becoming uniform. She was a white starched tube with a severe face at one end and slim ankles at the other. Nice hair, though, under a little gold cap.

"Why are you staring at me, Mr. Lucas?"

"For a reason that would horrify your factual little mind, sugar bun. How many years have we been sharing this cubicle?"

"Three years, four months and—and nine days," she said firmly.

"Too long. What do you say we get married?"

She lifted her chin. She quoted from the manual, " 'All technical employees of the Bureau of Improvement are forbidden to marry because of the possibility of their aptitudes being to some degree heriditary characteristics.' "

"But they'll let a colorless reactionary like you marry?"

She gave him one of her rare smiles; but her gray eyes didn't smile at all. "As soon as my five years are up, Mr. Lucas."

"May you be blessed with numerous ice-cream cones."

He stood up, filled with the familiar dull anger, and walked over to the wide window. His lab was on the tenth floor of the Bureau of Improvement Building. He looked out across the expanse of grass, to the distant flight towers, the wide pastel expanse of the New City. It had a fairy-land look; the architects had been infatuated with tower and minaret.

Yet Peter felt himself drawn to some of the less decayed buildings in the dead city off to the left. A mound of rubble separated the two. In the New City there were cars, pedestrians, glittering shops, gay clothes and the best of music.

In the dead city were the hiding places of the unfit.

He felt her beside him and he defiantly pointed to the mouldering lines of a gray building in the old city, the dead city.

"They had the right idea, Morrit. Look at that. Functional and sweet and clean. They were headed in the right direction."

She said thoughtfully, "That's a curious statement, Mr. Lucas. You used the phrase 'headed in the right direction.' That is indicative of the basic flaw in your thinking. We do not 'head' in any direction. We've achieved a static, unified community, and we are satisfied."

He laughed. "You mean you're dead, Morrit. We're on a big highway leading toward extinction. A nice flat, broad, smooth highway. We've forgotten an old rule—progress or perish."

"That has been proven false, Mr. Lucas. You must know that. You must know that it is only through the very extreme liberalism of Chairman Ladu, that you are . . ."

"Permitted to exist at all? How nice of Emery!"

"Thirty years ago, Mr. Lucas, as soon as your aptitudes had been discovered through the use of the integrated tests you would have been painlessly . . . removed, probably at the age of twelve."

"And you're sorry we aren't still on that basis."

Her gray eyes widened in anger and she turned away. "I see no necessity for improvements," she said. "Repair

and control is all that is necessary."

"If they'd turn me loose, baby, you'd really see some improvements." Lucas gestured toward the tiny motor strewn on his bench. Assembled, it was no larger than a peach pit. "That turns out a quarter horse. But it'll never be much better because the Code restricts us to minor variation within the approved method. On my own I'd try new methods, new procedures. I might get five horse out of it—or five hundred and then . . ."

"Be quiet!" she said, her lips thin and tight.

He smiled lazily as he went back to his chair. "I forgot, Morrit. Science is a nasty word. There is an approved list of beneficial devices. Radio, television, the internal combustion engine, electricity, subsonic aircraft, telephone, structural plastics, hydroponics. None of those things give you a fear reaction. But we leave the knowledge barrier of electronics right where it is. And we never, never, never mess with atomics any more. Or planetology, or rockets, or weather control. Never, never."

HE SAW that she was composing herself with an effort. She climbed back on her stool with a lithe motion. "I am not here to discuss this matter with you, Mr. Lucas. I was given a technical background only so that I can determine when you try to step outside the approved limitations. You and men like you are as dangerous to this civilization as uncontrolled fire. That is why you are watched so carefully. If you persist in continuing this discussion, I will report you to the Chief of the Bureau of Improvement."

Lucas sighed. "Okay, lady. Okay." He picked up a pair of tweezers, used them to pick up the tiny brushes. He held them up. "Just so you can follow me. This little pin here which supports the brushes is okay. The self-lubricating bearings are okay. But the airseal is bad and dust has leaked in and turned the lubricating agent to an abrasive, thus wearing down the pin until the brushes get an eccentric wobble. My next step will be to look up the table of rubber substitutes and find something we can use for the airseal, something that will have a longer life. Okay with you?"

Once again she quoted from the manual. "'It is the responsibility of the monitor to determine that all research is along approved lines and to report any suspected variance to the Floor Monitor for investigation. In no case will the monitor express an opinion about research which falls within the approved fields.'"

Once again her face was calm and composed. Lucas snorted, crossed over to the book shelf, brought back the rubber substitutes manual, looked up the proper table and made notations on a pad.

He took the bill of materials for the tiny motor, drew a neat line through the specification for the airseal, lettered in the symbol for the new material, put the bill of materials and the faulty seal in a manila envelope, shoved the rest of the motor parts into the scrap bin. One tiny screw somehow became caught in the fold of flesh at the base of his thumb. He turned back toward the window and idly picked at his tooth with his thumbnail. As he did so he rolled the little screw up until he could grasp it with his thumb and finger. He inserted it into the painful cavity in a back molar from which he had extracted the filling the night before.

In search, the little screw would give the same metallic index as the filling.

The nerve was raw and pain screamed at him. But he smiled, yawned and said, "Morrit, we'd better call it a day."

She glanced at the clock. "Ten more minutes."

"Too late to start a new one." Once again he looked toward the dead city, toward that decaying functional building. "Morrit, did you ever think about the dead city? About the reason for it?"

This time her quote was taken from the Approved World History. " 'With the continual shrinkage of population, many cities were completely abandoned because of unsatisfactory climate or other factors, while, in the more desirable cities, the oldest parts were abandoned, the remaining inhabitants taking over the most desirable portions.' "

"Quoting and thinking are two different things, sugar bun. Once there were five million people in this city. Now what are there? Eight hundred thousand? Maybe we're just genetically weary, Morrit. Dame Nature is dwindling us down to fit in the barren world we've made for ourselves."

Morrit did not quote. Her eyes narrowed. "And who was to blame, Mr. Lucas? The black-hearted men of progress. They blasted the earth and killed so much of the soil that millions starved. That's why they'll be forever hated by the race. And they called themselves 'creators' and 'scientists.' You should feel shame when you think those thoughts, Mr. Lucas. Because you are one of them. Oh, we have you under rigid control now. You can't do us any harm. You are the servant of the race, like fire. We direct your efforts."

Lucas ran his hand through his cropped dark hair, his strong lean face oddly twisted. "Morrit, why is it that we can't think the same way at all? Why is this wall between us all the time?"

She quoted from the manual. " 'Scientific aptitude is a dangerous mutational characteristic which blinds the individual to anything except his creative desires, making it impossible for him to understand the strict channeling of his efforts into those fields which will benefit mankind without opening the doorways to unknown terrors.' "

Lucas controlled his anger by biting down on the tiny screw, forcing it into the naked nerve, leting pain drain the fury from him.

Suddenly very tired, he said, "The ten minutes are up, my love."

THE HIGH fence bordered a narrow area half a mile long, leading to the small white houses provided for the workers at the Bureau of Improvement.

Peter Lucas, dressed in his street clothes, waited until several others had gone through search. When there were ten, a Bureau guard walked with them over to the housing area.

The precaution dated from the time when a mob had broken through the fence and torn three workers apart. Sometimes, even now, the heritage of sullen hate exploded into mob fury.

Lucas noticed that the other nine greeted him with less than their usual friendliness. Word must be getting around that he was marked as uncontrollable.

In the old days that would have meant a quick, painless death. But they had devised a new sort of death: a death of the mind. The electric knife would make a neat incision, cutting away memory and ability. Then the walking and talking school for the

period of incontinence; and a nice manual labor assignment.

They arrived at the small white house. There were sixty of them. It was a pitifully small number of workers, sixty men to carry on every bit of scientific effort in the world. And even that was a joke. They were not research workers; they were mechanics.

From the doorway of his quarters he could see, ten miles from the city, the myriad shining towers of World Administration. When all governments had disintegrated, after the brutal impact of the Three Wars, the men who had seized power had a knowledge of propaganda. Emery Ladu was called the Chairman, not the Dictator or King.

Ladu's palace was the World Administration Building. There he met with his five Princes, one from each world mass. Only they were called Unit Advisors. Lin of Eurasia Unit. Morol of Africa Unit. Frisee of Australia Unit. Ryan of North America Unit. Perez of South America.

The World Administration Building was the symbol of their reign. In some secret place a young man was being trained for each of them; a man to take each position. It was defense in depth. Nothing was left to chance.

There was no population pressure any more. And with the passing of this pressure, the prime motivating force for war vanished. The standard of living was built on an economy of abundance. And the abundance was a legacy from the billions who had inhabited the earth. In all the vacant houses of the dead cities of the world there were the pots and pans and chairs and tables free for the taking.

With design made static, except for minor and unimportant improvements, there was no obsolescence of mechanical things. With adequate care, a car of popular make would last several generations.

This was the only world Peter Lucas knew. It had been, at one time, a good world. There had been a home and comforting warmth and the old books which told of cowboys and soldiers. He had taken the examinations when he was twelve.

And then there had been tears in that home, tears and strangeness: a restraint that showed his parents' grief . . . as though they had discovered he was something monstrous and obscene, and their love for him fought against this new knowledge.

That year there had been three hundred thousand children. Each year there were less. Before Ladu's edict, in the old days, there would have been an efficient use of anaesthesia. The race had been cutting out the cancerous growth that insisted on returning with each generation.

Later, there would have been the electric knife and three hundred thousand mindless children to be sent to the protected schools, not sent back to their homes because, with the hate and fear in the hearts of men, there was no guarantee that these mindless ones would be permitted to live, once having evidenced the forbidden abilities —mathematical and mechanical ability, a creative turn of mind, an overweening curiosity.

They would form the labor pool after training.

But in the year that Peter Lucas had been one of the three hundred children, they had been gathered in the pens in the salt flats and there had been more examinations, more intricate tests.

Peter Lucas and four others had been selected and sent to a special

school which used the forbidden books and taught forbidden knowledge. At twenty he had been assigned to the Bureau of Improvement. Ladu had set it up with a fixed quota of sixty. Each year five children would be withdrawn from those who were to be made nearly mindless. Each year five young men were graduated from the special school. And each year the five most unstable of the workers at the Bureau of Improvement were subjected to the electric knife.

In two more weeks the new ones would arrive. And Peter Lucas knew that he had won himself extinction through his attitude.

He went into his two-room house. It had the barren simplicity of a cell. Directly above the television screen was the microphone which recorded every sound from the house, every fragment of conversation.

The house was clean and shining. His evening meal was under the glass dome on the tiny steam table. The food would keep warm. During the next hour he was permitted to exercise in the small area allotted to him. From then on he would be restricted to his house. Any request to visit another worker had to be submitted in writing and approved two weeks in advance of the date. Such visits were limited to one hour and a guard was detailed to escort the visitor to the door of the worker he wished to visit, and wait there to escort him back.

It had been a long time since Peter Lucas had had a visitor, or had visited anyone.

He took a long shower, turned on the television screen and watched the insipid entertainment while he ate. It was a melodrama. The villain was a man who had somehow escaped the screening tests and was working on a secret weapon to destroy the world. The hero killed the villain just as he was about to loose his weapon. It ended with a little sermon.

He felt the tension mounting in him as he ate, and he forced himself to smoke a leisurely cigarette. He knew that while he was at work the house had been carefully inspected for any evidence of forbidden experimentation.

He went to his bed, stretched out and let his left hand fall, almost as though by accident, against the cool, smooth plastic of the wall. The wax was still firm in the grooves he had cut with the tiny saw. He slowly exhaled, the tension going out of him.

With a thumbnail he pared the wax away, slid the tiny panel down, removed therefrom the device which had occupied his mind for six years, which had kept him from going quietly mad under the restraint, as had so many others.

Each bit of it had been smuggled past the search.

The lead for the little half-pound cup had been brought out, a gram at a time. He had melted it and moulded it with the heat obtained by making a minor adjustment in the heat coils on the steam table.

The infinitesimal tube, socketed in the lead cup, had been the most difficult. He had waited for fourteen months to smuggle that out. First it had been necessary to mold soft rubber around the tube, make a crude slingshot, wait until Morrit left the room for a few minutes, stretch the spring wire across the window and project the little ball of sticky rubber out so that it fell in the fenced passage.

Heartbreakingly, he had missed the passage with the first two tries. The third tube had landed properly. On his way back to his house that night he had located it, and, not daring to bend over, had stopped, pressed his

heels together so that the rubber clung to the inside of one shoe.

Four lengths of silver wire, forced into the edge of the lead cup, focused the energy of the tube. Each silver wire was forty millimeters long. Halfway along their length, suspended by spiderweb strands of copper wire, was a crude open-ended tube of lead, the opening pointing toward the tiny, powerful tube socketed in the lead cup.

Midway in the little cylinder of lead was a milligram of an unstable isotope which he had found five years before, secreted in one of the forbidden books, probably hidden there by a desperate man during the science purge.

The device was pathetically small, and his theories of its operation were necessarily vague due to his directed training. With an adequate power source, which he hoped to obtain in the form of one of the tiny powerful batteries used in wrist radios, hearing aids and similar devices, the activated tube would subject the isotope to a stimulus which would, he hoped, cause it to throw off, like bullets from a gun, a stream of focused matter which would stimulate the molecular activity of any inert substance. Arbitrarily assuming that the difference between a liquid, a solid and a gas lay only in the index of molecular activity, he hoped to be able to turn any solid into a liquid and then a gaseous state.

Behind the lead cup was a metallic frame for the battery. He took the screw from the tooth cavity, used it to make rigid another portion of the battery frame.

To complete it he would need the battery and a thin strip of hard copper. The completed device would be held in one hand, the battery against the heel of his hand, the wires pointing away from him. Firing would be accomplished by pressing the copper strip, not yet obtained, against the battery terminal, thus activating the tube.

Condemned never to commit any questionable research to writing, Lucas had been forced to carry all the complicated formulae in his mind, achieving at last a receptivity that enabled him to see the equations as though they were written in white fire against a velvet backdrop.

He had two weeks to snatch from under Ellen Morrit's watchful eye a larger item than any yet taken, to get it past the search.

It was impossible.

Probably the best he could do was to commit his formulae to paper, to hide the paper with the incomplete device, to hope that the next person to inhabit the small white house would be able to carry it further.

He replaced the device, slid the panel shut, melted the wax with a match flame, rubbing it smooth with his thumbnail.

CHAPTER TWO

Mad Scientist

ARDEN FORRESTER, Director of Search, was a smallish lean man with a spare body, a corded neck and an expression of intent curiosity.

He walked, snapping his heels firmly against the corridor floor, conscious of the fit of his gray uniform, conscious of the weight of responsibility. He and the Chief of the Bureau of Improvement and the Resident Psychiatrist formed the committee to determine which five workers should be removed to make way for the new ones.

He thought of himself as a hard and vigorous man, full of snap. When he

used the word in his mind it had two syllables: Suh-NAP! The last syllable came out with a whipcrack. No nonsense from these workers!

He bunched his thin hard knuckles and straightened his shoulders, taking a salute from one of the young guards.

He turned sharply into the office of the Bureau Chief, clicked his heels and saluted. As always, he detested having to salute paunchy Dale Evan. Why, the man didn't even keep himself physically fit! How could you be mentally alert if you were smothered?

Sargo, the resident psychiatrist, sat near Evan. Evan acknowledged the salute with a slight motion of his pudgy hand, said, "Sit down, Arden. Sit down. We have to go over the list again. It's down to eight. I've had the monitors wait. You probably saw them in the hall."

Arden Forrester sat down, careful of the crease in his uniform pants. Evan handed him the list. He pursed his lips and read it. He took a pencil from his blouse pocket, made four neat checks beside four of the eight names.

He handed the list back. "Those are the ones who have attempted to smuggle forbidden items out of their labs. Those four must go. You men can pick any one you please out of the remaining four."

Dale Evan sighed. "I wish you had five on your list, Arden. Whom do you nominate, George?"

Sargo inspected the glowing end of his cigarette. "Lewisson or Bendas."

Evan said, "I had picked Bendas or Lucas."

"Then that settles it," Forrester said, getting to his feet. "My four and Bendas."

Irritation showed on Dale Evan's face. "Sit down, Forrester. We'll talk to the monitors. Go out and tell the other four to go. Then send in Lucas' monitor. I believe her name is Morrit."

Forrester looked approvingly at Ellen Morrit. It was the first time he had noticed her in street clothes. Her severe working hairdo had been released and the golden hair fell to shoulder length. It softened her face Her dress, pale aqua, brought out very interesting and very adequate lines. Arden Forrester decided that he would soon exercise his right of substituting personal for automatic search of any employee in the Bureau of Improvement. It would be very interesting.

"Peter Lucas, number four three, is being considered for electro-surgery, Miss Morrit. This is a confidential meeting. Your comments will not be made a matter of record. What is your opinion of this?"

Her voice was crisp. "Lucas has the typical instability of all technical employees."

"Have you noted any change lately?"

"No sir."

"Does he attempt to . . . convert you to his way of thinking?"

"No sir."

"Does he sneer at the established order?"

"No sir."

"Would you prefer another assignment?"

She paused. "I had not thought of it." She shrugged. "A new one might be more difficult, sir."

"That is all. On your way out send Miss Peckingham in, please."

ELLEN MORRIT walked slowly down the hall toward the monitor exit. She showed her stamped search card to the guard at the door and he released the door catch for her.

She was confused. Peter Lucas had so irritated her during the past month that a dozen times she had been on

the verge of reporting him to Dale Evan. In fact, she had told some of the other monitors that she was about to turn him in.

And yet when she had been called in to testify, even though the irritation was fresh in her mind, she had—why, she had deliberately lied!

It was unthinkable. All of the monitors had been carefully conditioned so that there was not the slightest chance of an emotional attachment between a worker and his monitor.

And yet she had lied!

She was walking slowly toward the bus stand. She stopped. She knew why she had lied: because she wanted to spend the rest of her time in the Bureau of Improvement in the same room with Peter Lucas.

The obvious thing to do was to report for new conditioning. No! To do that would be to create the suspicion that she had lied to Evan.

Ellen knew that it was atavistic to think of a technical worker with anything except loathing. Mr. Evan and Captain Forrester and Mr. Sargo were sensible men doing a sensible job. It was evident that the burden of administration could be made easier by eliminating the most volatile workers each year. It was equally evident that Peter Lucas should be eliminated.

Yet when she thought of the soulless faces she had seen, the faces of the laborers, and thought of Lucas looking like that—something twisted her heart.

PETER LUCAS paused in the cool morning light and looked up at the building which housed Automatic Search. The guard pushed him roughly and said, "Stop dreaming, you."

In the first locker room he stripped, put his clothes in his locker, glanced at the narrow doorway. The laconic guard, as he stepped up, turned the dial to Lucas' number. Peter Lucas stepped into the shallow area.

His weight, size, allowable metal in the form of tooth fillings, ring and wristwatch, matched the settings on the machine. A low musical note sounded and he was free to enter the further locker room where he put on Bureau uniform. As he strapped on his sandals he wondered how on earth he would get the necessary battery through that doorway.

Tonight he would leave the removable filling in the lab, come through Search with a tiny strip of hard copper in his mouth, come back through the next morning with a useless bit of metal he would throw away as soon as he was in his lab. That was simple enough. It was the battery that had been baffling him for eleven months.

It was too large to project it into the fenced passage, as he had done with the tiny tube. No one could be trusted to risk throwing it to him through the narrow doorway in Search, even if he could have caught it without the guard's noticing.

Captain Forrester gave him a sardonic look as he passed into the main building. He wondered idly how many times he had considered the incredible satisfaction to be gained by striking the Director of Search with a clenched fist.

He knew the schedule of work ahead. Today he would get his hands on a good battery: compact and powerful, an inch and a quarter by an inch by three quarters of an inch. He could conceal it in his hand, get it down to the locker room, snap it onto the spring clip he had fashioned on the underside of the thin metal shelf.

But what then?

The lab door was open. Morrit, as usual, was waiting for him. He noticed absently that she looked as though she'd had a rough night. That didn't seem in character.

"Have a spirited evening, Morrit?"

"I was unable to sleep," she said primly. Her eyes were shadowed. She indicated a package on his desk. "Police broadcasting unit. Portable. The statistical section reports that fifteen percent of them get a blurred tone after three months' use."

He forced himself to yawn. Here was the battery, and it would be a good one.

ELLEN MORRIT watched him carefully throughout the day. She had come to a difficult decision just before dawn. She would watch Lucas with great care, and she would report him immediately if he stepped out of line; but not until then.

He had finished the analysis of the small broadcasting unit, finding that the ultra-short waves had magnetized the little screws that held the edge of the speaker diaphram. The recommendation was that the screws in future models be made of non-ferrous alloy.

He swept the dismantled parts into the waste bin, put the two magnetized screws and the revised bill of materials into the familiar envelope, and stood up.

She saw him start toward the door, heard him say, "See you tomorrow, jinx." Something was wrong but she didn't know quite what it was.

"Just a minute!" she snapped.

He stopped, turned slowly. There was something strained about his smile.

She walked to him and said, "Something is wrong, Mr. Lucas. You are

holding your hand in an odd way."

She reached out quickly and took his wrist. He let her open his hand. The small battery, emblem of guilt, lay on his broad palm.

The door was still closed. She saw how wrong she had been to lie, to defend him by misdirection. "I am going to—" She could not finish the sentence. His face was frighteningly close to hers, and his hand had closed on her throat.

He forced her roughly back against the wall. His eyes were quite mad. There was a muted drumming in her ears and the room swam with mist while she strained her lungs to drag air past her closed throat.

Even as consciousness faded, she knew that he would be caught in whatever evil plan he was carrying out.

His face loomed impossibly large, impossibly close. Other monitors had been killed in the past. They were essentially unstable, these technical workers. But a diagnosis was of small comfort now.

Then suprisingly his fingers left her throat. She gagged and coughed and the tears ran down her cheeks. He stood looking at her in a queer way. His voice was husky as he said, "Morrit, I think I could have gotten away with it. What happens when you hate somebody and can't kill them? When you don't want to kill them. When you even want to—" He forced her back against the wall once more and kissed her roughly.

She gasped and her cheeks flamed. She struck him across the mouth and slid away from him. "Mr. Lucas, I am taking this evidence immediately to the office of—"

She stopped and they both turned at the click of the door latch. Miss Glaydeen, Director of Monitors, walked in, her cheeks jiggling, her heavy steps rattling apparatus across the room on the zinc work table.

Her eyes had a look of mockery. She stopped three paces from Ellen Morrit and said, "I was going to send you the message, Morrit, but then I thought I'd come and take another look at you and see if I'd missed any hidden talent."

"What do you mean?" Ellen Morrit asked.

"You are honored, my dear. The Director of Search, Captain Forrester, has just indicated to me his desire to conduct a personal rather than a mechanical search of you tonight. Very flattering. And don't object. He has the right, you know."

"But I—"

"Report to Room C, my dear. I believe the good Captain is already there, impatiently waiting."

Miss Glaydeen smiled, turned on her heel and walked heavily out. The door slammed behind her.

Ellen Morrit had a feeling of nightmare. She took two steps closer to Peter Lucas and said, "Is—isn't there any way to—"

"Not in the manual there isn't," he said. She was surprised to see that he had a troubled look.

The world had gone upside down. A man who should have killed her had kissed her instead. She had lied to her superiors. And now Captain Forrester planned some unknown and unthinkable thing. Her loyalties were torn and confused.

"You must want this badly," she said, holding out the battery.

"Very badly," he admitted. He coughed. "If you took the battery right to Uncle Evan maybe you could throw a smoke-screen over the whole thing."

She realized that he was offering her the only out, an impossibly quixotic

sacrifice of himself to save her humiliation.

She left the office with the battery in her hand. She went directly to Room C, opened the door quietly, shut it behind her.

LUCAS waited for them to come for him. But they didn't.

He found the strip of copper he wanted, walked slowly down to the locker room. He was late; most of the others had gone. The guard told him to hurry it up. He went through Search, dressed again with a slowness that infuriated the guard and walked slowly down the fenced corridor.

Only one other worker was with him. The guard was surly. Lucas turned and saw the girl coming across the grass to the corridor fence. He saw her hair, gold in the twilight.

"Get away from the fence, you!" the guard roared.

"I am a monitor," the girl said firmly. Lucas recognized her voice, stared almost with disbelief at Morrit. It was the first time he had ever seen her in street clothes, seen her with the hair that fell to shoulders that were straight and perfect.

"Come here, guard!" she ordered.

The guard turned to them. "You two stand where you are." He went to the fence.

Lucas looked at her and saw the new hardness of her face, a bitter curve of mouth, an angry look in her eyes.

"Guard," she said, "you are to search the clothes of that tall one there. Lucas. An item was smuggled through Search."

As the guard turned toward him, Lucas caught the pleading look in her eyes. He was thoroughly confused. She was trying to tell him something.

The other worker looked on without much interest. Lucas held his arms up and the guard went through every pocket with care. Lucas stopped breathing as he saw Morrit back away from the fence, saw the small object in her hand.

She swung her arm as though practicing. With narrowed eyes she watched the guard. The search over, the guard turned back toward Morrit. In the instant of his turning, she threw the battery over the high fence.

By the time the guard had turned completely, her arms were back at her sides.

Lucas saw it against the darkening sky. He took two quick steps to one side and it splatted into the palm of his hand. He dropped it into his pocket.

"Nothing on him, Miss," the guard mumbled.

The other worker had seen the exchange. Lucas faced him tensely. He saw the fleeting grin, saw the other worker form the unspoken words, "Nice going!"

"Sorry to have troubled you," Morrit said. She called to Lucas, "I will not be reporting tomorrow, Mr. Lucas."

The words meant nothing to him; not until he had shut the door of the small white house behind him.

Morrit was not reporting. Under the stringent rules, no monitor could give up her position until the full five years had been served. To refuse to report would create the suspicion that the monitor had somehow become infected with the creative psychosis of the technical workers. And it was a free ticket to the little gray amphitheater where they wielded the electric scalpel.

Something had cracked Ellen Morrit. Something had made her betray the regime. And she would have to become a fugitive. He could not see her waiting for them to come and get her.

Thus her words became a message. She had said, "You are right, Peter, and I have been wrong. Maybe this battery will help you become free. If so, I will be in the dead city."

And suddenly he knew there had been only one way for her to get the battery past Captain Arden Forrester. Acquiescence. A very high price to pay; and a very impetuous decision to make.

His smile was a grimace that pressed his lips back against his teeth. Lucas had made a convert to heresy, had added another prisoner to the world.

He ate slowly, stretched out on the bed. His hand touched the wall, and he sat up in sudden panic. The wax was cracked. At last they had found the hiding place.

He pulled the sliding panel down, reached inside. His hand touched the device. He took it out and inspected it. They had not removed it, had seen that it was an odd thing, too small to be dangerous—possibly a physical indication that the mind of Peter Lucas was failing. And it had been left behind as evidence.

He forced steadiness into his hands, unscrewed the battery frame, put the little battery in place, connected one wire to a terminal, the other to the copper strip.

They arrived at that moment: Arden Forrester and two of the guards. Forrester swaggered in, his thumbs tucked under his uniform belt.

"Mr. Lucas, I believe. And what toy do you have there, Mr. Lucas? An automatic toothbrush, no doubt. And where did you get the metal, Mr. Lucas?"

Peter Lucas grinned foolishly at Forrester. He made his mouth slack, shifted the device into his right hand,

the battery case against the heel of his hand.

"We'd better go see Mr. Evan," Forrester said. He winked broadly at Lucas. "A shame to take you out of that lab of yours where the decorations are so nice. So very, very nice."

Lucas depressed the copper strip so that it made contact with the bare terminal. The tube glowed for a moment in the lead socket.

Forrester stood spare, firm and erect.

Lucas knew that the device had failed. And then he saw Forrester's right hand. Slowly it lost form. It sagged, sluggishly, a pink wax hand held above a flame, the fingers merging.

Forrester's eyes bulged and he shouted. He snatched his hand away from the waistband of his trousers. The hand pulled free at the wrist, spun across the room and slapped viscidly against the wall, clinging for a moment, all shape lost, bleeding in a thin line on the plaster, sliding slowly down the pattern of blood.

A gout of blood came from the wrist and where it struck the focal point of the device, it turned into a pinkish fog. The blouse where the hand had been turned shiny and ran into liquid.

The beam hit into the spare body underneath, softening it to a thin liquid, exploding it into a pink mist. Forrester screamed once as he fell.

A guard leveled his automatic and Lucas managed to center the beam on it. The barrel sagged as the man tried to fire it. The unliquified portion exploded violently, and the man, his face torn open, fell and writhed on the floor. The other guard tried to make the door, but Lucas swept the beam across his legs at knee level. The man dropped and at first Lucas thought that he had dropped onto his knees. Then he saw that the man's legs were out in front of him, toes up. The guard made a mewling sound, fell back, swiveling the gun to fire at Lucas. Lucas swept the beam across his face, saw the face become a pinkish pool in which the eyes were but widening stains.

He touched the guard whose gun had exploded on the back of the neck and the man was suddenly still.

Breathing hard, Lucas stood erect. He knew that if he looked at them any more he'd be violently ill.

He listened. The subdued workers who had heard the shot stayed close to their houses.

He heard the distant pound of running feet. There was no time to liberate the others. He cut the back wall of the house, finding that at fifteen feet, the area of liquification was about six inches in diameter. He made a sweeping cut, seeing the running plastic explode into gas with a puffing sound.

The section fell out and he went through. As he went he brushed the moist edge by accident with the back of his hand. For a moment he was in panic for fear the liquid contagion could be transmitted by contact.

But the back of his hand was uninjured. As fear faded, he noted that the process did not generate heat.

Floodlights clicked on over the area, and the massive throat of the siren on the roof of the Bureau Building began to pulsate.

Lucas felt naked, crouching in the glow, fifty feet from the rear of his house. Someone shouted behind him and he ran for the fence.

There was a soft whisper near his ear and the slug continued on to smash against the wire mesh. With a slow up and down sweep he cut the fence, seeing the dance of blue sparks as the electric current tried to bridge the gap.

He flattened, turned around and swept the beam across the legs of those who pounded toward him. The hoarse shouts turned to screams as they toppled over. Another slug whispered too close to him, and he sprayed the convulsing bodies until at last they were still. Another splash, and a section of the fence fell away.

He ran through the gap, turned and aimed the beam at the nearest floodlight. It spat and went dark.

There was a quarter mile of open ground to cross. He had covered half of it at full run when the headlights bounced toward him. Silhouetted against the distant floodlights he could see the men who clung to the outside of the car.

He dropped and rolled into a shallow place, propped himself on his elbows.

"Spread out and nail him!" somebody ordered.

Lucas yelled, "Go back! Go back or you'll die!"

"He's right over there. Try a few shots with the rifle, Joe."

He couldn't risk rifle fire. He pushed the copper strip against the terminal, sprayed the beam back and forth across the vehicle like a man watering a lawn. One headlight popped out and a bubbling scream was cut off.

There were cries of alarm. The other headlight went out and he heard the car creak and sag oddly.

A man came frighteningly close, leaping toward him. Lucas aimed up at him, threw himself to one side. The man fell across his legs, writhed once and was still. Something warm ran across Lucas' ankle. There was no more movement. He pulled himself clear, staggered to his feet and began to run again.

By the time he reached the wide avenue, he heard the rising bleat of sirens all over the city.

He crossed to parallel streets, crouched behind a hedge and waited there until his breathing was under control. A hundred feet away a man hurried toward his car.

Lucas ran after him. The man heard the faint sound and turned.

"Give me your keys," Lucas demanded.

The man grunted as he swung. The snap of the beam caught the fist in midair. It hit Lucas along the jaw, a soft and boneless thing. He wiped his face on his sleeve, bent over the man and found the car keys.

He knew of an automobile only through the drawings he had seen and the descriptions he had read.

He carefully placed the device on the seat beside him, started the car and drove it jerkily down the street, cutting the first corner too closely so that the rear wheel hit the curbing and he bounced high.

Five blocks, ten, twenty.

He abandoned the car, ran down toward the fire lane, the scattered rubble that marked the border of the dead city.

There were no lights there. He could not risk falling.

Behind him the sirens moaned and he knew that all of the resources of the New City, even of the country and the world would be directed at finding him and killing him. He was the villain of the melodrama now; he was mad, evil science raising its foul head again, greedy for destruction.

CHAPTER THREE

City of Pariahs

IN THE dead city ten thousands lived where once there had been four millions. They lived outside the frame of reference of the New City,

lived as their remote forebears had lived, in lust and violence and sudden death.

Some of them were there because to venture outside was to die for some past crime. Others were there because their emotional quotients were dangerous to the orderliness of the New City. And many had been born there, amid the clutter of gray stone, of broken brick, of dust and decay and matted, tangled growth that obscured first-floor windows, split the battered asphalt.

At night, in an area ten blocks deep bordering on the dead city, doors were double-barred and windows were shuttered. In time that area would become part of the dead city, providing new loot, new hiding places.

Within the dead city there was a loose society, with the strongest man at the top. Most vagrants who wandered in had a short life. If they managed to survive attack, they would still have no hiding place and would be picked up by the well-armed groups of special police who made periodic patrols through the man-made wilderness.

The police had learned by listening to the whisper of a thrown knife, that it was wise to make the patrols at regular and predictable intervals during daylight, to stay together, to conduct only the most cursory searches of buildings.

Ellen Morrit crept into the dead city at night.

She knew the unforgettable extent of her humiliation, the pathetic inadequacy of her revenge against a society which had abused and disillusioned her.

It would have been simpler to wait for them to come. But to sit and wait meant to think and to remember. It was easier to run away.

She carried a hand torch and a .22 target pistol. She wore rough tweeds and stout shoes and carried food in a hiking pack.

She turned and looked back at the New City, at the blare of lights which stopped abruptly at the high mound of rubble which she had crossed.

Ellen Morrit did not know that the first rule of secret travel by night is never to silhouette oneself against distant lights.

But her body was young, her reactions quick, and she carried the automatic ready to fire.

She whirled as one stone clicked against another and she made out the figure running toward her, crouched, knuckles almost touching the littered ground. In alarm rather than through any desire to kill she tugged on the trigger. The weapon made a brittle crackling sound and the figure fell, rolled almost to her feet.

She stood still for a long time, then risked shining the small flash on it. It was a man with a tangle of dark beard. His open eyes looked up at the distant stars and his mouth was open. She saw, in the hollow of his throat, the pool of blood where the tiny slug had gone in.

She clicked out the light, backed away, sank to her knees and began to weep.

In the end she decided to leave the dead city, to try to find a hiding place among less alien people.

She stood up with resolution, and turned directly into the arms of a man who towered over her.

He tore the gun out of her hand and when she screamed he clapped a harsh hand over her mouth. Her teeth met in his flesh and he cursed softly. The world exploded around her in darting fire and she was dimly conscious of being lifted off her feet.

She fought her way up out of untold depths to a consciousness of hard stone against her hips and shoulders. Damp stone. When she opened her eyes the flicker of oil lamps threw needles deep into her throbbing brain.

It was a long room, damp and windowless, and she knew it was far underground.

Her eyes slowly adjusted and she saw that there were four men at a crude table, another one on a bench against the far wall. A ragged girl with a white broken face leaned against the wall near the man who sat on the bench. She sang in a low, harsh voice, accompanying herself on a small stringed instrument. She stared at Ellen Morrit and her eyes were vacant and dead.

A much older woman squatted ten feet away, spooning a dark substance out of a rusty tin, smacking withered lips with each mouthful.

The men were rough, ragged, bearded and noisy. There was a lamp on the table, and several bottles and a greasy deck of cards.

One of them looked toward her, threw his cards down, got up and swaggered over. "Awake, eh? Come and meet the people."

He grabbed her wrist, pulled her to her feet, steadied her when she would have fallen.

He held her in his big arm, turned to the others and said loudly, "Now who calls James unlucky? A gun and a girl, all in the same night."

The old woman cackled. "When Thomas finds out maybe he'll let you keep the gun."

The man spat on the floor. "Now there's reason for standing up to Thomas, woman." He took Ellen roughly by the shoulders and spun her completely around. "Look at her! Meat on her bones. Soft hands. None of your leather-faced women, aye Janey?"

The dark girl cursed him, without bitterness.

James chuckled and pinched Ellen's cheek. "Ah, you're a great rarity here in the dead city, girl. We get the murderous ones, and the ones that have lived hard. None like you. Not for a long time."

"Take me to Thomas," Ellen said, trying to make her voice strong.

He scowled. "What would you know of Thomas?"

She lifted her chin. In this case she would try to forsake the devil she knew for the devil she didn't. "He expects me."

James shook his head dolefully from side to side. "Now just think of that! Thomas just upped and told you to come on in here and find him, did he?"

He pushed her back toward the corner, walked to the table and pulled a slight man up off his chair. "Bobby, you run along over and see Thomas and tell him that he has a lady friend waiting here for him. Be quick, boy!"

Bobby gave Ellen a quick, frightened look and left. The old woman threw the tin aside. It rolled across the floor, spewing out the remainder of its contents. She scuttled out into the night.

Ellen stayed where she was. The rest of them moved, by unspoken consent, down to the far end of the big room. James took from his belt a gun she recognized as her own. He slid out the clip and checked the shells, snapped it back in.

He then flattened himself against the wall beside the arched doorway. Through the doorway Ellen could see damp stairs leading up.

PETER LUCAS went deeper into the dead city. He knew that before the night was over the patrols would be out. The car would be found. They would be coming in after him. There might not be much time. It was important to locate someone who knew the terrain.

Coarse growth grew so high as to brush his face. He tried to force his way into it, and had to retrace his steps. His eyes were getting used to the starlight. He could make out the dim outlines of the buildings.

A stone rattled and someone ran off into the distance. He shouted after the sound, his voice startlingly loud in the silence. There was no answer.

He started violently as the shot sounded. It was near at hand. Very near. And yet it had an odd, hollow, booming quality.

He moved in what he thought was the right direction. Ten feet, twenty feet. Another shot came and another. He turned to the right and his outstretched hand touched a rough wall. He moved along the wall and saw a glow of light, a low arched doorway, half filled with rubble. He scrambled in. The light was stronger.

He went cautiously down the wide flight of stone stairs to a landing. The stairs cut back. He went down the second flight.

The stairs went through an arched doorway and into a room with a stone floor. He could see the huge stones of the floor, the mortar between them. The light was dim and it flickered. Oil lamps, he thought. Primitive.

A rough voice spoke words that he didn't understand. He stood in indecision, the device aimed and ready.

There was the sound of a heavy blow, a low moan of pain. Lucas decided that whoever was in the room was too busy to notice him. He moved quickly down the rest of the stairs, passed through the arch and moved to one side, his shoulders against the stone wall.

A dark girl sang and looked at him with dull interest. Bearded men in a far end of the long room turned and stared, wary and taut in their attitudes.

But a vast, pale, clean-shaven man with hands like hams and a massive belly merely looked up at him and said, "Be ,with you in a moment, friend."

A husky man lay on the floor. His eyes were agonized. A few feet away lay a .22 pistol with a long barrel. As the huge man bent over the figure on the floor, Lucas saw the raw, bloody streak straight across the back of his bull neck.

The big man pulled the prostrate man to his feet, steadied him and smashed him full in the face with a huge right fist. The man fell heavily and the big man kicked him in the side with all his strength, sliding him several feet along the stone floor.

Grunting, the big man picked up the automatic, grinned again at Lucas and said, "The fool tried to kill me. Something about a woman." He giggled, a curiously womanish sound. "He was going to drill me through the head as I came in, but I came in too fast. Always come into a room fast, boy, or don't come in at all. Who are you?"

Lucas noted that though the man held the automatic negligently, the thin barrel was pointed at Lucas' middle.

With a small warm sound, Ellen Morrit came from the far corner, ran hard against Lucas' chest, her body shaking, her eyes panic-stricken.

"Yours, eh?" the big man said. "I'm boss man around here. I may make you prove you can hang onto her. Who are you?"

"Lucas. I escaped tonight from the Bureau of Improvement."

There was an angry muttering from the men at the end of the room. The girl stopped her drab and monotonous song and merely stared.

The big man said, "We don't want your sort here."

Not even here, Peter thought. Not even in the dead city. When they can feel superior to no one else on earth, they still have contempt for us.

"Move away from him, girl," the big man said. "No need to hurt you too."

But Ellen clung more tightly to Peter Lucas.

He depressed the copper strip against the terminal.

The big man was very close to him, reaching for Ellen.

The beam touched the joint of the massive elbow and the forearm dangled limply. The big man did not cry out. Peter swept the beam across the middle of him. The heavy shirt parted and thick drops hung from the parted edge. The white flesh quivered and slid and puffs of gas made a rancid stench. When the beam touched the other elbow, the gun clattered to the stone floor.

Where the puffs of pinkish gas had erupted, Peter could see into the man, see a gleam of rib, the veined substance of a lung, see an edge of the strong heart, throbbing steadily.

The big man's mouth twisted into a smile. He said, "It looks like you might be the new—"

His eyes glazed and he went down as suddenly as though his feet had been kicked out from under him.

Peter turned in time to see the flickering silver of a thrown knife. He moved violently away from it, swept it with the beam and it continued to splash against the inside of the stone arch, to run in silver drops to the damp floor.

The girl who sang began to laugh.

She stood with her throat taut, her face uplifted, her mouth a down-curved slit. The sound stopped. They went out into the night.

Peter aimed the device at the others. They lifted their hands. He made a small gesture and they followed the first two. The unconscious man on the floor was the only one left, the only one left who was alive.

Peter dragged him to the stairs, pulled him up a dozen stairs to the landing. He left him there.

"Get back," he said. They went down again, across from the staircase. He used the beam to cut a half circle over the arch. He cut it again and again until he heard the shift of stone. The stone crashed down, choking the staircase, blocking the exit, blowing out the wicks of the oil lamps.

They found the lamps and lighted them and put them on the wooden table. The rock had covered the body of Thomas.

They sat at the table and they looked into each other's eyes and there was no need for words, for explanations, for empty sounds. Everything that could be said was said, and when he covered her hand with his it was a pledge and a dedication stronger than anything that had happened in their lives.

They sat alone in a stone room under the dead city and it was very clear to both of them that what little remained of life would have meaning and purpose and beauty.

CHAPTER FOUR

No Exit

LUCAS awoke. The air was stale and the room had a darkness so intense that he felt as though he were in an ancient tomb.

He wondered what had awakened him. He listened. He heard it again, a distant thud which sent vibrations through the stone of the floor.

He found Ellen's flash, squinted at the intense beam. Her face, a fragile oval faintly lighted by the reflection, was like the face of a sleeping child.

He touched her shoulder and she made a warm sound, a soft murmur deep in her throat. Out of the depths of sleep she had awakened with his name on her lips.

Then the fear came. He lit the lamp that was near them. Her mouth was tight and she pushed a strand of the golden hair away from her forehead with the back of her hand.

"What is it?" she whispered.

"Blasting, I think. They know we're down here. I shouldn't have let those others go. They were caught and made to talk."

The thud was louder and more rock fell from above the place where the doorway had been, dust sifting down to drift in winking motes in the flashlight beam.

"What will we do?" she said, and he could hear the quaver in her voice.

"We're two flights below ground level, Ellen. We can cut our way out with this gimmick, if the ground is solid enough so that the tunnel won't collapse."

They stood up and she clung to him, touched his throat with her lips.

He said, "You should have had a nice meek worker to supervise, darling. And then after your five years you could have—"

She stopped his lips with her fingertips. "Shh, Lucas. This way is better, no matter what happens."

With the next resounding crash, they could clearly hear the outside debris falling back to earth. He turned, focused the small device on the wall

opposite where the doorway had been, the flashlight in his left hand.

The stone ran fluidly and puffed into gas. He made the cut large, and, as he had expected, a large section of the wall collapsed. When the dust of fracture cleared away, he saw that it was possible to climb over the rubble to the face of the dark earth beyond.

He held her arm as they clambered up, ducking low to get through the wide low space. He focused the device on the earth from short range. The earth melted into a liquid and ran back toward the rocks and the gases choked them.

He found that he could eliminate much of the gas by using the device in intermittent bursts, giving the liquified earth time to run down.

He angled the tunnel up at a forty-five degree slant. Once, as they were about to move into a new portion of the tunnel, the roof collapsed, a large clod striking him heavily in the shoulder, forcing him to his knees. But instinctively he had shielded the tiny device in his hand.

He estimated that in cutting up through twenty feet at a forty-five degree angle the tunnel would have to be nearly thirty feet in length and he counted his paces as he followed the cut of the beam.

When he heard a distant shout from behind, he turned and undercut the ceiling of the shaft so that it fell, blocking the tunnel.

Ellen was subdued and, he thought, remarkably well under control.

When he estimated that the distance was right, he focused the beam almost straight up, pulling the device out of the way of the liquid, then holding the flashlight in its place and looking up.

He saw a circular area no bigger than his fist where dim light seemed to filter in. He cut the tunnel rapidly ahead, recklessly allowing the liquid to run over his feet and ankles.

He made a hole up into the daylight, cut a notch for his feet, stepped up and cautiously looked out. It was dawn in the dead city, the air sharp with ozone, the sun disc edging over the far hill that was sawtoothed with the minaretted buildings of the New City.

In the distance, beyond the corner of the building they had left he could see two men standing, not looking in his direction. Fifty feet away was a jumble of small buildings falling into

decay, a tangled confusion which might mean safety.

Leaning down, he said to Ellen, "This has got to be fast. I'll jump up, pull you up and then run as fast as you can with me toward the right."

She nodded, her eyes wide.

He wiggled up out of the hole and, as she came up onto the step, he reached down, got her wrist and pulled her up.

He heard the shouts, and his throat tightened with fear. As she got her feet under her, he saw that another group had come from the other direction and they were cut off from the tangle of buildings.

They came toward him at a dead run. No shots were fired. With deadly certainty he cut them down. More appeared. They wore the police uniform. He could see that they were hesitant and frightened, but they came on.

As they reached the place where the others had fallen, he cut them down, feeling a sting of nausea in his throat.

From the other direction came a running group, at least fifteen men from the guard details of the Bureau and the World Administration Building.

They ran silently, but in a matter of moments they lay on the ground, calling out with fear and pain and surprise.

One of them had come within ten feet of them. He lay on his side, his clenched fists held to his mouth, and he cried like a child.

Whoever was in charge had thrown a cordon around the area and from every direction more of them approached.

Peter Lucas was sick of death and pain. They were not shooting. They wanted him alive. His hand shook as the weapon bit a piece out of the advancing circle. He wished that they would shoot. Anything but this stupid and futile advance into dissolution.

His hand was shaking and he realized that he could not kill many more. He knew that he could take but a few more lives before the pity in him stopped his hand.

And as he lifted the weapon Ellen clung to his arm and said, "No. No more, Peter. Not any more!"

And he knew that she felt as he did. In the moment before they rushed, gaining courage from his lowering of the silent, deadly weapon, he smiled down at her and whispered, "Good-by, Ellen."

They hit him in a concerted rush, and he spun, fell, tried to roll with the device under him so that he could grind it into a nothingness which no man could decipher.

His wrist was caught and his face was ground into the rocks. His hand was pulled up into the small of his back until he could no longer hold it shut.

His wrists were handcuffed behind him and he was dragged roughly to his feet. They held him and one of them, a young guard, was crying. He looked at the men who moaned and moved useless limbs, and he hit Lucas in the face with all his strength.

Lucas could not fall. Another group surrounded Ellen. A purplish bruise was forming on her cheek, but she held her head high.

The man in charge wore guard's gray, insignia of captain's rank on one shoulder, the interlocked WA of World Administration on the other. He had a cold, competent look, entirely unlike the red, surly anger of the police official who walked beside him.

The captain said, "These two will be taken immediately to the trucks. And they will not be beaten or injured

in any way whatever. Is that clear?"

The men nodded. The young guard said, "Let me get one more smack at him. My brother is over there with—"

"Silence!" the captain snapped. "Take them to the trucks."

ELLEN and Peter were forced to lie down on the bed of the truck. The guards kept the mob back. There was hate in the shrill jeers and boos of the citizens.

Lucas shuddered as he heard the animal sound of those massed voices. If they should get their hands on Ellen . . .

Someone yelled above the crowd noise, "Roll it. Full speed."

The trucks roared and jounced. A heavy stone arched into the truck, bounced off the bed and rebounded to cut a gash across the back of a guard's hand. He cursed and sucked the the wound, clinging tightly with his other hand.

The truck made a wild turn and Lucas was skidded over against Ellen. His fingertips touched her arm and he exerted a gentle pressure. The angry noises faded behind them.

Above them the gray of the morning sky had changed to a clear, deep blue. Lucas looked up at it, at two drifting puffs of white cloud. Though he saw everything with the abnormal clarity of a man who is already dead, he felt peace within him. He felt a stolid disregard for what might happen, and he thought that there would be further rebellion, further defiance by the technical workers. And one day one of them would succeed in taking over enormous power. Then the earth could forsake this barren plateau of static mediocrity, could once again reach toward the stars.

The truck ground to a halt, and he heard the procedure of identification. It started again, winding up a graveled road. The truck went through an arched entrance that cut off the sky with the suddenness of a blow.

When it stopped, Lucas' ankles were seized and he was pulled back out of the bed of the truck. To the left was an open door. He was herded through the door so rapidly that he had no chance to look back at Ellen.

Two men were with him, one of them the captain. Ahead were three elevators. He was pushed roughly into the middle one. The door was silently shut and it went up with an acceleration that pressed his feet hard against the soft floor.

This was not what he had expected. Dale Evan should have been the responsible official, the one to decree electro-surgery; but he knew within seconds that they were not in the Bureau of Improvement Building. The insignia of the captain, plus the duration of the elevator trip, told him that they were in the World Administration Building.

He was pushed into a plain, windowless room about ten feet square. The glowing baseboard was the light source. He was carefully searched by the lower-ranking guard. The captain unlocked the handcuffs and the two of them left, closing the door, locking it.

In this soundproofed room, time had no meaning. He realized how close he was to the extreme limit of emotional exhaustion.

So his little escapade was a matter of a higher level than Bureau affairs. He smiled wryly as he thought of Dale Evan's discomfiture. The technical workers would have hard sledding for many months—provided the angry public didn't tear the place apart.

At last he stretched out on the hard floor, felt sleep rush over him like a dark tide.

ELLEN MORRIT was awakened by the unlocking of the door of her small, featureless room. The matron who had brought her to the room came in, put fresh clothes on the floor, stood aside while a second woman brought in a basin of water, various toilet articles.

"Fix yourself up," she said. "He doesn't like filth."

Alone, Ellen Morrit washed and dressed, and as she held the mirror she thought that she could shatter it against the floor, slash her wrists with the shards of glass. Yet the mystery, why it was necessary to be made beautiful in order to die, was a nagging question.

The dress provided was of a dark, rich fabric, a weave unfamiliar to her. It combined extreme thinness with warmth.

She was ready when they came for her. The matron carried a thin chain with a wooden handle on the end. She made two loops around Ellen's wrist and Ellen knew that a half turn of the handle would bring excruciating pain.

She was taken back to the elevator, and once again taken upward.

She gasped as the elevator door opened. One whole wall of the room was of glass, craftily curved so as to eliminate reflections. Far below stretched the entire expanse of the New City.

"Hello, Ellen," Peter Lucas said. She turned quickly, saw him seated in a deep chair of blonde wood. He wore clothes of the same dark fabric as hers. His arms were held flat to the arms of the chair by two wide, shining bands of metal that clamped them firmly.

The matron led her to the chair near his. Both chairs looked toward a raised dais, and beyond it were pale yellow draperies. When her arms were fastened, the matron left. The elevator door shut and they heard the tiny hum of power as it dropped.

She and Peter were alone in the room. It had an air of luxury and power, of quiet surroundings subordinated to a powerful personality.

She looked toward the bookshelves, noticed that the titles were of approved books. There was no clue to the owner of the room.

"What are we waiting for?" she asked.

His voice was harsh. "For the unforgettable pleasure of talking to Ryan, I believe. The Unit Advisor. This is high-level stuff."

"Why do they want to talk to us?"

"That should be obvious, Ellen. They have you taped as helping me. They will want to know our methods. If we don't talk freely, they'll have some pretty ways of making us talk."

A small table stood on the raised dais. On it was the device that had been taken from him. She wondered that they had not destroyed it.

Lucas said, "I wish you hadn't been brought into this, Ellen."

"After . . . after Forrester I couldn't feel any loyalty to them." She laughed. "He was so ridiculous. I let him think that he was flattering me. He was breathing so hard. When he had his arms around me I kicked him and I hit him in the mouth with my fist. I had the little battery in that hand. He fell and hit his head on the bench. I ran out to the locker room, through the other door, put on my street clothes and left. I didn't know what to do with the battery. Then I saw you with the guard. It—it just seemed like a way of getting even."

"And you aren't sorry?" Lucas asked softly.

"Not for anything, Peter." And she knew as she said it that it was the truth.

There was a rustle.

Peter Lucas frowned at the man who stepped briskly through the yellow draperies. They fell into place behind him. This wasn't Ryan.

This man had a clown's face. It looked as though someone had taken hold of the upper lip and given a sharp tug downward, and the face had frozen. The upper lip was pendulous, and all the lines of the face seemed drawn down toward it. The man was slight, obviously in his fifties. His small blue eyes were shrewd and quick.

He stepped down off the dais and walked over to them. He rubbed his palms together with a dry, whispering sound, smiled at them and said, "How do you do, Ellen. And you, Peter. I happen to be Emery Ladu, the Chairman."

Peter's mind spun dizzily and focused on a book of his childhood. Alice in Wonderland.

This was the man. This was the calloused dictator who, with the help of his advisors, kept the world on a dead level of mediocrity. Dictatorship from afar has a touch of the grandiose about it. Close up, Ladu was a brisk little man with sharp blue eyes, a clown's face and an air of trying hard to be charming.

In some odd way it made him more fearful.

Ladu wrinkled up his face. "This is why I never permit pictures," he said gaily. "Wouldn't want to frighten the public. It wouldn't inspire the requisite awe, if they should know what I look like. My, you are a silent couple, aren't you?"

"Whatever you want, get it over with and stop this cat-and-mousing around," Lucas growled.

Ladu shrugged. "You see? Preconceived ideas. I can't be anything but horrible, can I? My, how you people must hate me!"

"Certainly I hate you," Lucas said. "You're the one who thinks more of your comfort and power than the future of the race. You're the one that can't see the slow death of the world around you."

Ladu pursed his lips, cocked his head on one side and stared at Lucas. Then he turned to Ellen and said, "Your friend illustrates the typical aberrations of the second-class mind."

"What do you mean, second-class!" Lucas said loudly. Ladu had touched the focal point of pride, the pride in intellect that had kept him integrated throughout the lonely years.

"Just what I said, my dear boy. Just what I said. The best examinations that could be devised proved you to have a second-class mind that would adjust to close confinement and regi-

mentation without losing a certain analytical and creative knack which is useful."

Ladu turned his back on them, went over and stepped up on the dais and took the device from the table. "This," he said, "I find to be very interesting. And for more than one reason. The achievement indicates that under close confinement you, probably through emotional stress, became a superior sort of second-class mind."

"I resent your continual use of that word," Lucas said. He managed to sneer. "You, I suppose, have a first-class mind?"

Ladu raised one eyebrow. "As a matter of fact, I have. But my talents are in a political and sociological direction."

"Why are we here?" Ellen asked, her gray eyes narrowed.

"You are here because you constitute a new type of problem. Oh, we've had trouble over in the Bureau before. I get the reports. I seldom read them. Poor fat old Evan worries so much about his tremendous responsibilities."

"New in what way?" Lucas asked, impatiently.

"Other devices have been manufactured in there, you know. Escape devices. Or merely little tools to express a vast resentment toward the established order. But nothing of any originality. Such as this." He waved the device, replaced it on the table and came back to stand in front of them. He was frowning.

"Originality is supposed to be the ultimate sin in your neat little world, isn't it?" Lucas asked.

Emery Ladu waved a hand toward the curved glass through which could be seen all of the New City. "To all the people out there it is the ultimate sin. But not to me."

"You have the power. Why don't you propagandize them? Why don't you root out all this fantastic fear of progress?"

"There, my boy, is where a first-class mind can give you an answer. Because the administration of a static society is far easier than the administration of one where progress in one part of the world or another will give specific areas a temporary advantage. Temporary advantages lead to conflict, first on the economic and then on the military level. It is too difficult to cope with those potential focal points of disorder—and disaster."

"Then, as I said before, you think only of your comfort and your position, and not of mankind."

Ladu smiled sadly at Ellen. "You see how emotional the second-class mind can get?"

Before she could answer he walked away a few feet. When he turned he had a large gold coin in his hand. He showed it to them, enclosed it in his palm, waved his hand around a few times, then opened it. The coin was gone.

Lucas snorted. "A first-class childish trick."

"Be still!" Ladu said. The good humor was gone from his voice. Suddenly he was a very impressive person, ruthlessness surprisingly visible in his face and attitude. The clown's face was no longer funny.

"With a child you must use the explanations a child can follow," he said. "Neither of you knows what happened to that coin. Why? Because you were following the motion of my hand. It drew your eye because it was in motion."

He held up the same hand, fist clenched. "This hand, you fool, represents the Bureau of Improvement. It is in motion. It is visible. It attracts the mind of the people. Forbidden

talent under careful control. 'Aha,' they say. 'Old Ladu will keep them under his thumb. Ladu feels as we do. Together we will protect ourselves.' But Ladu knows, and they don't, that the poor ineffectual Bureau of Improvement is staffed with second-class minds inside people with a high stability quotient."

He began to pace back and forth. "You, Lucas, try to tell me—me—that time is short, that the earth grows barren, that nature weeds us out through the diminishing vigor of reproduction."

He stopped in front of Lucas, leaned over and his voice dropped to a whisper. "Lucas, how much time would we have if we spent most of it trying to destroy the superstitious fear that was imbedded in the race by a hundred mushroom clouds of smoke? How much time would be left?"

Under the naked force of the man's mind, Lucas shook his head stupidly. "What are you getting at?" he asked.

Ladu laughed. "I throw them a bone. I give them a gesture to watch. Here, my people, is the Bureau of Improvement. Yes, we are very progressive. We will let them do a little work for us—but carefully controlled, you understand."

Ellen, her voice shaking, said, "Your hand was the Bureau. The coin was the first-class minds."

"Of course!" he said. "Of course! Poor Peter never stopped to think what happened to them. He was too shocked to find out that he was not an apex, a pinnacle."

The emotion faded out of his voice. He said soberly, "You have made a contribution, Lucas. You have earned yourself a promotion. I have been in contact with the personnel chief at the base."

Lucas shook his head, as though by doing so he could clear it. "Base?"

Ladu's smile was grim. "The place where we send the first-class minds where we have been sending them, my predecessor and I, for the past sixty years. A thousand million tons of steel and concrete laboratories in the Chin Hills of North Burma, a self-contained city of thousands where miles of jungle are seared by the blasts of the ships that have taken off in search of a new system which will support mankind." He laughed shortly. "The tribes of the jungles call it the place where the stars shoot upward."

"But—"

"Lucas, you try my patience. In fifty or a hundred years, the men who come after me will set up the machinery of colonization. The strongest and the healthiest of all the races will be sent first. In a new green world we can start again, without the mistakes of the past. The men now in charge inform me that some application of your device can be made to avoid deep space collisions with meteors, asteroids and so on."

Lucas was unable to speak. He felt no shame at the tears that streaked his face.

Ladu said, "My people will come here and release you. After nightfall you will be picked up and taken to the airfield. The girl can go with you." Once again he laughed. "Only because, knowing the emotional weaknesses of the second-class mind, I am certain you would be of no value to the project without her."

Emery Ladu went back through the yellow draperies. They fell into place behind him, swayed slightly and were still.

Peter Lucas and Ellen Morrit sat side by side and listened for the sounds of those who would come to release them, to free them forever.