

SEPT.

SUPER SCIENCE *STORIES*

25¢

BOOK 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

NEIL R. JONES
MANY OTHERS





SUPER SCIENCE STORIES

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THE BIG BOOK OF SCIENCE FICTION

VOL. 5

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No. 4

THREE UNFORGETTABLE NOVELS

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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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From tiny nonexistence, Man's brightest highest attainment grew to an enormous nothing—a nothing vast enough to engulf not only him—but his universe!
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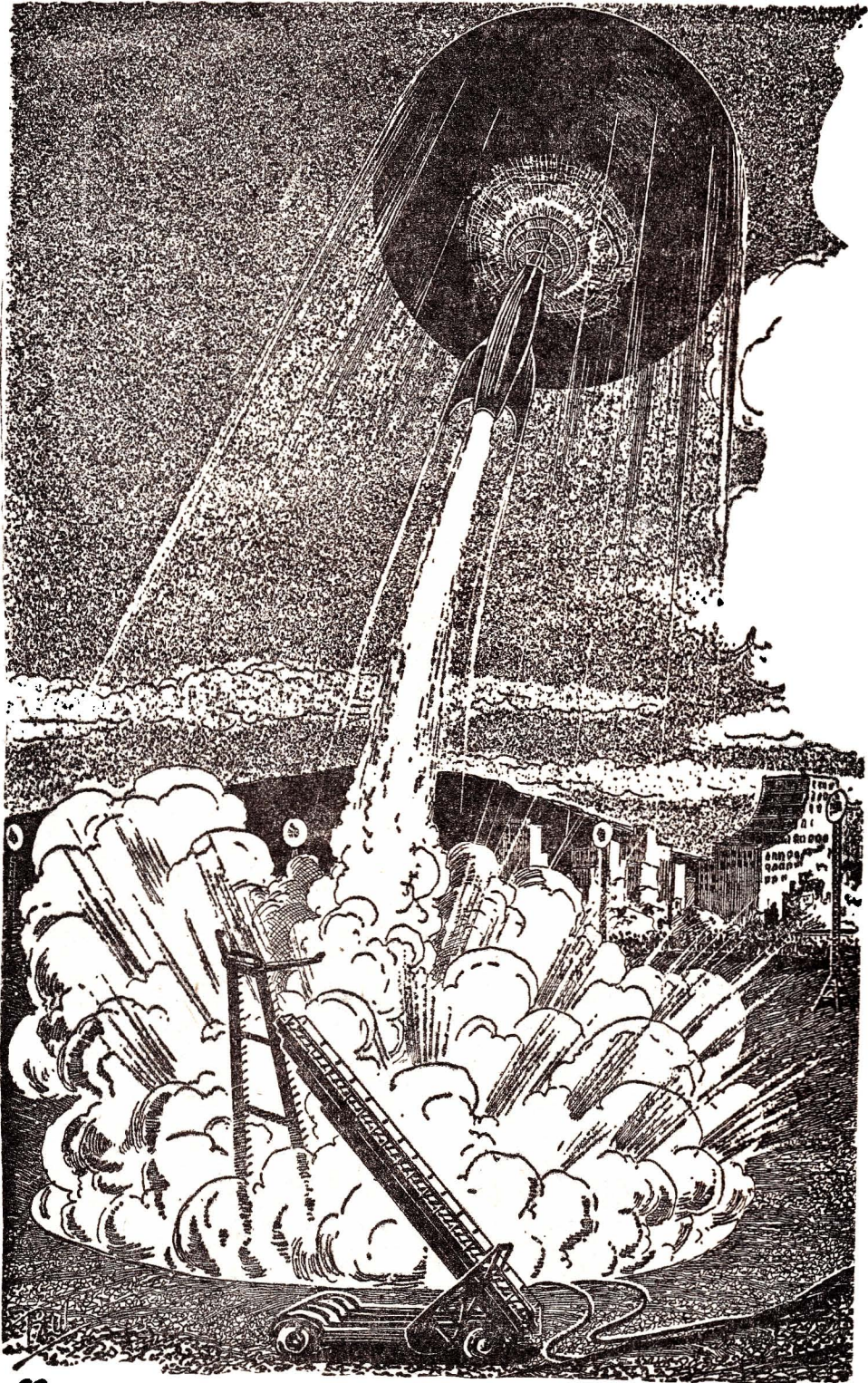
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MINUS DANGER!

By George O. Smith

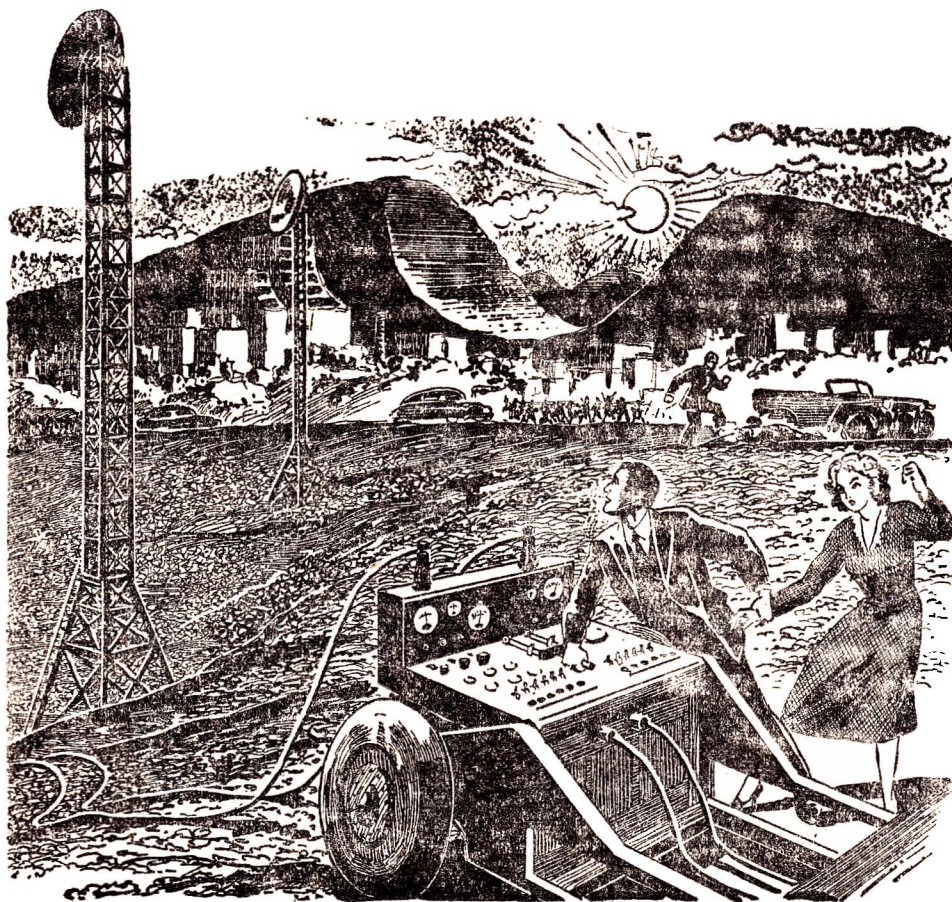
CHAPTER ONE

From tiny nonexistence, Man's highest attainment grew to an enormous nothing—a nothing vast enough to engulf not only him—but his universe!

At the same instant, the rocket flared in a torrent of flame and started to lift.

The Failure That Shock the World

"ANOTHER failure," grunted Jed Malone unhappily. He scrawled "No dice" across the page of his notebook and then looked at the conglomeration of apparatus, briefly checking the meter readings for the tenth time. Then,



satisfied that his conclusions were right—though his hopes were dashed—he turned the page of the notebook over and started to re-tabulate his constants for another try.

He had been a month at it. Thirty days exactly since the sorry debacle before the assembled American Physical Society. For two years he had been on the trail of an elusive concept in abstract physics, more or less predicted by an offtrail branch of mathematics. To himself, he had boasted that Maxwell had been no better off regarding the science of electronics when he brought forth the Electromagnetic Equations.

Confident that he would be received with tolerance, he had prepared the paper and had given his talk. He was certain that his math was sound, that his theories were correct, and that his belief in himself was not over-rated. He was equally confident that someone in the vast audience of high-powered thinkers would help, might even give a hint, or ask a question that would put him on the right track.

Instead he had been laughed out of the auditorium.

And now, after thirty weary days of trying, he still had a total blank for a result. He felt that unfair, somehow. No doubt if he had been able to use the equipment with full authority and aid, he might have come up with something. But instead he was forced to steal into the lab like a thief at night, working when any sensible man would be asleep.

He yawned as he made the last adjustment, and sat down a moment while the equipment warmed up. Then he pressed the operating buttons and the apparatus went to work—

Eagerly he looked at the silver-plated circle above the copper plate. Several varieties of energy were creat-

ing a spacial stress in that volume—magnetic fields, electrostatic fields, and nuclear bombardments from a few discretely-placed radio-isotopes. He varied the fields a bit, hoping all the time.

"Another failure," grunted Jed Malone unhappily. He scrawled "No dice" across the page of his notebook and then looked at the conglomeration of apparatus, briefly checking the meter readings for the tenth time.

Unhappily, he started to readjust the constants in the equipment—

But it was not another failure. Like many another researcher in a brand-new field of science, Malone did not know what to look for. Like Faraday, for instance, who spent years trying to generate an electric current from a magnetic field, reversing the familiar electromagnetic process. Faraday's attempt was too literal. So was Jed Malone's attempt to generate a force-field.

None of his equations told him how big the field would be.

It was there—invisibly minute and incredibly light-absorbant. It had generated during the instant that his variations of the generating fields had crossed the optimum, and it was there now—just too small and too black to be seen.

The fields were gone, now, but the submicroscopic field remained. It moved a bit, slowly, aimlessly, and by the time that Jed Malone fired up his equipment again, it had moved out of the influence of the fields generated in the circle-and-plate electrodes. Ignorant of his success, Jed worked on.

Unhappily he worked, worrying because his use of the equipment was strictly illegal. Sooner or later he would be discovered and then there would be hell to pay.

Day by day and try by try, he was

now on the other side of success, and was retreating more and more from the truth. His minute field of force was miles away, still floating aimlessly, striking an atom of air here or passing through a bit of solid matter there, and growing by the hour. Chance atomic collision is rare when both items have the same atomic cross-section, but with the growth of the field, its cross-section was increasing, bit by minute bit. Miles it had drifted, in many days, and it had grown to almost-visible size by the time that Jed Malone was caught.

Unfortunately for Jed, the equipment was not silent. It gave off a humming sound when in operation, which did two things. It caught the ear of Dr. Grimes, head of the laboratory, and it also covered Grimes' footsteps as he came up the hallway.

"What in hell is going on here?" stormed Dr. Grimes, with a scowl on his hawklike face.

"Why, I—"

"You imbecile! My God, Malone, are you still trying to prove that idiotic theory of yours?"

"Well, sir, you see—"

"That's all, Malone. Finis."

"But—"

"Get out. And don't come back."

"But sir—"

"Malone, do you think you're Dirac?"

"No—"

"Good. Who, then?"

"Look sir, unless a theory is tried—"

"And just how long have you been trying?" demanded Dr. Grimes.

"About four weeks, maybe five."

"Or six—every night since the meeting, isn't it?"

"Yes sir. I—"

"Get out, Malone. Go hide. Do we owe you any money?"

Malone shrugged.

"Payday was today, was it not?"

Malone nodded.

"Then we're even. And I, myself, will see to it that this wild mess is straightened out. Good night—morning, I mean."

"But—"

"Malone—get the hell out!"

Malone went. His job was gone; so were all his chances. Where else could he find a laboratory and equipment to make a try? Slowly, he walked to his small furnished room and started to pack his bag. All he had to say was a very weak and ineffective: "Some day I'll show you!"

IT FLOATED across the concrete highway, a two-foot sphere of absolute black. It took a trough out of the concrete, a bit deeper on the far side because the die-true course of the black sphere was on a long, shallow slant towards the earth. It hollowed the road shoulder, passed through the air above a drainage ditch, and then went full into the ground on the far side of the ditch. Noiselessly and without slowing it entered the ground, leaving a perfectly cylindrical hole behind it.

Sally Desmond was the first to see it; but not at once. Sally was much too busy trying to keep a bucking car from running off the road as she stood on the brakes. It was too close, and the front wheels hit the trough in the road. It made a good fit; the trough had about the same radius as the tires. The front of the car bucked high and the front tires blew simultaneously. The front of the car came down with a crash and rebounded high just as the rear wheels hit the trough. The back tires blew and the back leaped into the air.

Sallys' car hit the road shoulder, slid into the ditch and rolled a full

turn. It came to rest against a tree.

Sally Desmond was crumpled against the steering wheel, the breath knocked out of her. Blood trickled down her lip from her nose and fell through the spokes of the steering wheel onto her white skirt.

Minutes later she came to and groaned. There was pain in her side and she pressed the palm of her hand against it, wondering if she had a cracked rib. She swore angrily, fished a handkerchief from her bag and mopped the blood from her face.

Then righteous anger came. Anybody who would cut a furrow across a state highway like that without hanging up signs and red lights should be—should be—

She opened the door and got out. She walked stiffly at first, but pain was subdued by her anger.

And then came wonder. The trough was glass-smooth and die-true. Sally could not imagine what could have done it. She noted the cylindrical hole and wondered if someone had been guilty of firing a heavy naval rifle in this direction. That was impossible, and she laughed bitterly at the idea of anything firing a shell that big in the midst of Ohio. Besides, anything of that nature would have torn the concrete or been splattered by impact.

Then as fate would have it, the black sphere took another aimless change in course—upwards. It emerged from the ground twenty feet from its point of entry and rose to a height of six or seven feet. It paused there, and once more changed course. It went along on a slight rise.

It passed through the trunk of a tree and sent it crashing down.

Sally backed a step. She looked at it in complete perplexity. It was—definitely was — and therefore not

hallucination. The falling tree proved it. Also there was that furrow in the road and the tunnel through the ground.

Sally Desmond was a bright enough young woman but no physicist. She assumed instantly that it was some sort of "secret weapon" either on trial or out of control. Obviously, in either case, the proper thing to do was to follow it until the proper authorities came for it. At least, they would come noisily, no doubt, perhaps even using planes. She could at least call attention to the thing.

Sally did not even have a fear of the unknown. "Unknown" to Sally was something supernatural. Sally believed this to be a natural enough phenomenon, doubtless under test, and therefore man-made and not dangerous. She knew that they tested torpedoes with dud warheads and flew guided missiles with equipment in them instead of explosive until they were needed against an enemy. Not dangerous, that is, unless you got in its way. Even a dud shell is deadly if you happen to stand in its path.

So for an hour she followed it as it wandered across the landscape. It wandered idly, changing course by any angle from a few degrees to almost a full turn every few feet—or every hundred feet as it pleased.

Its blackness remained unchanged. So did its apparent size, though in the course of an hour it cut troughs in the earth several times, took sections out of hush or tree, and once was underground for a full minute. That bothered Sally because she was afraid that it might come up under her feet.

But it came out a safe distance from her, poised above the ground, and then headed out across a field. Luckily for Sally Desmond, it cut the wires

of a barbed-wire fence. It passed through the spine of a cow and the results made Sally ill.

When the girl was through retching, which pained her injured rib horribly, the black sphere was passing through a hill. She went to the top of the hill and saw it come out and head for a farmhouse.

With a wordless cry, Sally raced it to the front door of the farmhouse and knocked on the door.

The door opened slowly. "What is it?" said a lazy voice.

"Look," said Sally, breathlessly.

"What is it?" asked the farmer with a tone of disbelief in his voice.

"I don't know but—"

"Dangerous?"

"Yes!"

"Then come inside."

"You don't understand—" Sally broke off and picked up a plank. She swung the plank at the sphere, hitting it squarely. The plank was cut—consumed—neatly, effortlessly, and with neither noise nor coruscation. A clean arc terminated the far end of the plank.

"Well! Stop it!" snapped the farmer.

"Nothing can stop it. You've got to—"

"I'll stop the damned thing," snarled the farmer running out to place himself between it and the farmhouse. He held up his hands as if he were going to catch a ball.

"No!" screamed Sally. "The plank!"

Reason penetrated the farmer's mind quickly. His gesture and his action had been purely instinctive, and he recovered almost quickly enough. His left hand hit the sphere lightly before it was withdrawn, but in that brief touch, the skin from the palm of his hand was removed. He howled and swore—and bled profusely.

Cursing, he watched the sphere enter the house.

Then he raced inside with Sally following. They arrived in time to see the sphere cut through the dining room table, neatly removing a plate of ham and peas, change course and go out through one of the standards that supported the porch and went on across the front yard.

"What—?" growled the farmer.

"Fix your hand," directed Sally. "I'm going to use the telephone." She looked at him. "And can you keep an eye on it?"

"You're damned right I'll keep an eye on it," snarled the farmer. "Someone's going to pay like hell for this!"

An hour later, the state police came, hue and cry, across the fields to where Sally and the farmer were watching the silent, aimless wanderings of the sphere.

She turned to them with a smile of relief. It was good to hand the responsibility of watching that deadly thing to someone in authority. "There it is," she told them.

Then she quietly fainted.

CHAPTER TWO

The Growing Sphere

THINGS moved more swiftly after that. The wires hummed from the farmhouse to state police headquarters, and official automobiles raced with screaming sirens to the scene. A roving guard was established, with portable radio gear to direct activities. The official cars brought a corps of state troopers under the direction of Major Harris. Awed, unbelieving, and yet with growing conviction that what they saw was real, they watched the aimless wanderings of the black sphere. They saw it cut tree and fence and ground with silent ease.

Convinced, Major Harris raced back to the farmhouse to call Washington. The troopers made a cordon around the area and orders were that no one should be permitted inside—and those inside would not be permitted to leave.

Sally Desmond looked wistfully at Major Harris. "Me, too?" she asked.

He smiled at her wearily. "You too," he said. "This is big and dangerous and entirely new. Until the mystery is solved, it's a matter of national security. It may be some sort of attack; it may be an enemy design of a new weapon that has gone astray.

"As for you, Miss Desmond, you are to remain, as we all are for the sake of keeping the secret. Your employers and family have been given a plausible explanation. You're not too badly off, after all—you're in at the beginning of one of the greatest scientific mysteries in the world."

"But I don't want to be in on any mystery," wailed the girl. "I want a change of clothing."

"We can arrange that."

She snorted bitterly. "And I'm supposed to wander around here and keep an eye on that terrible thing?"

Major Harris thought briefly. "If this continues," he said, "there will be need for a secretary. I shall impress you to that duty. Then you can keep busy—and be decidedly helpful since you've seen it in action."

"But it moves—"

"And we'll move with it," said Major Harris.

"Supposing it goes up?"

"Good suggestion. Helicopters and planes. And radar. But down—well, I'm no scientist, Miss Desmond. We'll let the scientists take care of this problem."

In the morning came another caravan of cars bringing Doctor Forrest of the Office of Scientific Research and

a group of his top-flight scientists. They watched it for a while. They measured its diameter from time to time by letting it pass through large sheets of metal. They measured its motion with precision. They found its appetite voracious and unselective; it consumed everything they shoved into it. They also discovered that there was a small gradient of air-pressure towards the thing; the atmosphere was entering it as each individual atom touched it.

But other than that they knew nothing. Its growth varied in an irregular curve. Its course showed no periodicity whatsoever; it was entirely random. Fused dynamite bombs thrust into the thing and theoretically exploded inside did nothing; the inference was that the dynamite was consumed before it had a chance to explode. Magnetic fields meant nothing to it, nor did heavy electrostatic fields.

At a much earlier date, when it was formed, fields of energy would have affected it, or coerced it. But now it was too large.

So for all their work, the top-flight scientists of the country knew no more about the ultra-black, all-consuming sphere than the girl. Neither she nor they could predict its future course, nor did any of them know what it was.

And so the incomprehensible sphere roamed the countryside for week upon week, and it grew. With it grew its list of depredations—and with that list grew the list of people entrapped by Security. It became eventually only a matter of time before the secret would be too big to be kept.

In time, the black destroyer came to the outskirts of the town of Mason, Ohio.

"Evacuate the town," ordered Major Harris.

It had to be done, and it was done—but no one can evacuate a town the size of Mason without having some word leak out. And because Station WLW is near Mason, the word went on the air. The next few hours brought newspaper reporters and radio commentators who gave the entire world the report.

It was a mad scene that they gave to the world. On one hand were engineers and sappers dynamiting the buildings of the town that were in the path of the thing—and cursing because the best prediction they could get was a law-of-probability course calculated by one of the world's finest mathematicians. Because of the uncertainty of the future course, many more buildings were blasted than necessary, but it was essential to keep from feeding the thing.

Anything to slow it down in its growth—to give them more time to study the thing before it became too big to handle.

Then following the sappers and engineers who were clearing the gross matter from its path—and Dr. Forrest cursed the fact that putting a vacuum around the thing was impossible—came scientists to measure and study.

They continued to measure its diameter. In the meantime, a group of technicians were pouring torrents of radio-frequency energy into the sphere from a group of radar trucks equipped with resonatrons and projectors. This had gone on for hours but with no apparent effect—and the radio was telling the world about it.

Major Harris came to Sally Desmond then and said wearily, "There's no more secret. You may go home if you wish."

She shook her head. "I'll stick," she said.

"Good," he told her with a smile. "You've been a good secretary, Sally. I appreciate this."

"Maybe it's just a morbid interest," she said. "But I'd rather be here where I can see doom approaching than to go back to work and wonder whether any work done anywhere will be worth while."

"We'll think of something," he told her.

"You haven't done it yet."

"I see the futility of it," he said, "but dammit, we were wrong in one thing. We should not have kept it secret until it became twenty feet in diameter. Perhaps, somewhere, there is someone who could have given us the answer to this, if he'd known."

"Unless it is deliberately and wantonly done," she suggested.

"That I hardly believe— Oh, the field-phone."

He spoke into the instrument. Then he turned to Sally. "Hire me some miners," he said. "The math-boys say there is a fine probability that the sphere will pass through that hill over there, and we must have it removed."

Sally shrugged. "But where does all the matter go?" she asked. "If it feeds on matter, it should be miles high by now. All that it has consumed—" She turned to the phone and started calling for great quantities of earth-moving machinery.

The black sphere continued to move incomprehensibly, and the radio commentators were describing every move.

DURING the weeks that his creation had been growing, Jed Malone had been making an easy safari across the country towards California. He was driving a ramshackle car, and he was making all

of the towns on the route where a college existed that had any kind of a physics department. He was seeking employment; employment and the right to experiment.

He was refused. Professors are loath to employ a man who has been laughed out of the American Physical Society. He was growing embittered, and promising revenge.

It was not an easy job working his way across the country. He took a job here or there for long enough to stake him to the next stop, and this took time, so that he had progressed only as far as Yuma, Arizona in the months between his unsuspected success and the day that the news was broadcast.

He was, that morning, washing the night's dishes in a dingy roadside eatery on the outskirts of Yuma.

The news came on after a selection of canned music, and the commentator was obviously trained to observe and narrate lucidly. Jed Malone stopped working to listen, one cracked plate poised over the dirty water.

The commentator was explaining a plan told to him by one of the scientists.

"They shouldn't do that," he said quietly, though with concern.

"Look, buddy," said the owner. "You're paid to scull them dishes, not tell the brains how to work."

"But I know."

The proprietor laughed crudely, and looked at Malone's threadbare appearance. "Look, bright boy, if you knew anything, y'wouldn't be here, see?"

"Yeah," drawled Jed, listening to the radio despite the owner's chatter.

"Yeah!" snapped the owner. "Then what's it?"

"That is a sphere of—"

"Muck," growled the proprietor. "Forget it and get to work!" He

snapped the radio off with a hairy hand.

Malone set the dish down

"They need me," he said. He rolled down his sleeves and started to leave. He was stopped by the same large hand that had turned the radio off. "You finish your job, or you don't get paid," the proprietor said.

Jed flung the hand off. "All right, I don't get paid," he said. He picked up his jacket and walked out.

Next to his ramshackle car was a sedan with a man and woman inside. Jed approached them and said, "Pardon me, but is there some way that I could borrow some gasoline?"

"Why, son?" asked the man.

"I've got to get to the telegraph office in Yuma. I've got to telegraph the Ohio State Guard about the—"

"Oh. Then you, too, have seen the truth."

"Well, yes," Jed said. "They're doing it wrong."

"Precisely," boomed the man. "I know what it is, too. It's them Martians."

"Huh?"

The man held up a copy of Groff Conklin's "Best of Science Fiction." It was turned to the story, "The Man Who Saved The Earth." "Martians," he said. "They want water—our water. And as soon as that thing finds an ocean, Mars will drain the earth of water."

The woman nodded sagely.

Jed shook his head. "If evolution has taken place on Mars," he started, "it will be an evolution that does not need—"

"Them canals were dug by water-hungry Martians."

"No—"

"Don't tell me!" stormed the man angrily. "I know. It's here!" Again he waved the book. He looked at Jed

Malone eagerly. "You're not Charley Houck—?"

"I'm Jed Malone, the man who generated that ne—"

"You're a crazy man," stated the other. He shoved his car in gear and drove off, nearly taking Jed's arm where it rested on the doorsill.

From behind came a rude laugh. "Hike it—brains!" said the proprietor of the roadside stand.

Jed got into his car and started to drive towards Yuma. He did not have enough gas to make it but what he did have would cover a good bit of the ground.

It was afternoon before he reached the telegraph office, having spent two hours finding a man who was willing to let him have some gas. He didn't know who might be in charge of the encampment in Ohio; he addressed the telegram to "Scientist In Charge" and wrote:

Have knowledge and mathematics complete to avert danger. Send expenses.

Jed Malone.

It bothered Jed that he couldn't be more explicit. The telegraph company refused to take a collect telegram to such an address, and Jed's funds permitted him only the ten-word maximum.

He waited in the telegraph office until it closed, and then he waited outside until the following morning. All that day he waited, and at nightfall, the manager came. "Young man, you'd better leave."

"But I'm waiting for an answer to my telegram."

"Those scientists don't have time for crackpots," the manager told him. Now go on, beat it, before I call the police."

"But how am I going to contact them?"

"From this office, you aren't. Why don't you hitch-hike?"

Jed looked around. The manager pointed down the street to a prowling police car headed their way. "Shall I?" he asked testily.

Jed left, wandering down the street in a completely frustrated daze. How to get to Mason, Ohio from Yuma, Arizona without a dime is quite a problem to one who has never vagabonded before. But time was important; the danger multiplied and multiplied again with each passing second.

It was desperate; any measures were justified. And Jed Malone was angry at his inability to make people believe. Angry enough, in theory, to kill—and, in practice, to steal.

IT WAS a big Cadillac, a fine heavy car with a tank full of gasoline and the keys hanging on the dash. Jed Malone stepped into it, turned the key, and roared off into the night without waiting for the engine to warm.

Behind him came the hoarse cry of the owner.

A few minutes later the police were seeking a large Cadillac driven by a seedy character who needed a shave, a change of clothes, and three days of square meals to catch up.

Morning found Jed Malone a long way from Yuma. He was dead tired, and to keep himself from going to sleep, he turned on the radio. A voice said: "... offered, it is certain that people all over the world are eager to give all they can to help. Seventeen thousand telegrams have been received, and at least a half a million letters. Some offer help; some just want to watch; others want money. It is, of course, impossible to read them all. I've been asked to request all of you to stop sending messages of any kind

to the Sphere Encampment. Your willingness to help is sincerely appreciated, but your messages are overloading the facilities of the public carriers, and interfering with the necessary transmission of vital messages."

He turned to another subject, leaving Jed completely beaten. His telegram, the one clue to the truth, lost in seventeen thousands of telegrams the writers of which knew nothing! And doubtless, he thought in sheer bitterness, the first to be discarded were those requesting money.

His road was a hard one. He invaded a farm for food and he cooked his first meal in days beside a small stream where he washed and drank. Partially refreshed, he continued with a growing worry about the state of his gasoline tank. With the dying gasp of the engine he saw a medium-sized town ahead, and he walked the rest of the way into town and waited until dark. Then he stole another car, this time a Ford coupe of considerable age and mileage.

Preferring the heavier, newer car for cross-country travel Jed drove the Ford out to his stranded Cadillac and transferred the gasoline. Then once more he took off toward the east, and while the police of the state of Arizona were looking for a Cadillac with the plates which had been assigned to it, Jed Malone was driving a Cadillac bearing the plates assigned to a 1939 Ford. And as the days wore on, Malone became bolder and bolder. He broke into a store and stole clothing. He emptied the contents of a cash register in a barber shop. He stole cars and drained them of gasoline and oil, and he made his way across the country at half the speed he might have made had he been operating with money and a car of his own.

M R GRIMES looked up with a frown as the door opened. "Yes, Professor Hansen."

"I've been thinking," said Hansen. "Seems to me that this black sphere might be some manifestation of that wild theory of—"

"I've considered that," interrupted Grimes. "I've also considered the fact that neither you nor I know all there is to know about physics."

"Then there may be some—"

"I doubt it. Look, Hansen, if I, myself, had been the only man to scoff at Malone's rather outrageous theory, I'd be willing to grant that there might be something to it. But recall. We had about three hundred of the local physicists at the meeting of the APS. All of us had the same reaction."

"True. But isn't this the time to try outrageous measures?"

Grimes smiled cynically. "Complete with Hopi Indian ceremonies and maybe a Salem Witchcraft program?"

"Not that bad—"

"Well, Hansen, Malone's theory sounded too much like factoring the square root of minus one into three unreal quantities."

"But there's always the chance that he struck something, and none of us had the wit to see it."

Grimes snorted angrily. "Did you know that Malone spent weeks in trying to show a manifestation of his theory and could not? Did you know that when I caught him in the act I noted one scrawl across his notebook to the effect that he was baffled because everything—every factor—was correct, and that perhaps he had better re-check the accuracy of his standards?"

"No, I didn't know that."

"Well, Hansen, I had them checked."

"So? You partially believed him, then?"

"Not at all," replied Grimes. "I had them checked for entirely another reason. He had been using standard equipment in a rather unorthodox hookup. I wanted them checked to be sure that he hadn't ruined their accuracy."

"And?"

"Luckily, he had not. Ergo, we can assume that his setup was perfect, and that even so, nothing took place."

"Right. I see your point."

Grimes smiled. "Then forget it, Hansen."

"I will. It was just that I've about come to the end of my rope and was casting about for something to cling to, no matter how far-fetched."

Grimes stood up and walked to the door with Hansen. "I don't think," he said, "that we need to fetch our explanation that far."

CHAPTER THREE

Fatal Error

THE CADILLAC thundered along the road out of Cincinnati, heading for Mason. Its driver was dead tired and hungry but the last lap of the rugged journey was at hand and Malone could not wait for sleep. He had succeeded, and now was running entirely on nervous energy. In fact, so wound-up was Jed Malone that he did not see the army jeep coming towards him.

Sally Desmond was no cowboy driver. She drove sensibly and with judgment, and at the sight of that big car coming towards her with what appeared to be a drunken weave—plus far too much speed—she pulled to the shoulder of the road. It was a sensible move.

But she hit a section where the concrete was a bit crumbled. It slewed

the rear end of the jeep out, pointing the vehicle towards the center of the road.

The Cadillac came on. The jeep, its skid stopped by expert handling at the wheel, half-crossed the road with Sally Desmond turning it sharply to get back to safety again. When Malone finally saw the jeep, he swung his car in a frantic effort to avoid collision, and he succeeded in avoiding a crash. But the Cadillac left the road, cut a telephone pole down, and rolled once.

Sally stopped the jeep and headed for the wrecked car. It was on its wheels again but the driver was slumped over the wheel, unconscious. Sally shuddered. She recalled turning over in her own car not many months before and it still hurt to think about it. She opened the door and her nose wrinkled at the shabby, unshaven appearance of the man who drove such an expensive car. But shabby or no, he was in need of medical aid.

She returned to her jeep and drove it into the field where she struggled Jed Malone from the Cadillac into the back seat of the jeep. Then she used the radio in the jeep to call Major Harris.

"How is he?" asked Harris after she had explained.

"Just unconscious, I think."

"Well, don't you touch him, Sally."

"I've put him into the back seat of the jeep. I was going to bring him in."

"Shouldn't have done that. You might damage him by moving him that way. Now leave him there. I'm sending the ambulance. Cadillac, you say?"

Sally gave him the license number.

"Um. Think I recall it vaguely."

"How?"

"Don't know. Radio listing, I think. However, I'm sending Martin and

Calloway out with the ambulance."

Sally waited, and after a long time Malone groaned. She passed a cool palm across his forehead and asked, "How are you?"

Malone aroused, sat up quickly, and said, "I'm Jed Malone," in a very thick voice. Then the reserve of nervous energy drained from him and he collapsed again. A moment later the ambulance came, followed by a car with Martin and Calloway. The medics took care of Malone and the ambulance drove off in the direction of the camp.

Martin consulted a booklet. "That's it," he said.

Calloway looked over Martin's shoulder and nodded. "He'll go to the clink for that."

"For what?" asked Sally.

"This car was stolen in Arizona some time ago. Later a Ford was stolen and found with the plates missing. The Cadillac plates were found in the ditch. Stupid of him to try anything so simple."

"But how do you know? You're not connected with Arizona."

Calloway smiled. "The car has been seen a couple of times," he said, "always on its way east. Unfortunately, never seen when anybody could stop it."

"Name's Malone," said Sally.

Martin shrugged. "His name's Mud," he replied. "No crook gives his right name, Sally. Feel okay?"

"I think so. I'm a bit shaky."

"Look," said Calloway, "I'll drive you back; Pete can drive the jeep."

Pete Martin grinned. "I'll match you for the prospect," he said. "Or are you going to pull your rank on me?"

"I'll pull my rank," smiled Calloway. "Sally would rather ride with me anyway."

"You leave me out of this or I'll

drive myself," replied Sally, grinning.

Martin and Calloway tossed coins and Martin drove Sally back, with Calloway following almost bumper to bumper and making faces. They arrived at the mobile encampment labelled "Spheresite" by newsmen. They didn't stop to watch the wandering black thing that now measured sixty feet in diameter, because they were used to seeing it. Getting through the guards was no trouble for them; but there was a triple row of armed men in uniforms to restrain the several thousand people who lined the marked circle.

Sally found Major Harris and inquired about the accident victim.

"The medicos say Mr. Malone is suffering from shock, malnutrition, and extreme fatigue," was his reply.

"But why—?"

Harris shrugged. "I wouldn't know. Apparently he is one of the thousands of people who believe that there is something that he can do about the sphere. Fanatic, no doubt. I'll bet a hat that when he comes out of his coma he will exhibit all the symptoms—anxiety neurosis, possibly a persecution complex, delusion of grandeur."

Sally smiled grimly. "I can see the first two," she said. "But why grandeur?"

"I mean that no doubt he will insist that he knows everything there is to be known about that thing—knows more and can do more than the top-flight physicists of the country—no, make that the world, now. Actually, the major countries of the world have all chipped in their brains."

"That's a good sign."

"Not entirely altruistic, though. If any secrets are to be uncovered, they all want an in. Normal; I don't blame them."

The telephone rang. The major

answered it, listened mostly, and then hung up with a smile. "Well," he said with a sigh of gratification. "We've uncovered something. The first glimmer just came through. Come on, Sally, we're invited to watch."

"How about Mr. Malone?"

"He's being transported to the city jail hospital. Too bad. Unstable people always go bats under this sort of strain. Forget him and come on. This is important!"

Important. The brooding black thing no longer roamed. Mile upon mile upon endless mile it had come since that day when Sally Desmond's car had been wrecked by the sphere of all-consuming blackness. Its path, at first, had been marked by holes of its own making. Its more recent trail was marked by dynamited buildings, excavated hills, chopped trees, and other man-made ruin to keep the sphere from its fodder.

But now its aimless wanderings had stopped. Sally breathed a prayer of thanks as she saw the thing immobile.

Beneath its vast curve, his head less than ten feet from the deadly thing, stood Dr. Forrest of the Office of Scientific Research and Development. His pleasant face was no longer lined with care. Instead, he had a jaunty, self-confident smile, and his attitude now was one of daring the devilish thing to move once more.

He spoke after the personnel had assembled, and amplifiers carried his voice to the waiting people outside the camp. The radio lines were there, too, carrying the news to the world.

"We have," he said, "succeeded in one thing. We have immobilized the roaming sphere. For the technical listener, I state openly that we have discovered that a high-intensity multipolar magnetic field coupled with a complex electrostatic field attracts the

sphere, as a ball bearing might follow a powerful magnet."

A LONG the road towards Cincinnati the ambulance roared, carrying Jed Malone's inert body. Unconscious because of fatigue, shock, and lack of food, Malone did not hear Dr. Forrest's voice coming from the radio in the ambulance.

"Now there are two courses we can pursue," said Forrest. "We could, if we wished, build a large steel shell around this thing and create a vacuum in the shell. This would stop its growth while we study it. The entire scientific world is curious to the extreme as to its nature, which we admit is utterly baffling.

"However, we are convinced that someday we shall know what it is—or was—without keeping it as a constant threat to our safety. So we won't keep it any longer than is necessary. The boys at White Sands have a rocket capable of attaining enough velocity to leave the Earth forever. Now that we can pin this devil down, we'll pin it down to the nose of this rocket and send it out into space—"

His final words were drowned out by a roar of applause, which died in a long sigh of relief—which changed into a period of rejoicing. Every man celebrated in his own way. Some prayed, some drank, some worked.

And one eventually came out of his coma and found himself looking at a prison orderly.

"How you feel, buddy?"

"Weak. Listen, I'm Jed Malone and—"

"I'm Henry Waldron, and so what?"

"Look, Waldron, I've got to get to the scene of the ne—"

"So's everybody else. But just relax. They've solved it, Malone."

Jed leaned back with a sigh of relief.

"Then they know."

"Enough, buddy. Enough. Now take it easy. You're in a bad jam, y'know. Stealing cars ain't good."

Malone smiled. "People will understand soon enough. You see, I made that negasphere inadvertently, and when I—"

"You made it," said the orderly in a soothing tone. His left hand was fumbling for the call button.

"I made it, by applying the principles of my theory, which was given at the American Physical Society. Now that they all know what it is, those who were there will know immediately that I'm right, and that my theft of the car was an attempt to help."

"Well, you can take it easy, doctor."

"I'm no Ph.D. Just a Master's degree so far. But this will be the turning point. They laughed at me when I presented that theory—mostly because they couldn't understand it. Now that they know all about it, I'll receive full credit."

The guard smiled tolerantly. "That may take a bit of time," he said. His job now was to keep the patient engaged in conversation until the psychiatrist arrived.

"No doubt. But it shouldn't be too long; there are my complete notes to refer to. I hope they're all right, by the way."

"Of course. And you don't have to worry about the sphere. They immobilized it with electrical gadgets. I hear that they could build some sort of a shell around it, make a vacuum inside to keep it from growing if they wanted to study—Hey, what's the matter?"

Jed Malone's face was becoming distorted in a look of sheer horror. "No!" he cried. "They mustn't!"

"Take it easy, Mr. Malone. They won't—they've got a better idea.

They're getting a rocket from White Sands and they're going to pin it to the nose of the rocket and fire it to hell out into space. That will—"

"God, no! That is certain death!"

"Now, take it easy. They know what they're doing."

"The fools!" cried Malone. "Waldron, you've got to help."

"Sure I will," replied the guard soothingly. His hand fumbled for the hidden call button once more and he signaled frantically. Elsewhere in the hospital, orderlies were stopped in their work while they took from the locker a straitjacket and restraining sheet. "Cripes," said one of them, "that guy Malone must be a real psycho."

The guard was saying, "Now tell me why the thing is so dangerous."

"You know what contraterrene matter is?"

"Contra-what?"

"Contraterrene matter. Means matter opposite to that found on the Earth—Terra terrene, pertaining to Terra, or Earth. Earthly, or terrene matter is made of atoms with protons in the nucleus. Protons have positive electrical charges. Contraterrene matter has negatrons in the nucleus; they have negative charges."

"And that thing is contraterrene matter?"

"No. That sphere is even more deadly."

"But what would be deadly about contra-what-is-it?"

"Protons and negatrons are opposing particles," explained Malone eagerly. "When they meet, they cancel one another."

"And then—" prompted Waldron.

"Like an atom bomb. Gives out with terrible radiations."

"And this what-you-call-it?"

"Negasphere," said Malone. "It is the absolute negative of everything. Nega-

tive space." Jed struggled for words to explain the theoretical concept to the guard. "It will absorb the universe as a blotter soaks up water."

"I don't quite get it," said Waldron. "What happens if it's shot out into space where it has nothing to feed on?"

"That's the point. Outer space is sheer vacuum. Ergo, the thing can grow."

The guard smiled. "So they've got it backwards, right? The way to make the sphere get smaller is to feed it all we can instead of removing everything in its path."

"Of course," replied Malone. "That's why the growth of the sphere is erratic," he explained. "It grows faster in a rarified medium. In the air, for instance, its growth is faster than it is when the sphere is passing through the ground, where the matter is denser. They've been measuring wrong," said Malone. "I could tell them."

"How would you go about it?"

"Instead of measuring the mass of stuff put into it and trying to make correlation between that and the size of the sphere, they should get a physicist to calculate the amount of space between the atoms in the matter and proceed on that basis, remembering that all the time the expanding sphere is growing on the space between the atoms. Its growth is proportional to the reciprocal of the presence of matter."

Something in Malone's mode of speech touched a cell of recollection in Waldron's mind. It irritated for a bare instant and then touched off a train of memory. A few years before there had been a fantasy writer in the mental institution adjoining the prison; a writer who had, for some months, begun to believe the things he had written. The writer talked much the same kind of double-talk.

Inadvertently, the guard chuckled. The writer had been as cuckoo as a clock and sounded it. So was and so did Malone.

Malone looked up sharply at the chuckle. "What's funny?" he demanded. "Nothing. You just reminded me of a guy named Wesley Long. He was—"

"I know Wesley Long! Dammit, you don't believe me!"

"Now, wait a minute—"

"You dope!" yelled Malone. "You—let me out of here where I can do some good!"

Malone sat up, swung his feet over the side of the bed, and stood up, tossing the covers aside. He started forward. Waldron came forward too and put his hands on Malone's shoulders soothingly. He pressed back gently but firmly.

"Lie down," he said in a calm, firm voice.

"Like hell. Lie down while they wreck the universe?"

He hurled Waldron's hands aside and followed with a long punch. Waldron turned and let the fist go over his shoulder, and as Malone was recovering from the miss, Waldron neatly slipped a hypodermic needle into the muscle of Jed's upper arm.

When the orderlies arrived, they found that they did not require their restraining sheets. Jed Malone was lying back on the bed mumbling incoherently about the function of radial increase versus the velocity of the center of the gasphere.

"D R. FORREST," said Sally Desmond, "I've some notes here you might like to see. I took them from Malone's wrecked car. A treatise of some sort, called 'A Theory on the Possibility of Negative Space', whatever that may mean."

Dr. Forrest laughed. "It's a rather interesting concept. I recall Malone."

"You know him?"

Forrest nodded. He told Sally about the incident at the American Physical Society, and then added, "Doubtless Malone's mind cracked a bit; he was probably hurrying here to tell us all about what to do. Negative space!"

Sally Desmond wrinkled her forehead. "Negative space—sounds as though it might mean solid matter."

"Hardly. 'Solid matter' consists of atoms separated by vast distances. Relative to their sizes, the atoms are about as far apart as the stars in the galaxy." He riffled through the pages of the manuscript and paused here and there. "Malone may have been cracked," he said. "Or more likely, completely self-sold on a theory of his own. However, I've seldom known a man capable of acquiring a master's degree in physics who couldn't think—no matter how warped his thinking was. Malone may have a few interesting points after all."

"Then it isn't all wasted?"

"Oh, no." Forrest leaned back in his chair. "We've a breather now," he said. "We're going to manhandle that sphere and that will be that. After we get that off our chest, we'll have a look at Mr. Malone's theories."

Forrest pressed the button on his desk communicator. "Franklin? Come in here a jno, will you?"

"Right," replied the mathematician. When he entered the office, Forrest handed the sheaf of notes to him.

"Sally retrieved them from that wrecked car," explained Forrest. "They might prove interesting."

Franklin riffled through the notes and then re-read the front page. "Jed Malone," he murmured. "Seems to me I recall a tale of woe about him. Isn't he the guy who got laughed off the

rostrum for some quarter-baked theory about matter and space?"

"The same."

"Well, when the cream of the world's physicists call a theory ridiculous, who am I to dispute them? What do you hope to find?"

"Just run through the math, Doc. Maybe the guy is dividing by zero or something to get the answers he got. I wouldn't know; you would."

"Oh, I'll take a look," smiled Franklin cheerfully. "It'll be interesting tracking down his errors."

Forrest nodded.

"Take your time."

"I'll wait until the rocket is fired. When's it going?"

"It's ready now," Forrest said. "We'll fire it at dusk tomorrow evening."

The mathematician nodded. "The synergy curve—"

Sally blinked. "The what?" she asked inadvertently.

Franklin came out of his mood of semi-abstraction. "What? Oh, synergy? It's a term invented to describe the idea of firing a rocket at such a time and in such a direction as to use the rotation of the Earth to add to the velocity. If we wanted to hurl the thing into the sun, we'd fire it at the crack of dawn. But we're firing it in the other direction, so that the course of the rocket will be a part-spiral curving around in the direction of the Earth's rotation. It will approach a radial course asymptotically by about midnight tomorrow night."

"We're firing the thing a bit to the north and toward the galactic rim," added Forrest for Sally's information. He stood up. "Going to tear into that paper or—?"

Franklin dropped the sheaf of notes on Forrest's desk. "Not me," he said with a laugh. "I'm going to watch you work. I'll skim through this after

we've shot the black menace out of the way."

CHAPTER FOUR

Into the Sun!

MALONE awoke just a few minutes after midnight, fully ten hours before the time predicted by the doctor who had examined Jed after Waldron's administration of the sedative. The doctor was unaware of the power of Malone's mental guardian. His subconscious knowledge of the danger that threatened all of the Earth and the universe was strong enough to fight its way through the sedative.

He had been fed by tube and so he was no longer weak from hunger, though he was still famished. He looked around cautiously in the darkened hospital ward. There was a light in the corridor, beyond the screen-glass doors, but there was no one in the room.

He tried to lift his arms and found them bound in the restraining sheet. He cursed silently and strained against the bonds. He was strapped in, but not too tightly. Apparently someone had made the decision that a completely drugged man need not be bound fast; somewhere Jed had heard that it was not good for anybody to lie in the same position too long, and the slight freedom in the sheet was left to give him some limited amount of motion.

Malone stopped trying his strength and began to think. An hour of work with teeth and the corner of the bed resulted in a tear that Jed widened bit by bit until he had one hand and arm free. A few moments later he stood beside the bed, wondering how he could get from the jail hospital in Cincinnati to the sphere site near Mason

while dressed in a hospital nightgown.

In the dim light, Malone draped the remnants of the sheet over a lamp cord that hung from the ceiling. Then he stood beside the door and emitted a howl.

An orderly came, peered through the door, and saw the sheet still swinging.

He opened the door to grab for what he thought to be Malone standing erect and trying to escape. Malone hit him with both fists from behind and he dropped like a log.

Jed bound the guard with the remains of the sheet and went out of the room dressed in the guard's uniform. He locked the door with the guard's key and opened the door at the end of the corridor. Here he found a cabinet that opened with another key and in that he found a revolver.

He confronted a second guard with the revolver and forced him to lead the way to the garage. Then in the same ambulance that had brought him there, Jed Malone left the hospital with the siren wailing. He drove like a madman and in a few minutes he was in the open country to the north of Cincinnati and on his way to Mason.

He turned on the police radio in the ambulance and listened, expecting momentarily that the thing would break out in a rash of orders to apprehend the fleeing ambulance.

It was nearing four o'clock in the morning by the time Malone approached the encircling fence. The gate swung wide. Malone saw a group of buildings. He pulled up before the nearest and stopped, the siren dying as he snapped the ignition off.

He took a deep breath. He was here! At long last he had arrived. Now—

Malone grunted. So he was here. All of his efforts had been aimed at arriving; he had laid no plans to be followed once he had arrived. He

must find someone in authority, and then convince them of the truth of his theory. But whom, and how?

Malone looked out the door of the ambulance and thought furiously. One of the gate guards was sauntering up the road towards him. Maybe the guard could tell him whom to see—

The radio, still turned on, blared forth: "Warning! Cincinnati and Mason police be on the lookout for the city ambulance which was stolen from—"

Malone snapped the switch, but the damage was done. The guard shouted and broke into a run. Malone ducked out of the opposite door and ran into the space between the temporary buildings. He crossed a mud-filled street and cut between two more buildings. Then, coming to the end of the settlement, Malone cursed, stopped, and with only a moment of pause, headed for an open window. He dove in, wriggled through, and somersaulted onto the floor, sitting up finally and—

He blinked at the sudden light that came from a naked electric lamp in the ceiling.

"Well!" said a cold contralto.

Sally Desmond stood beside her bed with one hand on the light switch and the other curled around a nasty-looking automatic that seemed ten sizes too large for her small fingers.

"Don't be alarmed," Jed told her. "I came here to—"

"I don't care what you're here for," she snapped. "You won't get it!"

"But I'm—"

"Oh. I didn't recognize you with your face washed," she said. "Mr. Malone, I believe."

"Yes. And the reason I'm here—"

"You'll tell it to the guards," she said. "And don't try to stop me. You're a trespasser, and I'm within my

rights if I shoot you." She turned to the door with a firm step that was not hindered by the clinging silk of her nightgown.

"Wait, please. Just listen to me for one minute—then call the guards if you still want to."

"She paused. "All right. Go ahead."

"Look," said Jed desperately. "They think that sphere grows on matter. It doesn't. It's negative space and instead of expanding when matter is shoved into it, it only grows when nothing is fed to it. I made it, and I know."

"Yes?" said Sally.

Malone pleaded, "It makes sense if you'll listen. "Reverse every law of the universe you can think of, and you have the physical continuum of negative space. It expands when nothing is fed to it, it contracts when matter is shoved into it."

"But it does expand—"

"Sure," he said dryly. "The densest matter is mostly empty space. But the negasphere expands when it feeds on empty space—or put it another way—it expands when it has no matter to restrict its growth. So it must not be fired out into space where it can expand without limit!"

"Once it is out in deep space, it will expand until all of our normal space is contained in it. Then it—not us—will be the universe."

Sally looked at him. "Where do you think they should put it?"

"Into the sun," he said.

"That's about all," she snapped. She started for the door again.

He smiled sourly. "Please let me have my say at the big boss's desk? I'd like to save us all—and you look so soft and pretty in that nightgown that I'd hate to see you die—"

"Oh!" exclaimed Sally, for the first time aware of her state of undress.

She looked downwards and gasped. And Jed Malone stepped forward and slapped at the gun, knocking it from her hand.

He smothered her in his arms and bore her back by sheer weight. He stifled her scream with a large hand and gritted his teeth when she bit into the palm and drew blood. But he bore her back and then carried her to the bed where he wound her in a sheet before he tied her securely.

He snapped out the light and said, "Occasionally it does happen that everybody's out of step but Joe. Every now and then one man alone knows the truth while the rest of the world scoffs and makes nasty cracks about his sanity. Usually the guy is vindicated long after his death. But I'd prefer that someone would be alive to vindicate me and for choice, I'd like to be alive to know about it."

"Now, maybe I'm nuts, and maybe the world is right and I'm wrong. But it stands to reason that I know more about that sphere than any living man because I made it—and by God I'm going to destroy it!"

The faint light from outside showed her eyes, large and round, looking up at him.

"Is the rocket ready?"

Sally paused, and then because she believed it impossible for him to do anything, she nodded. It was almost certain that Malone would be apprehended when he tried to approach the thing.

"If I let you loose, will you scream?"

Sally shrugged mentally. Then she shook her head. With a smile, Malone unbound her.

"I'm doing this because I want to convince you," he said. "I'm no criminal. But certain things have to get done, legally or not. What is your name?"

"Sally Desmond."

"Then, Miss Desmond, you will put on a dress and you will walk with me as though you were walking with a friend. People will die if you don't—and probably the universe will too."

Sally slipped a dress on quickly. Here she could do nothing. Out there, something could be done somehow.

With his hand on the gun in his pocket, Malone walked with Sally to the jeep parked in front of her door. They got in, Sally driving.

They left the street as the searching guards rounded the other end and sent up a hue and cry. Then they were out of earshot and driving like mad away from the settlement towards the huge bulking sphere of blackness that was becoming visible in the graying sky.

THE SHOUTING rose. Dr. Franklin opened the door of his shelter in time to see Major Harris and Dr. Forrest racing across toward their jeep. He followed and dived into the rear seat as Harris took off with a jerk.

"What's up?" he gasped.

"Malone's escaped. Clipped a guard and swiped the ambulance and drove."

"Where—?"

"Got in. Disappeared. Last seen driving with Sally out towards the Thing."

"Got to find him," gasped Franklin.

"Damned right. Madman might wreck the ship."

"We'll get him," said Harris, turning out of the street and racing across open country.

The other jeep was far ahead and Harris drove like fury to catch up.

"Take it easy," yelled Forrest. "He's got Sally, remember?"

Harris groaned and cursed, but he did not slacken their speed. He reached for the radiophone and spoke: "Take

it easy," he ordered. "That's Malone and he's nuts. He's got Sally for a hostage."

Malone and Sally drove up to the hulking black sphere that was poised atop the waiting rocket.

"I don't like this," he said quietly, "but remember what will happen if you yell."

"I know," she said.

"I'm not afraid to start shooting," he told her. "The entire universe rests on this, you know." He lifted the pocket of his coat meaningly. "I'm just a friend that wants to see the thing with you."

"I remember," she said. She turned from him to the guards and watched them start to gather in order to investigate this early-morning visitation.

She did not believe Malone. To permit him to follow through was death anyway if he hurled the nega-sphere into the sun. Either way was death, but one way was life for the rest of the world at least.

"It's Malone," she cried. "Get him!"

Sally threw herself forward onto the ground, trembling as she waited for the thunder of the gun and the shock of the bullet.

Malone cursed, and dropped beside her. "Shoot!" he snarled at the four guards. "Shoot and be damned to you."

Sally turned over and clawed at him. He slapped her hands away, caught her wrist and twisted it so that the girl turned over again, away from him. He brought her wrist up between her shoulder blades until she whimpered, and then he yelled:

"Shoot, damn you."

"You can't do this, Malone!"

"I'm doing it!"

"There's four of us. We'll get you."

"Not before I get her." Malone

peered over Sally's shoulder and fired once. The foremost guard howled and dropped his rifle; his arm was shattered at the elbow.

The second guard lifted and aimed. The corporal knocked the gun down. "There's help on the way," he said. "What do you want, Malone?"

"Drop your guns and march away," snapped Malone.

"Okay, but don't hurt Sally."

"Do as I say and everybody will be all right."

There was a clatter of guns and the guards moved aside slowly. Malone stood up, almost lifting Sally by her bent arm. She cried out in pain and Malone said, "It would have been easier to take it quietly. Now march!"

Major Harris peered through the morning haze and cursed again. "What are they doing?" he asked.

Forrest did not have the job of keeping his eyes on the ground for driving, but the bouncing of the jeep made clear seeing difficult. "He's bluffed the guards," he said. A moment later the sound of the shot came to them.

"Sally?" groaned Harris.

"No. Malone fired that from the ground. I saw the flash."

"What are they doing now?"

"The guards are leaving—Malone's leading Sally towards the firing panel."

"The devil."

Harris trod on the gas.

"The firing panel," he yelled. "The devil's going to fire the rocket?"

"Fire it or wreck it!"

"Wreck it, I hope. We can get another—"

"He's firing it!"

Franklin looked at his watch. "It'll hit the sun if he fires it now," he yelled. The roar of the jeep almost covered his voice and the jouncing

made it almost impossible to keep his seat. "Listen, there's something."

"The sun!" screamed Forrest. "Faster!"

Then from the base of the rocket came a narrow tongue of fire. It swelled and it mushroomed out beneath the firing frame.

Harris gave one last spurt and then swung the jeep in a short arc that tumbled Franklin out onto the ground. Harris, braced and prepared for the jolt, landed running, took a half dozen steps and dove flat on his stomach behind a hummock of ground. He drew his revolver.

The flare of flame billowed and the rocket lifted uncertainly a few feet and hung there, poised on its pillar of flame. This was the critical moment.

"God!" prayed Harris, aiming the gun carefully. His hand squeezed on the trigger.

"No!" screamed Franklin. He raced forward and leaped, kicking at the revolver in Harris's hands.

And at the same instant, the rocket flared in a torrent of flame and started to lift. Slowly at first it went, then

it moved faster and finally took off into the sky with a screaming roar. The monstrous sphere of negative space went atop the rocket and as they headed into the graying sky, the jet-black sphere outlined the roaring flame of the rocket.

Rocket, flame, and sphere diminished and disappeared.

"I missed the devil— Dammit, Franklin, why did you—?"

"He did it!"

"Yes!" roared Harris. "Now what?"

Franklin grinned. "It's all right. He's right, you see! I was trying to tell you before— I spent all night working on his report. He's right. The center of Sol is the place for that thing." Franklin went back to the jeep. "I'll explain later. Let's go see Malone. We've got a lot of apologizing to do to that young man."

But when they arrived, they had no more than time to repeat Franklin's statement; then Jed and Sally were busy apologizing to each other—too busy to take any notice of anyone else's attempts along the same line.