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IMAGINATION

JANUARY 1952

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STORIES OF SCIENCE AND FANTASY



Introducing the

AUTHOR



• PHOTO BY VICTOR BARNABA

★
Kris Neville
★

I was born in Carthage, Missouri. I'm rather proud of the town.

If you stand in the cupola of the courthouse you stand on the highest point in Jasper County, and I've heard it said you can see three states from there. The biggest battle in the Civil War before Bull Run was fought in the vicinity, and in 1865 so thoroughly had the war decimated the citizens nothing moved in the streets but an occasional deer.

I was born in 1925. By that time civilization had pushed the deer back into the upstate forests. A few years later - - this is one of my first memories - - the city built a swimming pool in Central Park. I went over to watch the construction, and one of the workmen gave me two lumps of the concrete. One was black and one was red. I remember being

very excited about the gift. Not everyone, I realized, had samples of the Carthage swimming pool for his very own. . . .

When I was six or so I went with my father to Center Creek to catch a few soft-shelled crawfish for bass bait. We arrived around midnight and ignited the carbide light. In hot pursuit of soft-shells we innocently trespassed upon private property within fifteen minutes. And shortly we spotted a tall, thin female hurrying through the darkness toward us. She wore a breeze whipped white nightgown and carried an old fashion lantern. When she drew close enough, she asked politely, "Have you gentlemen lost something in my brook?"

It's really surprising how writing
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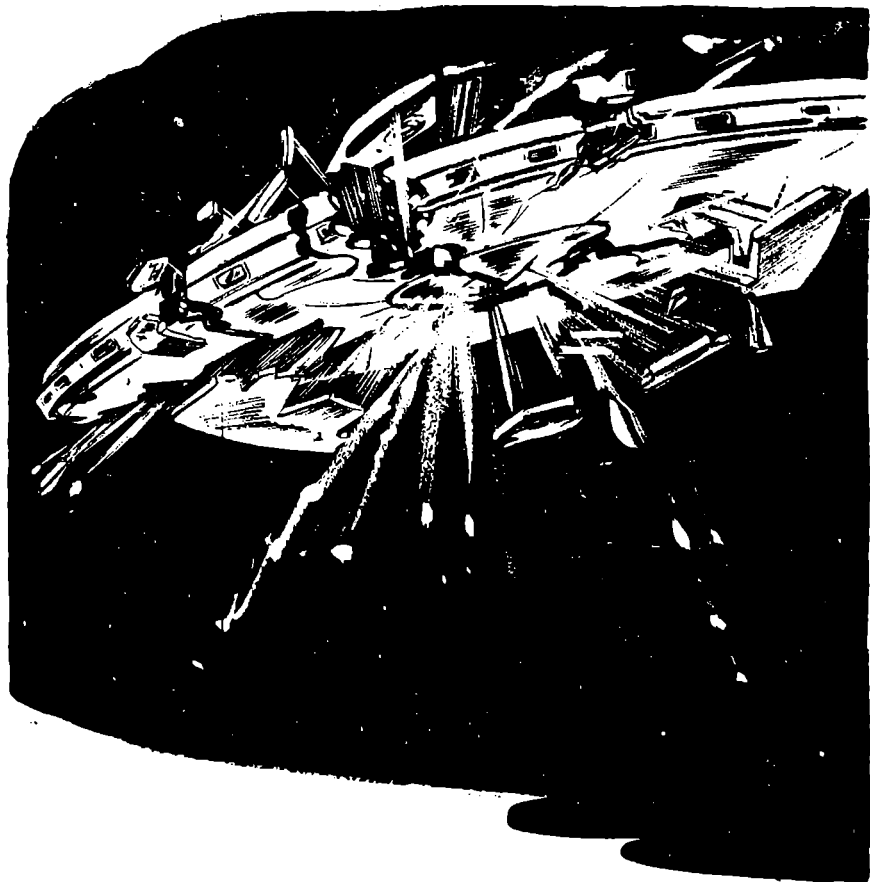
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The Σ ditorial



pressed us, and we think you'll like it too.

THIS month's cover for example, is a "first" by talented artist, Bill Terry. When Bill asked us for an assignment to do a cover we obliged by giving him Kris Neville's novel to illustrate. We admit that we had our fingers crossed, wondering if Bill could really turn in a top notch cover with his first try. One look and our doubts vanished. The cover is not only good from an artistic standpoint, but Terry managed to inject something new into it: utilizing the story title as an integral part of the cover itself. This, in a sense answers the requests from many of you readers to eliminate boxes and extraneous type from the cover. Here you have a terrific science fiction painting with the lead story title as part of the scene. It im-

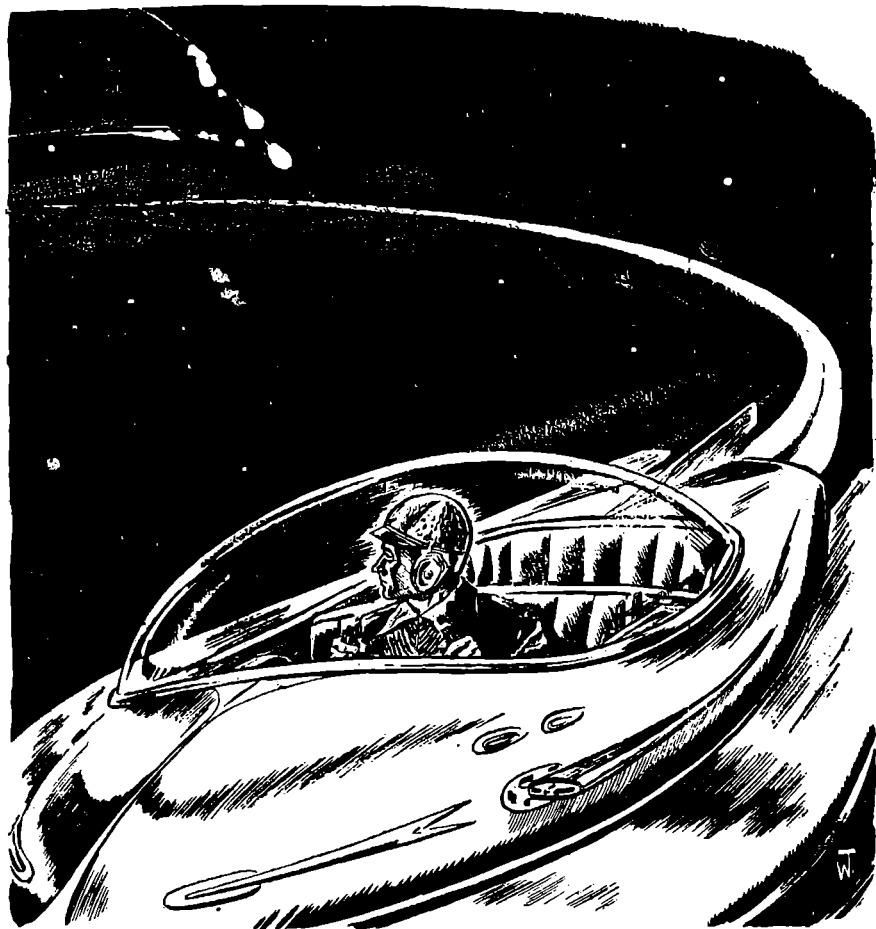


**Parr came to Earth as the advance guard
for an invasion. His mission: to see that every
person received a package that was being mailed—**

SPECIAL DELIVERY

By

Kris Neville



CHAPTER I

A CANNONADE of shell fire met the silver listening post as it zipped across the moonlit desert. It twisted erratically, trying to dodge. Then a radar controlled gun chuckled to itself, and the listening post faltered in flight, slipped air,

plunged sandward.

In the Advanceship, far above and to the west, one of the Knougs pressed a button and the listening post exploded in a white flare.

Afterwards, no fragments could be found. The newspapers said the usual thing. The government issued the usual profession of disbelief — and

finally even the gunner became convinced of the usual explanation: he had tried to pot Venus.

While on the Advanceship the Knougs continued to prepare for D-Day.

CHAPTER II

THREE days later, on D-Day minus thirty, the Advanceship began to move eastward, seeding down advancemen toward strategic centers in North America.

Towns with big post offices.

And then on over the Atlantic toward other continents.

Parr was the first advanceman to land. The coat tails of his conservative double breasted suit fluttered gently as he fell; air, streaming by, fretted his hair. Except for the anti-grav pack strapped to his back, he could easily have been mistaken in a more probable setting for an Earthman.

Minutes later his feet touched the ground with scarcely a jolt. He peeled out of the anti-grav pack, pushed the button on its disintegrator time fuse and dropped the pack. He lit a cigar and blew smoke toward the cold bright stars.

He walked from the weedy lot to the nearest bus stop. No one else was waiting. Darkness had concealed his descent. He sat down, stared stolidly at the darkened filling station on the opposite corner.

When he was halfway through the cigar the Los Angeles Red Bus came

by and he stood up, boarded it, fumbled in his pocket for change.

"Thirty cents, buddy," the driver said.

Still holding the cigar, Parr counted out two dimes and two nickles. He tried to hand the driver the coins, which were excellent imitations, as was his suit, his cigar, and all the rest of the Earth articles.

"Put it in the box, buddy."

Parr obeyed.

"Hey," the driver said as Parr turned. "Your check." The driver held out a strip of red paper.

Parr took it.

"No smokin' on the bus, buddy."

Parr dropped the cigar and mashed it out. He shuffled down the aisle, sank into a seat and half closed his eyes.

Furtively, then, he began to study the occupants — his first near-at-hand contact with the natives. At the same time he tried to form a mental liaison with some of the other advancemen.

For a moment he thought he had one to the east, but there was a hazy swirl of interdiction that erased all contact.

ABANDONING further attempts he tried to search out the frequencies of the minds about him. Once he managed to touch a series of thoughts innocently concerned with household details and with an overtone of mild and nameless anxiety. Aside from that he received nothing except the din of electronic im-

pressions at the extreme lower end of his range.

He half-turned to stare out of the window. The passing landscape was peaceful in starshine and the buildings stood proudly defenseless. In imagination he saw the illuminated, "You'll : take -a -shine - to - this - fine - wine" sign hanging askew over a backdrop of smoking rubble. And it was delicious to know that this would be fit and proper.

Although the preliminary intelligence report (based on nearly four years of preparatory scouting) contained no instance of Oholo activity on the planet, he listened, high up, on their frequencies, (particularly here, vulnerably near their own system it would be no fun fighting them.) He let his shoulders slump with relief, let the smile of satisfaction come. As reported, the frequencies were clear: Earth was, indeed, their blind flank.

He closed his eyes, relaxed completely, took quite a joy in the knowledge that shortly Earth would be the lethal dagger pointed at the heart of the Oholo system.

At the Beverly Hills transfer-for-Hollywood - the - film - capital - of - the - world Station, two drunks boarded the bus and settled in the rear, singing mournfully.

Parr grew increasingly irritated by the delay. When the bus finally started, making the sharp turn from the lot and throwing his body to the right against the steel ledge of the window, he cursed under his breath.

The dismal singing went on. It picked up telepathic overtones, and Parr gritted his teeth trying to block out the bubbling confusion that scattered from the drunken brain. He opened and closed his fists. Anger flared at him: the anger of impotence. For a moment, he dared to imagine the planet contaminated, the population quietly dead, the Knougs working from sheath hangers. Only for a second; but the brief thought was satisfying, even as he forced himself to agree with the strategy of the War Committee: which was to leave the planet as nearly unpoisoned as possible by even a minor land war.

Finally the song bubbled to silence. Half an hour later the bus turned on Olive Street and the gloomy Los Angeles buildings hovered at the sidewalks. It pulled in at the Olive Street entrance of the Hill Street Terminal and Parr got out.

He walked out of the lot and started downhill toward the Biltmore Hotel.

WHEN Parr awoke he knew that something had been added to Los Angeles during the night. He shivered involuntarily and tightened his thoughts down to the place where no fuzzy, side harmonics were possible.

He was afraid—the startled afraidness of finding something deadly underfoot. Gradually he made his body relax; gradually he quieted his twin hearts; gradually he corralled his

breathing. Then he let out a wisp of thought as tenuous as mist.

And he sensed the Oholo's mind again. Very near to his own. He closed his mind quickly, waited breathlessly to see if the Oholo had detected him. His ears hummed with danger for he was within mental assault range.

There was no answering probe and after a moment he got up cautiously.

Feeling the rug beneath his bare feet made him wince with a blind associational terror which he could not immediately analyze. Then, looking down, he thought of the tickle of Tarro fur. He half expected to see the dark stains on the rug too. Always, on Tarro fur—remembering—there were those stains. They had been a difficult people to rule. As *agent provocateur*, (that had been several years ago on Quelta) he had reason to expect blood.

He crossed to the trousers neatly folded over a chair. In the left front pocket was the comset. He fumbled it out and standing naked in the gloomy dawn, whispered: "Parr. There is an Oholo in my hotel."

After a pause the comset issued the tinny question: "Is he aware of you?" The voice filtering through the small diaphragm was without personality.

"I don't think so."

There was silence. Then: "Is he open?"

"I think . . . he is, yes."

"Find out for sure!"

The comset was cold in Parr's

hand. He stood shivering. He rubbed his left hand over his naked flank.

HE tried to kill his thoughts against the command from the Advancement, tried to let the drilled in obedience take over. He opened the receptive portion of his mind as far as it would go, knowing that within seconds seepage would be as loud as thunder because he was not adept at double concentration. But even before one second had gone he snapped his mind closed again.

The Oholo was open.

"Parr," he whispered hoarsely into the comset. "He's open."

" . . . He can't know we're here, then. What did you learn?"

Parr mopped his forehead with the back of his hairy arm. "I just kept receptive a second."

"Keep checking, then." •

Parr let the comset fall to the chair. He walked to the window and looked out at the haze bound city. Early sunlight fought blue smog. Across the street the Pershing Square pigeons waddled self-consciously about on the grass beside the new fountain, picking at invisible tidbits and cooing.

Parr rubbed his throat trying to massage away the inner tenseness. He was alone against the Oholo. An aloneness that he had not been prepared for. And he worried at the fear that was inside him.

He dressed with awkward fingers and left the room, his eyes darting suspiciously along the corridor as he

drew the door closed behind him.

He walked quickly down the carpeted stairs and through the front doors of the hotel. Several times he glanced over his shoulder as he hurried toward Sixth Street.

After four blocks he was sure that he had not been followed. He entered a restaurant. He ordered, reading from the menu.

He did not enjoy the meal.

AFTER eating he took a cab to the office of R. O. "Bob" Lucas, Realtor. The Advancement had determined that Lucas was the agent for an empty warehouse on Flower Street.

Parr exposed a bulky wallet for Lucas' benefit and began to rustle bills with blunt, stubby fingers. Within minutes he had signed a six month lease.

After making an appointment for three o'clock Tuesday at the warehouse, Parr left Lucas' office and caught a cab to a typewriter shop. He purchased a Smith-Corona portable, a ream of corrasable paper, a disk eraser, and five hundred business envelopes. At the bookstore next door, he bought a United States Atlas.

After that he took a cab to the post office, had the driver wait while he rented six postal boxes under the name A. Parr and bought twenty sheets of air mail stamps.

In the cab once more, he concentrated on the city map that had been impressed electronically on his brain.

"Drive out Sixth Street," he ordered, being very careful of his enunciation.

A half dozen blocks out Sixth, Parr located a hotel on the right side of the street. It was a reasonably safe distance from the Biltmore. He ordered the driver to stop.

The building sat atop a hill, the street before it twining briskly toward the center of town. Parr studied the building for a moment, memorizing details of architecture for reference.

Then settled with his purchases in a front room on the 3rd floor, Parr opened the Atlas to the Western United States and marked out the territory assigned to him with the heavy ink lines of his pen.

Having done that, he listed all the names of the included towns.

Then he sat down at the portable, inserted a sheet of paper and wrote:

"To the Chamber of Commerce, Azusa, California. Gentlemen: Please send me the current city directory." He looked at the postal numbers. "My mailing address is . . ." He typed in the first number on the list. " . . . Los Angeles, California. Inclosed is five dollars to defray the costs. Thanking you in advance, A. Parr."

HE studied the letter. It was a competent job of typing. He flexed his fingers, found them slightly stiff from the unaccustomed work.

He ran his eyes down the list of towns, inserted another sheet of pa-

CHAPTER III

per.

"To the Chamber of Commerce
... "

He stopped typing.

He sat before the typewriter imagining the number of directories, imagining the staggering total of individual names.

He thought of the Advanceship and its baffling array of machines that would automatically scan the directories and print a mailing label for each of the names. He thought of the vast number of parcels waiting to be labeled, as many as fuel requirements permitted the Ship to carry. And of the even vaster number that the synthesizer was adding out of the native resources. The smooth efficiency of the Advanceship, the split second timing of the whole operation . . . And all of it auxilliary timing to the main effort. Even with superior weapons, even with complete surprise, the Knougs were taking no chances. The job of the Advanceship, the job of Parr, was to demoralize the whole planet just before the invasion. To insure an already certain victory.

He turned back to the typewriter, wrote a few more words.

There was still the awareness of the enemy Cholo in the back of his mind.

He split the list of cities into six equal groups for box numbering.

Several hours later another tenant complained about the noise of the typewriter. Parr gave the clerk fifty dollars and continued to type.

PARR spent the morning of Tuesday, D-Day minus 28, in his hotel room, reliving what seemed now to be the extremely narrow escape of the previous morning. He imagined what he *might* have done: assaulted the Oholo mentally, or struck him down with the focus pistol when he tried to leave the hotel. And having imagined the situations he proceeded to explain to himself why, instead, he had fled.

At eleven o'clock, by prior arrangement, he reported to the Ship and from it received the reassuring information that the now alerted advancesmen had been able to find no other Oholo.

At noon he went out to eat and then for an hour walked the streets, studying the people and their city. Most particularly he listened for accent, intonation. He was afraid to drop his mind shield to try for telepathic contact with them.

A few minutes before three o'clock in the afternoon his cab drew up to the warehouse. The air was hot and sour smelling and Parr was restless. The realtor was waiting for him on the sidewalk. Parr nodded curtly. The man bent clumsily and rattled keys at the lock.

"Here it is," Lucas said.

Parr walked into the warehouse.

It was an old building. Perhaps shabbier, dustier than he had expected. The air was stale and faintly chilly with decay. Remnants of pack-

ing crates, wrapping paper, labels and twine had been heaped in a greasy pile in a far corner.

Parr sniffed suspiciously as his eyes darted around the room.

Across from him, above the rubbish, an electric box indicated that the building had at one time been industrialized at least to the extent of a few heavy power tools.

Parr walked to the stairway.

"I'll want someone to clean this mess up," he said curtly.

"Yes, sir," the realtor said.

"Tomorrow," Parr said.

"All right," the realtor said, consciously omitting the "Sir" as if to reassert his own individuality.

Parr glanced at him. "I'll send you sufficient money to cover the fee." Without waiting for an answer, he started up the stairway.

The upper two floors were in much the same condition as the first. From the third there was a narrow flight of steps slanting to the roof. Parr eyed it with disapproval.

"Narrow," he said.

"There's seldom any reason to go up there . . . sir."

PARR went up. At the top of the flight, he forced back the door and clambered into the shed which opened onto the roof. Parr dusted his knees. He stepped outside, and the gravelly finish grated under his shoes. The air smelled of warmed over tar.

He tugged restlessly at his chin. It was a good, substantial roof. As the listening post had reported. Good enough for pickup and delivery. He permitted himself a glimmer of satisfaction.

He heard movement behind him. Instinctively he whirled around, his hand dipping toward his right coat pocket, the memory of the Oholo—the vision of a composite Oholo face surprisingly like an Earth face—flashed across his mind. The realtor's head bobbed into view, and Parr relaxed his tense muscles.

"How is it up to here?"

Parr rumbled an annoyed and indistinct answer and turned once more to the roof. When the realtor stood at his side, Parr said, "I want that shed thing ripped off and a chute installed, next to the stairs. Have it done tomorrow."

"I'm . . ." the realtor began. But he looked at Parr's face and licked his lips nervously. "Yes, sir," he said after a moment. "Anything I can do. Glad to oblige."

"That's what I thought," Parr said, and Lucas shifted uneasily.

Parr turned to the stairs. Going down he could see dust motes flicker in the fading light at the dirty west windows.

Outside he watched the realtor lock the doors.

"Keep the keys," Parr said. "Send them to me at the Saint Paul Thursday morning. At eight o'clock."

The realtor said, ". . . Yes, sir."

AT six o'clock Parr was in his hotel, undressed, making preliminary arrangements by telephone to hire a fleet of trucks. He had already placed an advertisement for shipping clerks and common laborers in *The Times*: interviews Thursday from ten to four at the Flower Street warehouse.

After finishing with the truckers, he phoned four furniture companies before he found one open. He ordered it to deliver a desk and two dozen folding chairs to the Flower Street warehouse Thursday morning at nine-thirty.

All the while the Oholo was in the back of his mind, now sharp with sudden memory, now dull with continued awareness.

He checked the schedule the Ship had given him.

He took the comset, flicked it on. "Parr. I'm scheduling. I'll need a packet of money along with the dummy bundle. Can you deliver them both to the warehouse tomorrow night?"

"We can."

"Good," Parr said, swallowing, and there was perspiration on his upper lip.

"Have you contacted the Oholo again?"

He felt his blood spurt. "Not yet," he said.

He waited.

Then: "Think you can handle him mentally?"

Parr glanced at the mirror, saw how taut his reflection was.

"I'm not very sure," he said.

"Well, physically, then?"

Parr let out his breath slowly. "I don't know."

"Try. Either way. Get rid of him. An Oholo could cause the invasion trouble."

Parr plucked nervously at his leg. "If I'm not able to?"

The comset was silent for a moment. Then the impersonal voice said, "If you are killed in the attempt, we will replace you." It paused for a reply. Receiving none it continued: "Get what information you can, even at the risk of exposure. It's too late now for them to mount a defense, and they probably have no way to alert the natives. We want to know what he's doing there, and if there are any more on the planet."

"All right," Parr said, and he realized, gratefully, that, to the Ship, his voice would sound emotionless.

He dropped the comset. His hand was shaking.

Not so damned good. How to kill the Oholo?

HE tried to steady his nerves by remembering other planets, other times. He had faced danger before, and he was still alive. Except that before the danger had never been an Oholo. He had been Occupation, not Combat. He remembered the few captured Oholos he had seen. They died slowly when they wanted to be stubborn.

Finally he crossed to the bed and

stretched out naked, relaxing slowly, knowing that the time had come to get what information he could. Muscle by muscle he began to go limp.

Slowly, very slowly, he dissolved his mind shield. When it was completely gone he began to inch out, to flutter out, concentrating with all his power a stream of receptive thought on the Oholo frequencies high up and uncomfortably shrill.

He located the mind, far away, and he began to skirt in toward it, his own mind trembling in anticipation of the blow if he were detected.

He inched closer trying to make himself completely non-transmitive. He could feel seepage around the beam, and he shunted it to a lower frequency, holding it there, suppressed. The effort blunted his full concentration and when he finally began to get Oholo thoughts they were blurred. He picked up a scrap here, a scrap there, his body tense.

When he relaxed at last, forming his shield solidly, he was weak. He held the shield desperately, chinking it against a possible attack. None came. The Oholo was still completely unsuspecting, completely lulled by the security of its environment.

Feeling a sense of elation and a new confidence, Parr went to the comset. "Parr. Oholo report."

"Go ahead."

Parr concentrated on the wording, filling in the blank spots with his imagination. Suddenly he was conscious of an inadequacy, something elusive that he should be able to

add. He wrinkled his face, annoyed. But the uncertainty refused to resolve itself into words. "His name is Lauri. He's here on a mission having to do with the natives. I got no details, but it doesn't directly concern us, I'm sure of that. There appear to be several more on the planet. They seem to avoid cities, which accounts for the fact that advance-men haven't reported them." For a moment, he almost placed his thoughts on the elusiveness, but again it escaped him. He paused, puzzled.

"We'll have the advancement warned. This may be damned inconvenient, Parr. If there are many of them."

"I couldn't get the exact number without exploring his mind. If I'd done that, I might not have been able to report afterwards."

"Go on."

"He's leaving the city in a few days. You still want . . . me to try to kill him?"

"Yes."

The Oholo, Parr could not help remembering, had as strong a mind as he had ever encountered.

WEDNESDAY morning Parr walked to the Biltmore, not hurrying, not anxious to face a free and dangerous Oholo.

At the side of the hotel he risked contact. A shutter movement of thought told him the quarry was still inside the building.

He crossed Olive at Fifth with the

light and angled right into Pershing Square. He located a seat from which he could observe the entrance of the Biltmore. For one moment he considered mental assault; but remembering how strong the mind was he faced he discarded that course.

He waited. He walked around the Square. The morning seemed endless.

Finally he risked another shutter of thought.

The Oholo was still there.

Noon.

He ate in a drugstore across the street.

Still there.

As the afternoon wore on, the weariness of waiting left his body and the success of the shutter contact inflamed him with confidence. He could cross the street, enter the hotel, seek out the room. But he delayed—without admitting to himself that he was still afraid.

The gloom in the air was pre-sunset, city gloom, nostalgic. He consciously dilated his pupils to accommodate the fading light, unaware now of the scurry of people on the sidewalks and the roar of the city cloaking for night amusement. Neon lights came on like cheap fire, out of the darkness, infinitely lonely.

He shifted uncomfortably. He stood up. He could wait no longer.

Then a man and woman emerged from the hotel. And he tensed. A wisp of thought, unsuspecting, floated to him on mental laughter.

The Oholo, Lauri.

He shielded his mind even tighter,

scarcely thinking.

He began to amble in the direction the couple were taking, keeping to the opposite side of the street.

At Sixth they turned toward him, waited through the yellow for the green light. They crossed.

He paused studying a Community Chest sign, his hearts pounding uncertainly. He felt a curious little probe of thought that was delicate and apologetic, as if reluctant to intrude upon anyone's privacy. It passed him by undetecting.

THE man bent toward the girl, a pert blonde, and laughed in answer to something she had said. Parr watched them go by and then at a short distance swung in behind them. He touched the focus weapon in his right hand pocket, a crystal-like disk with one side tapering to a central point. It was a short-range weapon, palm aimed, fired with an equally exerted pressure on the lateral sides.

Even with his mind closed Parr could catch ripples of Oholo thought: amusement, sympathy, appreciation. For a moment he was afraid that he had been mistaken somehow, for again there was the elusiveness, an unreality he could not account for in terms of the situation.

Parr narrowed the gap between himself and his prey.

And they turned a corner. Parr crossed the street, drew still closer, in time to hear the girl say, laughing, " . . . slumming once before I go back."

The crowd thickened and Parr found himself sidestepping passers-by. He was almost near enough, and his hand was moist on the focus gun.

The couple turned into a cellar night club. Parr swore to himself. Taking a nervous breath, he descended the steps. He nodded to the bouncer-doorman who was leaning idly against the wall.

He stepped into the night club. He saw the man help the girl to a table.

Parr brought out his hand. His eyes were suddenly hot and beady with excitement.

On the far side of the room he saw the black lettered sign, "MEN." He would, in crossing to it, pass directly by the Oholo's table.

As he began to move forward a woman stumbled unsteadily against him, knocking him off balance.

"Whynacha watch where ye're goin', ya . . .," she began shrilly, but, with his left hand, he brushed her out of his way. She took a half step backwards, undecided.

He turned to glare at her and under his gaze she looked away and tugged nervously at her dress.

Parr walked swiftly toward the rest room, his every energy concentrated on his mind shield.

As he passed the table, the girl shuffled uneasily on the chair.

Without breaking stride, Parr fired the focus gun into the man's back.

He was clear of the tables when he heard, from behind, the initial surprised, "Oh!"

He had one hand on the door marked "MEN" when he felt the confusion in his mind. Automatically, he pushed open the door. A puzzling realization that something was wrong . . .

He turned left, from the narrow corridor into the rest room proper.

And he went down to his hands and knees on the filthy tile, writhing in agony.

CHAPTER IV

THE hurt, mostly, was in his brain, and he choked back a scream. He could not think. And then the outer edge of the shield began to crumble.

He concentrated. Every muscle, bone, nerve. Veins stood out on his neck. He fought.

He was dented by fire inside his head. Hot, lancing tongues of flame. He tried to shrink away. He whimpered, groveled. His hands fumbled uselessly.

She was nearly inside of him now. It was almost over. Her thoughts were like fingers rending and tearing at quivering unprotected flesh.

He struggled hopelessly, retreating under a mental assault of unendurable ferocity. His outer memory was ripped away, a section of his childhood vanished forever.

And then there was desperation in the assault wave. He could feel her trying to shake off an attempt to breach her concentration. He stiffened, relaxed, arched his body, strug-

gled with her.

Her attack suddenly crumbled into a distracted muddle. Her concentration had been shattered.

His mind was trembling jelly, creamed with throbbing pain. But he could resist now, and slowly he forced her out.

"I'll be back!" she lashed at him. And the hate in the thought was alive. "I'll kill you for this!" Then her thoughts began slowly to fade away and her mind shield came down.

Parr shook with every muscle.

"Buddy. Buddy," someone was saying, shaking his shoulder. "You sick, huh?"

He struggled to his knee twisting his head back and forth, trying to regroup his memories. The sear places were vacant, empty, part of himself cut cleanly away. Immediate memories not yet stored and filed seemed to be floating free, unassociated—too widely spread to have been cut out, not too widely spread to have been mixed and shuffled. He was panting as he struggled with them, capturing them, tying them down, ordering them.

Then he began to vomit.

"You drink too much? Hey, buddy, you drink too much? I guess you drink too much, maybe?"

UNDERSTANDING—half understanding—came with the words. He scrabbled up the wall until he was erect. His back pressed against the vertical tile for support. He

turned and staggered from the stinking rest room, his hands forcing clumsily against the walls.

In the short hallway he could hear voices.

"And when he slumped over . . ."

"She just sat there like she was *thinking* . . ."

"You see the cop shake her?"

"I thought she was gonna hit him with the ash tray."

"Well, they sure hauled her outta here!"

Parr staggered back into the night club. Eyes turned to stare at him. His head spun in nausea. He began to move leadenly toward the exit.

There was a police officer in his path.

The officer reached out to stop him, and he tried to shake the hand away from his shoulder. He tried to think, to reactivate his trained responses, knowing that he would have trouble with this man.

He muttered wordlessly.

The officer looked grim.

"Not drunk," Parr gasped. "Sick." The officer was incredulous.

Parr shook his head, and an explanation appeared from the basic psychology of the natives: a coded scrap, death-fear.

"It . . . it . . . was horrible . . . seeing him like that."

The officer hesitated.

"One minute he was alive, the next minute . . ."

"Yeah. Yeah. You better get a cab, buddy."

"Fresh air. I'll be all right, with

fresh air."

Suddenly sympathetic, the officer helped him up the stairs.

Once outside the wave of sickness began to recede. Parr waited unsteadily while the officer signaled for a cab.

As he got in the cab he whispered, "Drive."

The driver looked suspiciously at his fare, but the policeman said, "He's sick, that's all. He's just sick."

The driver grunted, meshed gears. "Where to, Mister?"

"Just drive," Parr said tonelessly, rolling down the window until he felt air hitting his face. He lay back against the seat cushions.

BALLOON-like, memories floated, rose, fell. He struggled with them. Drifting away, his hotel's name. Before he lost it, he bent forward, muttered it at the driver.

The Oholo—a female, he knew now — suddenly whispered in his mind from a distance: "You killed the wrong one, didn't you?" He struggled with his mind shield in terror, finally got it set against her. He shivered.

At the hotel, he stumbled from the cab, started in.

"Hey, Mister, what about me?"

"Eh?"

"Money, Mister. Come on, pay up!"

He fumbled at his wallet, found a bill, handed it over.

In his room at last, he peeled off his suit, his underclothes.

He lay prone on the coverlette.

After hours, or what seemed hours, his mind was stable enough for hate.

He lay in the darkness hating her. Even above the instinctive fear he hated her.

He tossed in fever thinking of after the invasion when she would be captured. The last of the sickness ebbed away. His thoughts adjusted, found more and more stability.

Slowly he drifted toward sleep which would heal up the confusions. As he hovered in the dark of near sleep, he felt a wash of mental assault from too far away to be effective. Her thoughts tapped at his shield and he dissolved it partly to let a little defiance flash out.

"I'll get you!" she answered coldly.

And after that, he slept, healing.

HE awoke, automatically assessing the damage. It was less than he had expected. Sleep had resolved it into tiny confused compartments.

And he knew how hard it would be to keep up his shield for four weeks. There was fatigue on it already.

Then, too, there was the pressure.

A gentle insistent pressure. As if to say, "I'm here." He remembered how strong Lauri's mind was and he knew that she would be able to hold the pressure longer than he could hold the shield. Once, in training he had shielded for nearly thirteen days—but now, under the sapping of his energy by physical activity, by

the multiple administrative problems, by the pressure itself . . .

He shook his head savagely.

He looked at his suit across the edge of the bed. He shuddered with the memory of his sickness and reached for the phone to order new clothing.

And the pressure. He was going to have to learn to get used to it.

Later, he reported to the Ship, his voice fumbling and hesitant.

The answer crackled back. "She's alerted the others, you idiot! We picked up her message. There's four more of them down there."

Parr tried to think of an excuse, knowing how pointless it would be even to offer one.

"You should have used your head," the Ship continued. "What made you think the Oholo was necessarily male?"

"I . . . I don't know. I just did."

"You know what happened on Zelta when an advanceman was careless? You want that to happen here?"

"I . . ."

On Zelta? He knew it should be familiar to him. He cursed inwardly, reaching for other memories, to see how many he had lost . . . A sentence, unbidden, flashed across his mind: "Never sell an Oholo short." It was what someone had told him once. "They think differently than you do." How, he pondered confusedly, could they expect him to think like an Oholo?

"I can't think like an Oholo," he

said tonelessly.

"You could . . . Never mind."

"I could? Listen, how can they be thinking, to leave a flank like this unprotected? Why didn't they take this planet into protective custody long ago? How can you *think* like that? They aren't logical. How could I know they'd let a woman . . ."

"Parr!" the Ship ordered sharply. Parr gulped. "Sorry."

"Insubordination on your record."

Parr clicked off the comset.

Damn! he thought angrily.

There was still the annoying pressure on his mind. "Damn you!" he thought without lowering his shield. "Damn you!" he thought again, dissolving enough of the shield to let the thought escape.

She did not answer.

There was a knock at the door.

A man with his suit.

IT was almost ten o'clock when Parr arrived at the warehouse. The windows were alive with sunshine, and through them he could see the freshly cleaned interior.

The men with the furniture were waiting, the driver angry at the delay, his assistant indifferent. Already there was a line of job applicants who shifted uneasily, eyes turned curiously upon Parr as he crossed and unlocked the warehouse doors.

Parr, one hand resting on the knob, said to the delivery man, "Bring the stuff inside."

The driver growled and picked up

a clip board from the seat. "I gotta bill here, doc. You wanna pay before I haul the stuff out?" He held out the clip board, jerking it savagely for Parr's attention.

Parr glanced at the sum. He reached for his wallet. One by one he removed the bills and handed them over to the driver. When he had met the amount there were only two bills remaining.

"Now take them inside."

"Okay, doc."

Parr went immediately to the roof. The shed had been knocked down as he had ordered, and the chute had been installed.

The two packages were lying at the top of the chute. The bundle of money and the sample, dummy parcel—both night deposited from the Ship. He picked them up.

Walking down the stairs, he peeled away the wrapper from one bundle, exposing green sheaves of currency. Back on the ground floor he put the stacks of bills on the newly arrived desk, and the dummy parcel in the drawer. He took one of the chairs, carried it to the desk and sat down.

He looked toward the door.

"You, there! At the head of the line! Come here." He was careful of his accent, realizing the necessity of impressing the waiting workers. He was pleased to find the accent near perfect.

The woman, frail and elderly came forward hesitantly. "My name is Anne, sir."

"All right," he said, reaching for a bill from the top sheaf. "I forgot to bring a pen and paper. Take this and go get some. You may keep the change, and there'll be another bill when you get back."

Her eyes widened. "Yes, sir." She held out a wrinkled hand.

He did not need to glance toward the door again to know that an initial and important impression had been established.

After she had gone, Parr leaned back in the chair and said to the other applicants, "You may come in now."

They shuffled inside.

PARR watched them settle into chairs. As he did so, he was aware of *her*, Lauri, holding the pressure steady on his mind, and memories of last night came back. Concentrating away from them he tried to analyze his feelings toward the natives. He found a mixture of contempt and indifference.

"I'm going to say this only once," he announced crisply. "I will expect you to inform any late comers. When I have finished I will interview each of you."

He balanced his hands before him on the rim of the desk, holding them steady. He looked around at the waiting faces. He let his mind relax, and the speech—it had been graven on his brain in the Ship—came bubbling to the surface. He searched forward along it, and he found it to be complete, untouched by his con-

tact with the Oholo. He wrinkled his forehead and began, seeking to give the impression that each word was being carefully considered.

"I intend to hire some of you to help me sort and load packages of promotional literature. Those hired will be paid five dollars an hour."

They shuffled unbelievably. "Yeah, but when, Mister?"

Parr's mind dipped for information. "Whenever you wish to. At the beginning of every day. Will that be satisfactory?"

The listeners twisted uncomfortably, embarrassed by their doubt. "Now you're talkin'," the original critic said.

Parr cleared his throat heavily for effect. "The work day may be as long as fourteen hours, depending on the circumstances."

No questions, now.

"The literature will come already packaged and labeled. It will be delivered to the roof by helicopter, and your job will be to sort it and transfer it to trucks." He looked them over. "I will need you for approximately three weeks."

The pressure was still on his mind, not demanding, merely present. He writhed at it inwardly. Outwardly he was calm, his voice undisturbed.

"Hey, Mister," another of them said. "I'd like to get somethin' straight right now. You ain't havin' us to handle no explosives or somethin' dangerous like that, are you?"

It was an objection Parr had been prepared for. Scarcely thinking, he

bent to the drawer and picked up the dummy parcel. He put it on the desk top.

"There is no danger. You will need no special instructions save to handle as you would normal mail. I have a sample package here." He bent over and stripped off a section of wrapping paper to permit them to see a stack of printed material.

HE rippled the dummy sheets with his thumb. "The nature of the advertising is secret for the moment, but," he lied, "this is what it looks like." He returned the bundle to the desk. "It's just paper." That was true, and he smiled faintly as he imagined the amount of disorganization mere paper would be able to accomplish. For an instant, the uncertain emotion returned as he thought of the invasion fleet, rushing communicationless through hyper-space for its rendezvous with Earth.

"There is, of course, a reason for the high wages," he said, the words coming automatically. "We want to hit the market before—ah—" and the phrase and the hesitation were memorized, calculated for effect, "a competitor."

He pursed his lips speculatively. "Naturally we want to avoid publicity. Anyone violating this requirement will be dismissed immediately."

He seemed to study the faces individually, looking for spies from the rival company.

"I will probably not require you for more than a few hours the first several days. In that event, you will receive pay for a full eight hour day."

He stopped talking, and the applicants' faces were excited.

"As soon as the woman returns with the paper, I will begin the interviews. Those of you whom I hire will receive a fifty dollar bonus before you leave the building."

When she returned, Parr interviewed. His questions were perfunctory. By noon, he had enough workers, and he had one of them hang out a penciled sign reading: "Jobs Filled." After that, he closed the doors and assembled them before him.

"If you'll form a line, I'll give you your bonuses. Give me your names to check against my list. You will sign a sheet of paper here in receipt. I've hired enough people to take care of any of you who do not choose to come back tomorrow, so there will be no further vacancies and no chance to collect a second bonus . . . Report for work at nine o'clock tomorrow morning. At that time, I'll have someone here to fill out the necessary government employment forms for each of you."

Sitting at his desk, he began to count out the bills into neat little stacks. After each applicant had signed, he pushed a stack toward him.

After that he spent the afternoon making further arrangements with

truckers and locating a woman to handle the employment records of his workers. He even had time to purchase some extra clothing and buy a few personal articles.

As night fell, while he lay comfortably naked on his hotel bed, he felt the pressure on his mind begin to fluctuate subtly.

CHAPTER V

THE Oholo, Lauri. Strong minded, yes. But untrained.

And realizing this, Parr smiled, for it testified to the certainty of his superiority, a superiority he should have recognized from the beginning. He was dealing with an amateur, an Oholo who had never received even the most elementary instruction in individual tactics.

What she was doing now was glaringly obvious to a professional: cruising the town in an attempt to locate him. But in contacting his shield by focusing the pressure, directionally, she failed to realize that the space variations would not only tell her of his location but also inform him of her movements.

Cautiously Parr began the defensive procedure. Step by step he engaged the pressure with his mind, rather than letting it rest on his shield. Then he began to counteract the distance pulsations—strengthening, weakening, presenting a continual pressure against her questing thoughts, compensating for her movements.

But in a very short time she realized what had happened. She altered the pressure sharply. A split second later he joined it again. The advantage was still his. She altered once more. He followed suit. Check.

He could almost feel her angry confusion. Then after a moment she let the pressure fall into a rhythmic pattern. A lullaby of montony that was the result of concentration rather than of the distance variations. He knew what to expect and after fifteen minutes it happened. She broke the rhythm suddenly and tried to plunge inward, to center on him before he could counter. He had not been lulled, however, and she accomplished nothing. He met the assault easily.

The rhythmic pattern returned. Every few minutes she broke the pattern and tried to plunge in again. But his mental screen absorbed the shock.

She was persistent.

Finally Parr grew weary of it — then vaguely annoyed — then exasperated.

When he was thoroughly uncomfortable she tried another swift change of tactics. She began to increase the pressure, slowly, inexorably — stronger and stronger against his defense. He blocked her, held, retreated, held again, keeping the shield in readiness. Shortly, perspiration stood on his forehead. Abandoning the defensive he fought back against her.

But she blocked him; they locked

in a deadly mental tension of spiraling energy that weakened Parr with each passing second.

SHE held the tension longer than he would have thought possible. And when it eased, it vanished, leaving his mind uncontacted. Instead of relaxing, he formed his shielding, expecting a sudden assault.

None came. Instead, the gentle insistent pressure returned, undiminished by her efforts. She was stationary now; the pressure was steady.

His body had been tense for a long time. It ached, and he was physically exhausted. His hand shook a little as he brushed at his leg, waiting for the space variations to begin again.

They did not.

But the initial confidence — generated by the realization of her inexperience — was no longer so bright.

The very pressure itself now was an emotional drain and he wanted to lower the mind shield and relax completely. But even at a distance a mental assault would sting like a slap, like a cut, like disinfectant in a raw wound.

Under the strain, sleep was lost. Instead there was uneasiness.

He tried to ignore it. He forced himself to remember his home village. It had been a long time since he had thought of it, and at first it was difficult. But after a while, memories began to open up with nostalgia: the clumsy citizens with their mute opposition to the Empire, a

jehi farmer who had once addressed his class on planetism and afterwards been shot, the smell of the air, the look in people's eyes, night . . . the stars . . .

The stars were cold and bright and far away. Imposing symbols of Empire.

His mind turned comfortingly on that, and his planet seemed dwarfed and unimportant. The Empire, with its glittering capital system, the sleek trade arteries . . . the purposeful masses of citizens . . . the strength and power of it, the essential rightness of it. Something you could feel in the air about you and smell and see. It was a thing to be believed in, to be lost in, to surrender yourself to.

It was strong, crushing opposition, rolling magnificently down the stream of time—splintering, shattering, destroying, absorbing, growing hungry and eternal. He was part of it, and its strength protected him. It was stronger than everything. There could be no doubt about Empire.

But a single Oholo was strong, too.

He stirred restlessly on the bed, unable to dissect out the thing that bothered him when he thought of the Empire. His thoughts had run the full cycle, and they were back where they had started.

It seemed for a moment as if his mind were a shiny polished surface, like an egg floating beneath his skull, hanging on invisible threads of sensation that ran to the outside world.

The room was full of moonlight.

WITH fascination he studied the wall paper, a flower design scrawled repetitiously between slightly diagonal lines of blue. He concentrated on the rough texture of the paper, let his eyes drift down to where the paper met the cream siding, revealing twin rifts of plaster. A thin line of chalk-like dust had fallen on the wood of the floor. The edge of the rug, futilely stretching for contact with the wall, curled fuzzily.

A faint breeze fluttered the half drawn blinds, puffed the lace curtains, rippled in to his bed and body.

He was guilty of something.

He wrinkled his face, puzzled. What was he guilty of?

No answer, and the moon went behind a cloud, bringing depression and acute loneliness, sharp and bitter. A depression bleak in its namelessness, and terrifying.

Then suddenly his mind jerked away from the thoughts.

He realized he was not countering the Oholo's movements. The steady pressure was a compensated pressure, varying as her distance. A projection requiring mental ability he could never hope to equal. She had learned fast. She had neatly sidestepped his defense. Terrified, he probed beyond his shield, and for an instant received an impression of her distance. He sat upright, shivering. She had worked much nearer. In desperation, he launched an assault, closing his eyes, forgetting everything else.

Lightly she parried him and slapped back strongly enough to make

him wince.

Then for two long hours they fought. He grappled with the pressure, working on the theory that it was a burden no mind could carry indefinitely.

But she did not concede. Instead she continued, giving up trying to come closer, intent on breaking down his will to resist. He checked her with all his energy. He countered, stared at the scattered moonlight on the rug.

Energy drained from him until he wanted to scream, to plead with her. And beyond the bleak reality of concentration he knew that she was using twice as much energy as he was.

Then she began to weaken. The pressure steadied, and he could feel her exhaustion. She was through for the night.

The sheets of the bed were damp. His body trembled. He wanted to whimper pathetically in fancied defeat.

Sleep slowly came, and the long pervasive influence of Empire, the influence visible in concrete form on conquered planets, swept over him.

But somehow he was guilty of something, he knew . . .

HE was still tired when he awoke, instantly alert, wary. She apparently still slept, although she held the pressure against his mind.

Dawn ushered in a cloudy day, and street noises — cars, trolleys, movement—came into the room with the utmost clarity.

He would have to change hotels. That alone had an urgency to it. Wearily he fumbled with his shield. It was still solid. He ran a hand over his forehead, pressing against the temples.

He thought of the sleeping Oholo. He dropped the shield completely, knowing she would realize its absence. He stretched mentally for a long, precious second, and it was with infinite relief.

"Hello," he leered in the direction of Lauri. "Hello," he snarled suddenly, tingling with excitement.

No answer.

"Hello! Hello! Hello!"

He shielded, and hatred of her and of all Oholos—inbred hate, overcame him. It brought an almost pathological bravado with it. The destructive drive for revenge was a surge within him. He dropped the shield and thought to her, slow and gloatingly, of the things in store for her when she was safely disarmed and helpless. And he permitted his hate to leap and caress her, and the details of the torture were etched in passion acid.

After a while, he could feel her shudder at the thoughts, and he simpered. She seemed to lie helpless, stunned under him, spurring him to greater imaginative excesses.

Then she struck out blindly, a shivering blow that caught him unaware between the eyes like a swung club.

HE shielded. Instantly he felt the guilt of last night. He was

angry at himself, as if he had acted without really wanting to, as a Knoug was supposed to act. And he snarled a curse.

The maddening, uncompromising pressure returned. Implacable. Patient. Unanswerable. Pressure that would drive him insane if he had no eventual hope of release. He shuddered, and the sense of depression — the night sense — was even more dark and terrible in daylight.

He got out of bed, reported to the Advancement, keeping his voice low and even.

"Parr. Scheduling."

"Check."

The voice from the Ship was a stabbing, accusing voice. A voice that *knew*, that had made, overnight, a secret and awful discovery about him. He wanted to grovel before it and plead for forgiveness . . .

Nonsense!

He licked his lips nervously.

"That damned female!" he shrieked.

"Eh?"

"That damned female, don't you see!"

"Parr, what's wrong? Listen, Parr, are you all right down there?"

Suddenly he relaxed. "Nothing. Nothing's wrong."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," he said. "I'm just a little nervous."

HE ordered the driver to stop. The building was columned, red brick, decayed. The sidewalk be-

fore it was grimy, littered, cracked, chipped. Listlessly, people shuffled down the street, flecks from the vortex of humanity farther uptown drifting in the backwater of the city. Faded overalls, jeans, thin unpressed cheap suits, frayed shirts and crumpled soggy collars. Faces—lean, hollow, blotched; eyes that were harried, red, tired. The women, still trying to retain the snap of movement, were like wind-up toys, almost run down.

Parr grunted at the smells of the area, and straightening up to pay the driver, noticed distastefully the slack faces, defeated eyes and shuffling steps.

Then he knew: here, pressing in from all sides was reassurance. He watched a haggard face, felt pity, shook off the emotion as unworthy but still felt it. He could understand the haggard face. But distaste returned again, for he was superior to the face. He blocked off his mind, refusing to consider the natives any longer . . .

He took a room inside the dingy, wasted building. He hung his extra suit in the closet. The wall was greyish with cracking plaster and water stains, half hidden by the dim light; the rug underfoot was threadbare and stale. On the dresser, a Gideon Bible, nearly new.

The sheets, he discovered upon turning back the bed, were dingy and yellowish. The mattress sagged in the middle and the metal bedstead was chipped and dented.

After he was settled he reported to the Advancement, told of his new location and the reason for it.

On his way out of the hotel he was conscious of the guilt again, and in the street, he stopped an old man who wore a tobacco stained shirt and gave him several of the bills from his wallet. Bribing helplessness made him feel better.

Back in the hotel that evening, renewed confidence came as he thought how clever he had been to choose such a location; he thought of the Oholo searching across town, her mind automatically rejecting this location. It would take her more than one night to find him.

But her mind did not seek contact with his; instead, the pressure remained annoyingly general.

She was making no attempt to locate him.

He stared out the window at the pale reflection of neon from the sidewalk. She was not even moving yet.

He waited, suddenly nervous.

When she finally began to move she still kept the pressure general.

He checked her position and after an instant met opposition that scattered his thoughts. But in that space of contact he knew she had moved closer.

In terror he drew his shield in tight.

SUSPENSE mounted in his mind.

He counted his pulse beats, quieting himself. He tried to relax. Then

fearfully checked her position again. That involved receiving a sharp slap of assault, for she had been ready with an almost trigger response.

And she was closer. She seemed to be advancing confidently.

In nervous haste he began to dress.

And then she struck with her full hellish power from very near at hand.

Amazement and abject fear flamed in his mind. He fought to strengthen the shield. She forced it back, got a single hot tentacle of thought through into his mind proper, and it lashed about like a living thing before he could force it out.

Gradually he came to realize that she was not near enough for the kill.

He staggered to the door, his mind numbed and spinning as if a giant explosion had gone off by his ear.

And then, somehow, he was in the street, half dressed. Somehow he managed to find a cab. It was all a blur to him that might have taken two minutes, five minutes, or twenty minutes. She had abandoned the assault. She was moving closer.

Then, before the cab began to move he saw her. Two blocks away. Coming toward him. Her face was impassive, but even at a distance, the eyes . . . or was it his imagination? The focus gun . . . in his pocket . . . The cab drew away. He leaned out the window, twisting back, tried to aim at her. The shot, silent and lethal, sped away. The distance was too great.

Then a new assault, but it was too late. He held it until the cab

outdistanced it. She renewed the pressure and he could think again. And he knew, in the back of his mind, that soon now they would meet. And he shuddered, wondering of the outcome.

HE was sick. Unbelievably, she had outguessed him. She had guessed he would flee away from the obvious to the other extreme.

His breathing was hoarse and painful, and he thought comfortingly of his home planet; a small planet with a low sky; incredibly blue, a trading station far removed from Earth, satisfyingly deep in the Empire. As a boy he had often gone to the space port to watch the ships. He remembered how he had stood watching their silvery beauty and their naked violence. He had always been very excited by them. Always. And they were a symbol of Empire.

After the cab driver had spoken to him several times he roused himself to say, "A hotel, any hotel."

It was luck he knew, that he had been beyond effective range. She might have guessed the correct slum hotel and stood below his window.

His mind was foggy and befuddled.

And he had been hurt. Much more than mentally hurt. More than physically hurt. He wanted to hurt something in return. Only now he was too tired.

He relaxed in the seat, listened to the hiss of tires. He would be able to sleep tonight. She could not figure

out his next move, predicted on random selection.

In his new hotel room he found that his body stung and itched.

And she began to search for him.

He had to fight her for more than an hour, and after that he slept, subconsciously keeping his shield on a delicate balance.

CHAPTER VI

THE next day Parr went first to the post office and from there immediately to the warehouse. He brought with him three manila envelopes containing three city directories, the first responses to his requests. He took them to the roof, checked the three cities off his list, placed the directories at the base of the chute. Later the helicopter would come swishing down from the night sky, collect them, and return tomorrow evening with the compressed and labeled parcels, one to a family, stamped with the requisite postage. The parcels, spilling out of the compressor, would expand to a huge jumbled heap for the natives to handle. And Parr knew he was only one of many advancemen. The cargos would nightly spew to all points of the Earth from the Advanceship slowly circling the globe behind the sun.

Complete coverage was what the Knougs were aiming at. Here advancemen were using the government postal system for distribution; there, making arrangements for private de-

livery; elsewhere, setting up booths. Earth had been scouted very thoroughly by four prior Intelligence expeditions. It was an inconceivably complex network of planning, possible only through extreme specialization in an organization made frictionless by obedience.

THAT night Lauri's pressure increased—or seemed to — and he shook his head like a hooked fish. He began to walk faster, mumbling under his breath.

The solution, he knew, was distance. A partial solution only for he was bound by assignment to commuting range, not great enough to permit him to lose her completely.

The jangle and clank of a city train roused him. An interurban trolley. It was stopped at the next corner accepting passengers.

He turned and ran the quarter block to board it.

As he rode toward the ocean he could feel the gradual lessening of the pressure; it was a lessening not nearly as pronounced as he would have felt were she trying to center on him as he fled, but sufficient to relax him. He could feel a puzzled pressure shift after a few miles as she checked him briefly, then an over excessive spurt of questing thought which he countered automatically. Even if he only remained shielded it would take her at least a week to localize him except in a very general direction.

He began to feel all of the over-

charged tenseness drain out of his muscles. He even began to take an interest again in his surroundings, studying the buildings with appreciation. The incongruity of the architecture was more apparent than before, due to his greater acquaintance with the thought patterns of the natives.

A bizarre sight: a temple in the style of the Spanish, low-roofed, unpretentious, comfortably utilitarian with no nonsense except for the gleaming gold minaret atop it, its coiled surface outlined with neon tubing.

It drifted away, behind.

Here a huddled shop, antique-filled and sedate, less than a block from a brilliant drive-in in disk form, radially extending like a somnolent spider.

And most paradoxical of all, the false glamor of signs encouraging the spectator to rub shoulders with excitement that was supposed to be inside the door, but wasn't. For people who were incapable of finding it anywhere. Parr felt suddenly sad.

Odd natives, he thought. But even odder thoughts for a Knoug, he knew. Then he felt the savage stirrings inside of him again. It brushed away sadness. The numbered days until the invasion excited him. The emotional surge of danger and trial and obedience were the preludes to the necessary relief.

Parr felt fully relaxed.

HE got off the trolley in Santa Monica, where the night fog

was already fingering in from the ocean.

He crossed the wide street, angled toward the Mira Mar hotel.

In his room he stood looking out across the street over the stretch of park that broke suddenly as a dull clift, dropping jaggedly to the road beneath. Beyond were buildings unusually small and squalid in sea perspective. The beach, curving north to Malibu; and the sea itself was overshadowed toward the Ocean Park Pier by the brazen glitter of red neon.

But the fog was quieting the scene, and isolating it. After a bit there was no world beyond the window but the grey damp world of fog.

Still the excitement beat at him. He projected his thoughts beyond the immediate future to the bright burning of the Oholo System, the atomic prairie fire skipping from sun to sun at the core, leaving the planets ashes—while isolated, the periphery worlds would one by one capitulate to Knoug power, to Knoug *will*, and become infected with Destiny.

Beyond that?

The doubt came, and he cringed mentally.

He was guilty of something.

His hands whitened on the sill, and staring into the fog he tried to bring all of the weight of Empire to his support.

But there was the memory of revolt by Knougs themselves on a tiny,

distant moon.

The depression came back.

. . . It took the Oholo four nights to locate him.

CHAPTER VII

THE strain on his face—the heaviness of his eyes—the taut lines of his throat. His body was exhausted.

Like dripping water the pressure pounded at him.

The night before, she had found him at Long Beach.

He cast off the depression to find euphoria; and the two alternated steadily with increasing peaks.

His hands were nervous. Blunt thumbs constantly scrubbed blunt fingertips in despair or anticipation.

. . . The trucking had all been arranged for.

The deliveries from the Ship occurred nightly. He had sent follow-up letters to cities who had not responded to his first request. The answers had finally arrived.

The warehouse, floor by floor, was filling. Already some trucks were waiting.

There was the continual bump of handled packages sliding from the chute, being sorted, being stacked. But worries piled up inside of him: fears of an accident, a broken package, a suspicious employee, a fire . . . The Oholo, the guilt, the depression.

Eagerly now he listened to the general information report from the

Ship. Most advancements were on schedule. No irreparable accidents. Certain inaccessible areas had been written off. A few advancements recalled for necessary Ship duty. One killed, replaced, in Germany. World coverage estimated at better than seventy per cent in industrial and near industrial areas, a coverage probably exceeding the effective minimum—short only of the impossible goal.

He had been talking to a trucker in front of him without really hearing his own words, his fingers and thumbs rubbing in increased tempo.

He hated the man as he hated everyone in the building, everyone on the planet.

The trucker shrugged. "I'll have to deadhead back. That has to go in the bill, too."

"All right," Parr snapped irritably. "Now, listen. This is the most important thing. Each of the lots has to be mailed at the proper time. Your bonus is conditional on that."

"Okay," the trucker said.

"I can't overstress the importance of that," Parr said. He handed the slip of paper across the table. It was a list of mailing information, Ship compiled, that was designed to assure that the packages would all be distributed by the mails as near simultaneously as possible.

"You deliver the Seattle lot, that's number, ah, eighteen on the list, the last."

"I understand."

"When your trucks are loaded, you

may leave. I'll pay you for lay-over time."

"I've got a bill here," the trucker said.

The two huddled over it, and after the trucker had gone Parr leaned back staring at the ceiling, his nerves quivering.

HE knew what he was guilty of, at last. Knowledge came suddenly, from nowhere like an electric shock, and it stunned him. Logically he demanded proof; but there was no proof. It came, it was; it was beyond logic. Nothing in his memory . . . and for a moment he thought he had lost the memory under Lauri's first vicious assault ripping into his mind; but, and again without reason, he knew it was not in the memory she had destroyed. She was connected with it, but not like that . . . He was guilty of treason. He could not remember the act, but he was guilty. What? When? Why? He did not know; he was guilty without knowing what the treason was: only the overpowering certainty of his guilt. Wearily he let his head droop. Treason . . .

"Mister Parr?"

"Eh? Eh?"

"There's somethin' heavy in this one. It don't feel like paper. I think it's metal of some sort. Now, look, Mister Parr, I don't want to get tied up with somethin' that's not square. You said all these packages had paper in them. And I'd kinda like to see what else there is in this

one, Mister Parr, if you don't mind."

Parr wanted to jump out of the seat and smash at the man's face. But he forced himself to relax.

"You want to open the package, is that it?" he said, gritting his teeth.

"Yes, Mister Parr."

"... Then go ahead and open it."

Having expected refusal, the worker hesitated.

"Go ahead," Parr insisted. He kept his face expressionless, although, beneath desk top level, his hands bundled into knobby fists, white at the knuckles.

Then at the last possible second, as the worker's fingers were fumbling at the wrapping, Parr leaned forward. "Wait a minute. It won't be necessary to waste the parcel ... Unless you insist."

The worker looked at Parr uncomfortably.

A question of timing. Events hung in a delicate balance between exposure and safety. Parr reached for the drawer of the desk, his movements almost too indifferently slow.

His hand fumbled inside the drawer. "I think I have some of the metal samples around here," he said. His hand found the stack of gleaming dummy disks, encircled it possessively. He tossed them carelessly on the desk top and one rolled, wobbling, to the edge and fell to the floor.

PUZZLED, the worker bent to the one that had fallen, picked it

up, turned it over in his hand, studying it curiously.

"I don't see . . .," he said suspiciously.

"That's our product," Parr lied. "We include some in every hundred or so bundles. The literature explains their function."

The worker shook his head slowly.

"As you can see," Parr persisted gently, "they're perfectly harmless." He tensed, waiting.

"... Yeah, uh ... I think I get it. Something like them hollow cement bricks they use to cure people of rheumatism with, huh?"

Parr swallowed and relaxed. "That's the general idea. You'll see ... Well, if you want to, go ahead and open the parcel."

"Naaah," the man said foolishly. "... There wouldn't be no sense in doin' that."

Beneath the desk top again, his hands coiled and flexed in anger and hatred. "I want your name," Parr said, a very slight note of harshness in his voice.

The worker let his eyes turn to the backs of his heavy hands, guiltily. "Look, Mister Parr, I didn't mean ..."

Parr silenced him with an overdrawn gesture. "No, no," he said, his voice normal and conciliatory. "I meant, we might be able to use a man like you in our big plant in the East." He snarled inwardly at himself for the unnecessary note of harshness before: it was too soon for that.

Suddenly stammering with excitement, the worker said, "My name's George . . . George Hickie . . . George Hickie, Mister Parr. I got good letters from back home about my workin', sir."

"Where do you live, George?"

"Out on Bixel . . . Just up from Wilshire, you know, where . . ."

"I meant the number of the house, George."

"Oh." George told him.

Parr wrote it down. "George Hickie, uh-huh."

"I'll be mighty obliged, Mister Parr, if you'll keep me in mind."

"Yes. Well. Good afternoon, Hickie. You ought to be getting back to your work now, hadn't you?"

And when the worker had half crossed the room, Parr drew a heavy, black line through the name. He had memorized it.

The pencil lead broke under the pressure.

And at that moment, the pressure in his mind vanished.

In automatic relief, he relaxed his shielding for the first time in what seemed years, and before he could rectify the error Lauri hit him with everything she had, catching him just as the shield began to reform.

PAIN roared in his mind. From the force of the blow he knew that she must be near the warehouse.

It had been one quick thrust, leaving his mind throbbing and he sobbed in impotent hate and anger.

The pressure was back.

And slowly and surely she was closing in on him, compensating. She had struck prematurely, realized her mistake, and was narrowing the range, holding the final assault until assured of victory.

He stood up weakly and hurried to the door, brushing through a group of startled workers.

Outside, a cab was cruising, and Parr ran after it. It did not stop. He turned and ran frantically in the opposite direction, rounded the corner, still running, his heels thudding on the hot pavement.

He ran for blocks, the blood pounding in his head, sweat trickling into his eyes. Pedestrians turned to stare, looking back along his line of flight.

When Parr stopped, finally, he was trembling. He stared at his own hands curiously, and then he looked around him.

He swallowed hard. The world swam, steadied. His chest rose and fell desperately . . .

At the airport, he phoned the warehouse.

"Hickie? Get me Hickie . . . Hello, Hickie, this is Parr. Listen, Hickie, are you listening? Hickie, I've got to leave town for two days. You've got to run things. You understand? Listen. I've left money in the drawer of my desk . . . for the pay roll . . . You know how to run things, don't you, Hickie? . . . Now, listen, Hickie, there's some trucking . . . wait a minute . . . Look . . . You stay down there. Right there. I'll phone you back, long distance, later. Don't go

away, Hickle. Wait right there. I'll tell you what you've got to do."

The last call for his plane came over the loudspeaker.

"Listen, Hickle, I've got to run. I'll phone you later, so wait. Wait right there, Hickle!"

OVER Bakersfield, gratefully — infinitely gratefully — he felt the last wisp of pressure vanish.

He was free.

There was no consequence powerful enough to keep him from dropping his mind shield entirely. But he let it come down slowly, barrier by barrier, enjoying the release, prolonging the ultimate freedom beyond.

At last the roar of the motors, muffled, sang in his head like an open song, and there was nothing between his thoughts and the world.

His mind stretched and trembled and pained from the stress, and quivered and fluttered and pulsed and throbbed and vibrated and rejoiced.

He looked out over the wing, through the whirling propellers, at the hazy horizon, at the cloudless sky, bright and blue and infinite.

It was the best day he had ever known. It was freedom, and he had never known it before.

His mind was infinitely open as the sky above the clouds, and he stretched it out and out until he forced the limit, beyond which no mind may go, yet wanting to plunge on.

In the east, there was the dusk of

night coming down, a cloak pulled up from the other side of the world by the grapple hooks of dying sunshine.

In San Francisco he phoned Hickle in Los Angeles, a man and a place so far removed that he wanted to shout to make himself heard over the telephone.

Then to a hotel—but now as a place of rest and refuge, not a symbol of flight and fear. His hate returned, beautiful, now, flower-like, delicate, to be enjoyed. To be tasted, bee-like, at his leisure.

The city outside was a whirl of lights and the lights hypnotized him with their magic. Soon he was in the streets.

There were cabs and scenes: laughter, love, death, passion—everything rolled into a capsule bundle for him. The city spread out below in a fabric of light, the hazy blue of cigar smoke closely pressing sweaty bodies, laughing mouths. A swirl of sensations.

"Somewhere else!" he cried madly to a driver.

China Town, The International Settlement, Fisherman's Wharf . . . The cabbies knew a tourist.

HE had been moving for hours, and now he was tired and lost, and he could not find a cab to get back to the Sir Francis Drake.

A girl and a sailor passed. A tall lithe blonde with a pert nose and high cheek bones and brown eyes heavy lips and free hips . . . a . . .

blonde.

The Oholo . . . Lauri . . . was a blonde.

He began to cast up memories of her, sickeningly, making his fists clench.

He wanted a blonde to smile at him, unsuspecting. A blonde with honey colored hair and a long, slim throat with a blue vein in it, so he could watch the heart beat. He wanted to hurt the blonde, and hold her, and caress her softly, and . . . most of all, hurt her.

He wanted to shake his fists at the sky and scream in frustration.

He wanted to find a blonde . . .

Finally he found one. In a small, red-fronted bar, dimly lit. She was sitting at the end of the bar, facing the door, toying with a tall drink, half empty, from which the ice had melted.

"What'll it be, Mister?"

"Anything! Anything!" he said excitedly as he slipped behind a table, his eyes still on the woman at the bar.

"And the same for me?"

"Sure. Sure."

She brought back two drinks, picked up a bill, turned it over in her hand speculatively. She wore an off the shoulder dress, and high rouge on her Mexican cheeks. She made change from her apron, putting the money beside the second glass, sitting down in front of it, across from him.

Still he had not noticed her.

Two patrons entered. They moved

to a table in the far corner near the Venetian blinds of the window and began to talk in low husky voices.

"I'll be back, dearie," the woman across from Parr said, sipping her drink, smearing the glass rim in a veined half moon.

She went to serve the girls.

When she came back Parr had brushed away the drink from in front of him.

"Listen, dearie," she said. "You got troubles?"

He grunted.

She snaked an ample hand half across the table and wiggled her shoulders to show off her breasts. "I bet I know what's wrong with you. Same as a lotta men, dearie. Want a little fun, I bet."

"Bring me that blonde," he said hoarsely.

"Listen, dearie, you don't want her. What you want . . ."

"The blonde!"

RELUCTANTLY she stood up, frightened by his tone. She put a hand over his change, waited.

He did not notice.

She put the money into her apron pocket, heaving her chest.

Then she got the blonde.

"You wanna buy me a drink, honey?" the blonde said.

"Sit down!"

The blonde turned to the Mexican. "Make it a double." She sat down.

"Talk!"

"Whatdaya wan' me to say, ho-

ney?"

"Just talk." He had seen the pulse in the vein in her neck. The neck was skinny, and the face was pinched, lined with heavy powder. Her eyes were weary, and her thin hands moved jerkily.

"Just talk."

When she saw his wallet, as he brought it out to pay, she said, "Maybe we oughtta go somewhere to talk." Her voice was flat and nasal, and she tossed her head. She ruffled her coarse dirty-colored hair with an automatic gesture.

Parr wanted to kill her, and his hands itched at the delicious thought.

But not tonight. Not tonight. He was too tired. He . . . tonight he just wanted to think about it. And then he wanted to sleep and rest and think.

She tossed off the drink. "Another one, Bess," she said shrilly, glancing at him.

He took two bills out of his wallet, two twenties, put them on the table, pushed one of them toward her without looking at it.

She drank two more shots quickly, eagerly, hungrily, as if there was need to rush through them and get them safely inside.

She leaned across the table, her eyes heavy. "I'm gonna talk, okay? Man wants to hear woman talk. Get yer kicks like that, okay. You're buyin' . . . Hell, I bet you think I'm a bad girl. I'm not a bad girl — bad girl." Her hands twitched drunkenly below her flat breasts. "There was a

sonofabitch in my town . . . I came from up north, Canada." She drank again, hastily. "I could go for you, know what? . . . I'm getting drunk, that's what. Fooled ja, didn't I? Listen. You wouldn't believe this, but I can cook. Cook. Like hell. Wouldn't think that, eh? Hell, I'm good for a lotta things. Like being walked on. Jever wanna wanna—walk on a girl? Listen. I knew a guy, once . . ."

Parr said, "Shut up!" For one instant, there was sickness and revulsion, and desire to comfort her, but it vanished almost before it was recognized.

She closed her mouth.

He pushed the twenty-dollar bill into her lap.

"You be here tomorrow. Tomorrow night."

"Okay."

"You be here tomorrow night."

"Sure, sure, honey."

"You be here tomorrow night, and don't forget it."

She smiled drunkenly. "I'm here . . . most nights, honey . . ."

"You be waiting for me."

"I'm always . . . waitin', honey. Ever since I remember, honey, waitin'. Just waitin', honey."

But the next morning, when Parr awoke, Lauri was trying to center on his open mind. She was in San Francisco, looking for him.

The depression came back, and the guilt—the knowledge of treason—that made him want to go to a mirror and stand, watching blood trickle down his face in cherry rivulets like

tears.

And fear.

When he shielded, she resumed the pressure.

AT noon he was back in Los Angeles. Perspiration was under his skin, waiting icily.

He went directly to the warehouse.

Hickle, in surprise, crossed the room to him. "Mister Parr!" he said.

The right corner of Parr's mouth was twitching nervously. "Get a chair. Bring it to the desk.

When Hickle was seated before him, Parr said, "Okay. I've got some papers. I'm going to explain them to you." He got them out. "They're all alike in form. Here." He took off the top sheet and Hickle stood up to see. "This number, here, is for the truck unit." He circled it and scribbled the word "truck." "This number." He circled it. "This number is the lot number. You see, truck number nine has lots seventeen, twenty-seven, fifty-three, thirty-one."

"I get it," Hickle said.

Parr's body was trembling and he threw out a tentative wave of thought probing for the Oholo, afraid that she might come silently, knowing his approximate daytime location. He began to talk rapidly, explaining.

It was D-Day minus seven.

After fifteen minutes, he was satisfied that Hickle understood the instructions.

"There was a plain bundle this morning?"

"Yes, sir. I wondered about that."

"Get it."

Hickle got it.

Parr opened it. "Pay roll money, trucker money. Give the truckers their money when they give you their bills. I'm going to trust you, Hickle."

Hickle gulped. "Yes, sir."

Parr began to stuff money into his wallet.

She was in Los Angeles. He knew by the pressure on his mind.

"I've got to hurry. Listen. I want you to keep the workers here as long as necessary, hear? This schedule's got to be kept. And you take a thousand dollars. And listen, Hickle. This is just chicken-feed, remember that, when you're working for us."

"Yes, sir!"

He had her located, keeping his mind open to try to center on her.

HE could center on her! She was only partially shielded, and she made no protest. She was not moving, and he could . . . except that there was something wrong with the pressure. He was overlooking something. But she was not moving. Not yet.

"I've got to talk fast. All these final deliveries. You'll be busy. If you need help, hire it. And listen, I'll be here from time to time if I can."

"There's something wrong, Mister Parr?"

Parr searched for an excuse. "It's personal . . . my wife, yes, my wife, it's . . ." He wondered why he had

used that one. It had sprung automatically to his mind. "Never mind. I'll phone in from around town. I'll try to help you all I can by phone."

She was not moving, but the pressure seemed different . . . *alien!*

He jerked out of his seat, kicking the chair over as he headed for the door.

A different Oholo!

There were two of them in Los Angeles!

He probed out.

Lauri was almost on top of him.

He skidded through the door, into the street, knocking a startled man out of his path.

He stared wildly in both directions. Several blocks away a cab was stalled with a red light.

And almost before him, a private car was headed uptown. With three huge leaps he was on the running board, yanking the door open.

He jerked himself in beside the frightened driver.

He twisted his head, shouting. "Emergency! Hospi . . . "

She had seen him trying to escape. She struck.

In the street, a flock of English sparrows suddenly faltered in flight, and one plunged blindly into the stone face of a building. The others circled hysterically, directionless, and two collided and spilled to the ground.

"Hurry, damn it!" Parr moaned at the driver. "Hurry!"

He slammed forward into the windshield, babbling.

The terrified driver stepped down on the accelerator. The car leaped forward.

Parr, fighting with all his strength, was twisted in agony, and blood trickled from his mouth.

He gasped at the driver: "Cab. Behind. Trying to kill me."

The driver was white-faced and full of movie chases and gangster headlines of shotgun killings, typical of Southern California. He had a good car under him, and he spun the wheel to the right, cutting into an alley; to the left, onto an intersecting alley; to the right, into a crosstown street; then he raced to beat a light.

He lost the cab finally in a maze of heavy traffic at Spring.

Parr was nearly unconscious, and he struggled desperately for air.

Run, run, run, he thought despairingly, because two Cholos are ten times as deadly and efficient as one . . .

CHAPTER VIII

D-DAY minus four. General mailing day.

Parr, his mind fatigued, his body tense, phoned the warehouse twice, and twice received enthusiastic reassurances behind which he could hear the hum and clatter of parcels being moved, trucks being loaded . . . cursing and laughing and subdued shouting.

How many hours now? His mind was clogged and stuffy and sluggish.

An hour's sleep, ten minutes sleep—any time at all. If it could be spent in clear, cold, *real* sleep.

Eat, run. Always, now, he was running, afraid to stop longer than a few minutes. He needed time to *think*.

And the pressure was steady.

Get away. Leave Los Angeles!

"Parr, Parr. This is Parr," he whispered hoarsely from the back seat of the moving cab into the comset.

The rhythm of the engine, the gentle sleepy swaying of the car and the monotony of the buildings lulled him. He caught himself, shook his head savagely.

Dimly he could understand the logic advising him to remain in the city. But it was not an emotional understanding and it lacked the sharpness of reality. For now the two Oholos could follow him easily, determining his distance and direction. If he left Los Angeles, the focus of the invasion, it would be difficult to return after postal delivery. After the invasion it would be nearly impossible. It would give the Oholos added time to run him down. But to remain . . . His body could not stand the physical strain of four more days of continual flight, around, around, up Main—to the suburbs—to the ocean—back to Main again—down the speedway to Pasadena and through Glendale to Main. Change cabs and do it all over again.

"Yes?" the Advanceship said.

"I'm . . . leaving. I've got to leave. I've got to." And suddenly, in addi-

tion to the other consideration, he was afraid to be there when the invasion hit. Was it because he was afraid they knew of his treason? Or . . . was it because . . . he liked the buildings? Strangely, he did not want to see the buildings made rubble . . .

The answer: "You have a job to do."

"It's done!" he cried in anguish. "Everything's scheduling. In a few hours now it'll be all over. I can't do anymore here."

A pause.

"You better stay. You'll be safer there."

"I *can't!*" Parr sobbed. "They'll catch me!"

"Wait."

A honk. The purr of the engine. Clang. Bounce. Red and green lights.

" . . . If the mailings are secure, you have the Ship's permission. Do whatever you like."

Expendable.

Parr put the comset in his coat pocket and cowered into the seat.

"Turn right!" he said suddenly to the driver. "Now . . . now . . . Right again!"

He bounced.

He closed his eyes, resting them. "Out Hill," he said wearily without opening his eyes.

He withstood an irritated mental assault. They were tiring. But not as fast as he was.

THE silent pursuit: three cars out of the multitudes, doggedly

twisting and turning through the Los Angeles streets—separated by blocks, even by miles, but bound by an unseen thread that was unbreakable.

"I gotta eat, buddy."

Parr drew himself erect. "A phone! Take me to a phone!"

The taxi ground to a stop in a service station.

Nervously, Parr began to phone airports. Three quarters of his mind was on his pursuers.

On the third try he got promise of an immediate private plane.

"Have it ready!" he ordered. Then, dropping the receiver he ran from the station to the cab.

He jockeyed for nearly thirty minutes for position.

Then he commanded the driver to abandon the intricate inter-weaving and head directly for the airport in Santa Monica.

Shortly, the two other cars swung in line, down Wilshire.

THE job of softening up Earth for the invasion began to pass entirely from the hands of the advancemen. From a ticklish, dangerous proposition at first to a virtual certain mailing day. The world wide mechanism of delivery swung into operation from time zone to time zone, and, in the scheme of conquest the advancemen passed from integral factors to inconsequential objects.

All over America, from East to West, within the space of a single day the post office became aware of the in-

creased, the tremendously increased volume. Previously in certain sections there had been sigrls in the form of out-bound dribbles. Now there were in-bound floods rising suddenly to the peak irtensity of overtime innundations. A million packages, some large, some small, some brown wrapped, white wrapped, light, heavy—no two alike, no way to tell the new influx from the normal handling.

At the very first each office saw the rush as a unique phenomenon—for there was no reason to report it to a higher echelon which might have instituted an investigation. Merely to take care of the rush, that was all. To process the all-at-once congestion of parcels to be door to door delivered. Later to be marveled at.

Lines formed at parcel windows; trucks spewed out their cargos. Lights burned late; clerks cursed and sweated; parcels mounted higher and higher.

Nor did it break all at once in the press. The afternoon editions carried a couple of fillers about how Christmas seemed to be coming early for the citizens of Saco, Maine, and how a tiny Nevada town whose post office was cob-webby from lack of use suddenly found itself doing a land office business.

Most of the morning editions carried a whimsical AP article that the late radio newscasters picked up and rebroadcast. Then after most West Coast stations were off the air for the night events began to snowball

in the East.

The breakfast newscasts carried the first stories. The morning papers began to tie in the various incidents and reach astonishing conclusions . . .

THE propeller was not even turning over. The plane, wheeled out of the hanger, was waiting, cold, and the pilot lounged by the office, smoking a cigarette.

The sky was black, and here and there before the blatant searchlights sprouting from dance halls and super markets, clumps of lacy California clouds fluttered like dingy sheepwool in a half-speed Mix-Master.

Parr, tossing a handful of bills at the driver, leaped from the cab and ran frantically toward the office.

The wait was terrible. Should the Oholos arrive, he was boxed in spaciouly, with no escape. In gnawing at the inner side of his lower lip, he bit through his disguise into real flesh and real blood.

There were forms to sign, responsibility to be waived.

And with every minute, *they* drew nearer.

Finally the airplane motor coughed into reluctant life, and Parr could feel the coldness of artificial leather against his back.

The ship shuddered, moved heavily, shifted toward the wind onto the lighted runway. The motor roared louder and louder and the ship trembled. Slowly it began to pick up

speed, the wings fighting for lift.

A searchlight from the pier made a slow ring of light toward the invisible stars.

The ground fell away and Parr was on his way to Denver.

Almost immediately, with the pressure still on his mind but fading swiftly, he fell into a fitful sleep and dreamed of treason, while, in the background ominous clouds shifted and gathered to darken the sun of his native planet. Finally, all was a starless black except for half-forgotten faces which paraded before him, telling his treason with hissing tongues in words he could not quite grasp the meaning of.

THE air of Denver was clear and bright—crystal clear, drawing in the mountains, opening up the sky like a bent back box top. The new sun seemed small.

Parr stood on a street corner acutely aware of the thin air and the bright clean sky. An open sky that seemed to be trying to talk to him. He snorted at the absurdity of the thought but he strained half consciously to listen.

He walked on, his feet tapping sharply on the concrete, his mind foggy from the uncomfortable sleep.

A building to the left momentarily reminded him of a slide shown long ago in a classroom on a distant planet, and he wondered if the picture had been taken in this city (knowing, deeply, that it could not have been).

Parr took a newspaper from a stand. Tucking it under his arm he continued to walk until he found a hotel.

He ate breakfast hurriedly in the annex and then rented a room with a radio. He went to it, lay relaxing on the bed, his mind open and free but uneasy again as he thought of treason.

"Parr," he said into the comset. "I'm in Denver."

"Have you escaped?"

"They will follow me," Parr said wearily. "But for the moment, I'm free."

"We'll send our Denver advance-man to you," the Ship said. "The two of you should be able to handle the Oholos."

Parr's mouth was dry. He named the hotel.

"Wait, then."

He lay back but felt no exultation. He tried to force it, but there was nothing.

And then, staring at the headlines, knowledge of success broke all around him and he was trembling and jubilant. He sprang up, paced the room, moving his hands restlessly.

He rushed to the window, looked out into the street. The people below passed in a thin nervous stream. Unusually few; many more were glued at home, waiting for the mail.

A postal delivery truck turned the corner, rolled down the street before the hotel. All action ceased; all eyes turned to watch its path.

Parr wanted to hammer the wall

and cry, "Stop! Stop! I've got to ask some questions first! Stop! There's something wrong!"

PARR was shaking. He sat on the bed and began to laugh. But his laughter was hollow.

His victory—a Knoug victory . . . He frowned. Why had he automatically made a differentiation where there should be none? He realized that the mailing success had released him from nervous preoccupation in Knoug work; for the first time he was free of responsibility, and he could think . . . clearly . . . about . . . He wanted to hammer the terrifying new *doubts* out of his mind. But they gathered like rain clouds. He went to the mirror and fingered his face. "What's wrong? What's wrong?" Knoug victory had a bitter taste.

He suddenly pictured the civilization around him as a vast web held in tension by a vulnerable thread of co-operation, now slowly disintegrating as the thread crumbled. And he took no joy in the thought.

He began to let images float in his mind. Imagined scenes, taking place beyond the walls.

A man went in to pay off a loan, his pockets stuffed with money.

"I'm not taking it."

"Whatsa matter? It's legal tender. You gotta take it."

Bills on the counter.

"You didn't earn that!"

"It don't matter."

"It isn't any good. Everybody's

got it."

"That don't *matter*."

"It's worthless!"

"Yeah? Listen: 'For all debts, public and private . . .'"

Parr's mind reached out to grasp the unsettling immensity of it. He flipped on the radio, half heard an excited announcer.

Parr thought: All over the world, each to his own: coins, bills, dollars, rupees, pesos, pounds — how many million parcels were there? Each stuffed with enough to make its owner a man of wealth, as wealth was once measured.

Parr thought it was terrifying, somehow.

And the headline of the paper admitted: "No Test To Reveal Good Money From Bad."

(There was a mob. They were storming a liquor store, while the owner cowered inside. He was waiting for the police. But the police were too busy elsewhere, so finally, to salvage what he could before the mob took his stock for nothing he opened the door, crying, "Form a line! Form a line!")

Parr thought of the confusion that would grow.

Prices spiraling.

(In the United States Senate, a member took the floor to filibuster until California had its mail delivery and its fair share of the free money.)

This was the day work stoppages would begin.

FAMINE PREDICTED . . .

PRESIDENT IN APPEAL TO . . .
GUARD MOBILIZED . . .

Riots. Celebrations. (A church burned the mortgage gratefully.)
Clean shelves. Looming scarcity.

By the time the sun dipped into the Pacific, the whole economic structure of the world would be in shambles.

Governments doubtless would blame each other (half-heartedly), propose new currency, taxes, and the gold standard again.

Industrial gears would come unmeshed as workers took vacations. Electric power, in consequence would begin to fail.

(Looting already occupied the attention of the better part of the underworld, and not a few respectable citizens decided to get it now and store it for use when it would be unavailable because others had done likewise.)

Stagnation tomorrow. But as yet, the fear and hysteria had not really begun. Parr shuddered, sickened. "What have I *done*?"

It would take months to unuddle the chaos.

Earth was ripe for invasion . . .

PARR aroused from a heavy stupor. The pressure was back. He moaned, and the knock on the door jolted him into startled animal movement.

The knob turned. Parr tensed, although he could tell that the Oholo team was still distant. "Who is it?"

The door opened and a disguised

Knoug slipped through. Immediately behind him a simian-like Earthman towered. "Come in," the Knoug said. When they were inside, he shut the door.

"The Ship sent me over," the Knoug said. "You wanted help? My name's Kal. You probably remember me on Ianto?"

Parr swung his legs from the bed and stood up. "You feel the pressure?"

Kal rumbled angrily.

"Two Oholos," Parr said. "I've been dodging them."

"Two, eh? Okay. It's a good thing I brought Bertie along. Two, you say. Well I'll be damned."

Kal turned to the Earthman. "There'll be two, Bertie. So watch yourself . . ."

Bertie grunted noncommittally.

"Okay. Now like I told you, shoot when I give you the mental signal. You'll see the ones."

"Uh-huh," Bertie said, chewing complacently.

"Go on downstairs then."

Bertie hunkered forward and leered at Parr. "Sure. Sure."

"Hurry the hell up," Kal said.

Bertie shuffled to the door, opened it, left the room.

Parr swallowed uneasily.

Kal chuckled. "Good one, Bertie. Useful. Damn this pressure. Glad I brought him. They won't be looking for an Earthman, eh? So when they try to come in here after us, he'll drop 'em, eh?"

Parr wet his lips. "They're get-

ting nearer."

"Relax," Kal said. He crossed to the bed and sat down. "The Fleet's out. It just came out. Did you hear?"

PARR felt a shock of surprise. He imagined the hundred powerful ships of the fleet coming, one by one, from the dead isolation of hyperspace. In his mind's eye he could see the faint glimmer of the static shield—the protective aura—form slowly in real space; he could imagine the ships safe within their electric sheaths which caught the hull-wrenching force of transition and dissipated it from the heavy steel plating. He could imagine one ship—perhaps one—popping out, shieldless, battered by the force vortex, and perhaps leaking air or ruptured entirely because the protective aura had collapsed under pressure. Then he saw the ships neatly pulling into formation, grouping for instructions, waiting for the attack signal.

"Day after tomorrow they attack," Kal said.

"They're closer," Parr whispered.

Kal concentrated. "Yeah. I feel them. Come to the window." He stood up and crossed the room in quick cat-like strides.

Parr followed him and the two of them stared down. Perspiration stood on Parr's forehead. After a moment they saw Bertie come out from beneath the hotel awning. He seemed small at a distance, and they saw him toss a cigarette butt carelessly to the sidewalk. He moved leisurely

away from the entrance and leaned against the side of the hotel, one hand in his overcoat pocket.

Kal sneered, "You think they'll drive right up?"

Parr's face twitched. "I don't know . . . if they know there's two of us . . ." He glanced left along the street. "I guess they will. I guess they'll try to come right in after us."

Kal chuckled. "That's good. That's damned good, eh?"

Parr turned to stare at him. "They're strong."

"They won't be looking for Bertie."

"Listen," Parr whispered hoarsely. "They're stronger than we are."

Kal snarled a curse.

"No," Parr said intently. "They are."

"Shut up!"

"Listen," Parr said. "I know. I've . . ."

Kal turned slowly. "They're not stronger. They *couldn't* be stronger. Even if Bertie misses, we'll get them. If they're so strong, why haven't they already carried the fight to us? If they're so strong, they should be ready to attack us, so why don't they?"

He turned back to the window.

"They're almost here," Parr said.

A cab turned the corner. "Feel them center on us?" Parr said, drawing down his shield as tightly as he could.

Kal, tense-faced, nodded.

Parr stared fascinated as the cab screeched to a halt.

Then Parr felt a wave of sickness and uncertainty; he reached out for Kal's elbow. "Wait!" he cried.

But already, below, Bertie jerked into explosive action.

He shot three times. The male Oholo pitched forward to the gutter.

Bertie's gun exploded once more, but the muzzle was aimed into the air. He crumpled slowly, and the gun clinked to the sidewalk from nerveless fingers.

"He got one," Kal said in satisfaction. "The other one must be quicker 'n hell."

Parr let out a tired sigh.

"That's that," Kal said. ". . . I'll be damned, a female Oholo! She won't dare to try two of us alone."

Parr's eyes were fixed below. In what seemed a dream, he watched her get out of the cab. She glanced up and down the street. She looked up, quickly, toward their window. And then she darted across the sidewalk toward the hotel entrance.

"I'll be damned!" Kal cried. "She's coming up anyway!" His eyes sparkled gleefully. He searched his lips with his tongue. "Let's both hit her now! She's near enough!"

"No!" Parr cried sharply. "No! Let her get closer . . . Let's . . . let's make sure we get her."

They could feel her nearing them, not quickly, not slowly, but with measured steps.

CHAPTER IX

SHE was just outside the door and Parr felt something like momentary confusion before the hate came. Yet when it did it was tinged and colored as he thought of her walking toward them, alone. He tried to concentrate on her remembered image, tried to call up the previous hate in all its glory. He could not; instead, even the hate he knew drained away. In its place he felt—not fear exactly—not fear for himself but of the inevitability of death. Not his death—hers.

He saw Kal's lips curl, and then he winced. Fingernails dug into his palms.

And the door opened and she stood before them. There was a breathless instant, absolutely still, while time hung fire. Her eyes were aflame. Eyes, he knew, that were capable of softness as well. Eyes steady, intent, unafraid. He was frozen in delicious surprise that tingled his spine, and he felt his scalp crawl. He also felt deep awe at her courage.

She came into the room, closed the door, stood with her back leaning lightly against it. Her eyes blazed into his.

Her red lips moved delicately. "Hello," she said. "I've been looking for you." She had not glanced at Kal.

"Now!" Kal cried wildly.

Parr wanted to scream something meaningless, but before the sound

could bubble forth the room seemed to erupt into a colored blaze. She had struck at him with a lethal assault!

He reeled, fighting back for his life, conscious now of Kal fighting at his side.

Her eyes were steady, and her face frowned in concentration. She was icy calm in the struggle and there was cold fury in her whips of thought. But slowly, under their resistance, her eyes began to widen in surprise.

For a breath-held moment, even with the two of them against her, the issue seemed in doubt; Kal half crumpled, stunned by a blast of hot thought that seared away his memory for one instant.

She could not turn fast enough to Parr, nor could she, in feinting his automatic attack, strike again at Kal. Then again, the two of them were together, and slowly, very slowly, they hedged her mind between them and shielded it off.

Kal recovered.

Parr gritted his teeth in a mental agony he could not account for and stripped at her outer shield. Kal came in too and the shield began to break.

The Oholo still stood straight and contemptuous in defeat, her eyes calm and deadly as she still struggled against them.

She struck once more with fading strength and Parr caught the thrust and shunted it away. And then he was in her mind.

HE held a stroke that would burn like a sun's core, and almost hurled it. But there was a great calmness before him and he hesitated a fraction of a second in doubt as he stared deep into her glazing eyes. He felt his heart throb in new pain.

Kal struck over him, and the Oholo went limp, suddenly, and sank unconscious to the floor, a pathetic rag doll. A tiny wisp of thought struggled out and faded.

Kal cried in triumph and gathered for the final blow.

Great, helpless rage tore at Parr then, and almost before he realized it he sent a powerful blast into Kal's relaxing shield. Kal rocked to his heels, dazed, and his left hand went to his eyes. He whirled, lax mouthed, surprised.

"What . . . ?"

"She's mine!" Parr screamed wildly, "She's mine!"

"The hell —"

In fury Parr slapped the other Knoug a stinging blow across the mouth. "Get out! Get out! Get out or I'll kill you!"

Kal's eyes glazed in surprise.

Parr was panting. "I'll finish her," he gasped. "Now get out!"

Kal's eyes met his for a moment but they could not face the anger in Parr's.

"Get out or I'll kill you!" Parr said levelly, his mind a welter of emotions that he could not sort out and recognize.

Kal rubbed his cheek slowly.

"Okay," he said hoarsely. "Okay."

Parr let breath out through his teeth. "Hurry!"

Kal's lips curled. His shoulders hunched and he seemed about to charge. But Parr relaxed, for he saw fear in the Knoug's eyes. Kal straightened. He shrugged his shoulders indifferently, spat on the carpet without looking at Parr and stepped over the unconscious Oholo. He jerked the door open and without looking back slammed it behind him.

Parr was trembling and suddenly emotionally exhausted.

PARR'S knees were water. He stared fascinated at the fallen Oholo. He sank to the bed. He let his thoughts touch her unconscious mind as it lay exposed and helpless, and he wondered why he did not strike the death blow. He tried to think of stripping her mind away slowly, layer by layer, until she lay a helpless babbling infant, her body weak and pliant to his revenge. But he thought of her clear eyes and he was sickened and ashamed.

He called up memories of Oholos—the captured few—and now for the first time he knew general respect rather than hate. And thinking of Knougs, he writhed.

Yet he was conditioned to hate and he was conditioned to kill. He must kill, for the conditioning was strong. He tried to fight down the revolt of his thoughts, and, in recognizing the revolt at last, knowledge came. The guilt of treason. Not

for any act. His treason was doubt, and doubt was weakness, and weakness was death. He could not be weak for the weak are destroyed. But he seemed, for a heart beat, to see through the fabric of Empire which was not strength at all. No he thought, I've believed too long. It's in my blood. There's nothing else.

He went to the wash basin and drew a glass of water. He carried it to the Oholo, knelt by her head and bathed her temple with his dampened handkerchief until she moaned and threw an arm weakly over her forehead. Her hand met his, squeezed, relaxed, and was limp again.

He carried her to the bed and sat beside her, staring at her clear face, which was an Earthface. (I've been in this body too long, he thought, I'm beginning to think all wrong.) For the face was not without beauty for him.

He shook his head dazedly, trying to understand himself.

(Here is the enemy, he thought. How do I know? I have been told ever since I can remember. But is it true? Does saying it make it true? But what else can I believe? One must believe something!)

SHE opened her eyes, stared at him uncomprehending. He waited patiently as she gathered her loose thoughts and tied them down. She smiled uncertainly, not yet recognizing him.

Finally he could see understand-

ing in her eyes.

"Your mind is too weak to fight," he said. "If you try to shield I will kill you."

Her lips curled. "What do you want?"

"Don't try to shield," he warned. He studied her face and his chest was tight. He looked away from her face.

"I've got to ask you some questions," he said. "After that, I'm going to kill you."

There was no fear in Lauri's eyes. "Go ahead," she said calmly. "Kill me."

"I . . . I . . . want to ask you something first," he said. "I've got to ask you some questions."

Her lips glistened and he felt sympathy that he could not understand. And seeing her frown, he shielded the thoughts from her.

"You're not . . . quite like I thought you were," she said, very calmly.

"I am!" he snarled. "I am what you thought!" He was ashamed of the sympathy he had let her sense, and then he was ashamed of being ashamed, and his mind was confusion.

"Why did you—did you leave this planet as an unprotected flank, like this?" he said. It was a question, he knew, that had to be answered, before . . . before . . . what?

"They weren't ready to join us," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"They were not developed enough

to join us," she said.

"Why didn't you conquer them!" he insisted. "You were strong enough. Why didn't you conquer them?"

She said: "We couldn't do that. We don't have any right to do that."

In that instant, it all became clear. Suddenly truth overwhelmed him, wave after wave, like a sickness. "No!" he cried. "No!" He dropped his head into his hands. "Lies," he murmured. "Lies, lies, lies!" He saw the wrongness, the terrible wrongness, and he searched desperately over his life for repudiation, an excuse. But he found none.

They had come to him and said, This is the law of life. And they took him and trained him, and showed him nothing else. He had been scarcely a child at the first school of soldiery, and they had fashioned his mind, a pliant mind, and ground doubts out (if there had been any.) They told him that the law was strength, and strength was destiny, and destiny was to rule those below, obey those above, and destroy those who did not agree. There were no friends and enemies—only the rulers and the ruled. And the ruler must expand or die of admitted weakness.

"It's all lies!" he said. He felt the crumbling away of the certainty he had lived by. And before the helpless Oholo he felt weak and defeated and suddenly he realized that his mind shield was down.

She reached out gently to touch him.

Below, a police siren wailed in the streets. A car for corpses.

HE tried to shake the hand away. "They lied," he said. "They lied about everything. They lied that you were ready to conquer us. They told us you were cowardly and would kill us if we did not kill you first, and that we must take . . ."

She said: "It was worse than we thought. We did not think you were strong enough to attack us. Not here. We thought if we let you alone you would collapse of your own weight."

"I never knew," he said. "There wasn't any way to know. You have to do what everyone else does. You get to think they must be right." He made a small sound. "When I first came here—it started to bother me, when I saw the planet was unprotected—when I saw how strong you were . . . But I had so many things to do. I was too busy to think. But I felt something at the very first about your presence here . . ."

She stirred restlessly on the bed. He knew that he was defenseless before her because she had recovered, but she did not strike out. "Trying to help them," she said. "A few of us came to help them. They needed us. We were trying to prevent a war. And a few more years—if we'd . . . but that's gone now. You'll destroy it all."

He stood from the bed and it creaked.

"We were slowly changing their governments," she said. "We would have succeeded." He felt her mind slowly gather, and there was infinite bitterness, and he tensed. But still she did not strike at him.

"I want you to go," Parr said. "Before the other Knoug comes back. Get out."

Words damned up inside him. He had been trained to hate and trained to kill. The emotions were loose now. There was no outlet for them. He was frustrated and enraged. Hate bubbled about in him, fermenting. He had been trained to hate and to kill. Lauri winced as she felt the turmoil. "Get out!" he screamed.

The door crashed open.

Three figures lunged through.

"Lauri, thank God!" one of them cried. "We thought he'd killed you."

Parr suddenly found his arms held by two Oholos.

"We got here as soon as we could pick up your thoughts."

Lauri said, "Jen is already dead."

One of the Oholos slapped Parr's face savagely. "We'll kill this one for that!" he snarled.

LAURI sprang from the bed and sent the weapon spinning from the hand of the leader of the three Oholos. He gave a startled gasp. The weapon hit the carpet and slammed to rest against the far wall. "Don't!" she cried.

"You're crazy!" the leader snarled. "What's wrong with you?"

"He saved my life," Lauri said,

panting.

"He's Knoug," the leader sneered. "You know damned well he was trying to use you for something or other."

Parr stared, fascinated. He was surprised to find that he was not afraid. The shock of capture had not yet passed, and he seemed to be watching a drama from which he was removed.

"No!" Lauri said. "No, he wasn't!"

"How can you say that, Lauri? Look what he's done! Look what he's already done!"

"Unshield, Parr, show them," Lauri commanded.

Parr hesitated, trying to divine the plot and see what was required of him.

"It's a trick," the leader said. "They've got some way to fool us, even with an open mind!"

Lauri's eyes were wide.

The leader jerked his hand. "Kill him," he instructed.

The Oholo on Parr's left released Parr's arm and reached inside his coat for a weapon.

Lauri darted across the room and pounced on the weapon lying at the base of the wall. She seized it and rolled over. She aimed it steadily at the Oholo on Parr's left. "Don't do that," she said. "Let him go." She got to one knee.

PARR felt the grip ease on his right arm. He stood free. And for the first time—with strange hope

—the feeling of unreality vanished.

"You're insane!" the Oholo on Parr's right rasped.

She jerked the muzzle of the weapon. "I told you. He saved my life. He could have killed me. He didn't."

"A trick!"

"Get away from him!"

Reluctantly the two stood back, and the leader shifted uneasily on his feet.

"Don't you try it," Lauri suggested. "For all you know, I might really shoot. You aren't that quick."

Parr let out his breath.

"You!" she snapped at him. "Get to the door!"

Dazed, he obeyed her. He shook his head to clear it. He was afraid they would try to stop him.

"Open it!"

He opened the door and hesitated, looking at her.

"I'm coming," she snapped. Still covering the three Oholos she got to her feet and began to back toward him. "Don't follow," she warned the three before her.

"You know what this means?" the leader said. "You know what it means to help the enemy?"

"Go on out," she told Parr. "He saved my life," she said doggedly.

He obeyed. She followed him. She fumbled for the door knob, found it. "Run!" she cried. She slammed the door.

They ran desperately for the stairs. Their feet pounded on the soft carpet as they clattered down.

She was almost abreast of him.

"Help me!" she cried when they passed the first landing.

And a moment later Parr knew what she meant. They were trying to tear into his mind, and she was holding them off with her own shield. He joined her as well as he could, marveling at the vast strength she had recovered.

"Hurry!" she cried. "I can't hold it much longer." She lurched into him and he put an arm around her waist.

AND then they were through the lobby and into the silent street. No curious spectators were lingering to stare at the drying patch of dirty brown in the gutter beyond the awning.

"This way!" she cried.

As they fled on the pressure weakened. She was running fleetly at his side now, her brow unfurrowed, and yet he knew that she was still holding the shield under terrific pressure.

"In here," she gasped, suddenly turning into a narrow alleyway. "Stop!" she said. She half dragged him down to the pavement behind a row of packing crates.

"They'll be right after us!" he panted.

"No. Listen. Follow my lead. I think I can blanket us, if you help me."

Parr felt the warmth of her thoughts around him, and then they began to go up beyond his range

and he had to strain to stay with them. Underneath her thoughts his mind began to quiet, and, in a moment he felt—isolation.

"Help, here," she said.

He saw the weakness and strengthened it. With her helping, he found the range less high, and he could almost relax under it. And their minds were very close together, and their thoughts were completely alone. "We're safe here," she whispered.

He listened to his own far away breathing, and heard hers, too, softer but labored.

They crouched, waiting, and the street before them was quiet in the sunlight, for the mail trucks were out, and no taxis moved. The city—for the moment—was deathly still and waiting uneasily. The high air was sharp in his lungs.

"They've missed us," she said at length. "Wait! They're . . . They're after . . . it's another Knoug. They think we've separated, and they think it's you."

"That would be Kal," Parr said. "He must have been waiting nearby." He brought out the comset. "He must have seen us come out together."

He flicked open the comset, heard, " . . . joined with the Oholos. Parr and the other just left the hotel together."

"He's told the Advanceship," Parr said to the girl.

"It doesn't make any difference," Lauri replied wearily.

And Parr breathed a nervous sigh,

for the hate had found its channel. The Empire had made him unclean and debased him, and he had to cleanse himself. His vast reserve of hate shrieked out against the Empire; their own weapon turned against them.

"I'd like to get back to the Advanceship," Parr said. "If I could get back, I could smash in their faces!"

"Oh," she said.

THE comset sputtered excitedly.

"Three Oholos after me! They're armed! Must be new ones. The other two weren't armed!"

The comset was silent.

"Three?" Parr said. "That's right, there were three. I thought there were just five on the whole planet."

"There's about fifty now. They landed last night. Out in the Arizona desert. They're the only ones who could get here in time."

Parr felt elation. But it passed. "Fifty . . . That's not enough to stop the invasion."

"It's all we could get here," Lauri repeated.

Parr groaned. "The Knougs will shield the planet tomorrow. It will trap those fifty on the surface. And us. They'll shoot us, if we're lucky. But I'd like to kill some first!"

The comset crackled, and the Ship voice said: "How many new ones altogether?"

"I don't know," Kal answered. "I only know of three."

"We'll hurry the attack, then, be-

fore they're set. Can you hold out, Kal?"

"I don't know," Kal said.

The attack. The meaning of it suddenly rang in Parr's ears. Until a second ago, he had seen his hate as personal, and now he realized that the Empire was ready to capture a planet and then to destroy a System. And he saw the vast evil of the Empire hurtling toward Oholo civilization. He gnashed his teeth.

Lauri's hand jerked on Parr's elbow. "The one you call Kal is dead."

"I'm glad," Parr was grim. He remembered the savage eyes which the Earth disguise could not conceal. "I'm glad."

"Kal, Kal," the Advancship called into emptiness. "Kal! Come in, advanceman Kal!"

Parr flipped off the cornset.

She lowered the thought blanket completely. "Relax. Try to relax."

"Why did you do it?" he said. "Why didn't you let them kill me?"

"I don't know," she said slowly. "You saved my life. I couldn't let them kill you. I saw how you felt, how you suddenly changed. How you'd become a new person all at once. I couldn't pass judgment on you after that. I hated you and then I didn't hate you anymore. It doesn't matter. It's too late to matter. I . . . I . . ."

Her mind was warm against his.

"They're going back to join the others in the desert now," she said. "They're going to get ready to fight

the attack."

"Lauri," Parr said. "Lauri, I've got to do something!"

CHAPTER X

(New York had broken windows now, and the streets were glass littered. An occasional white face peered out suspiciously from above a ground floor. But the heart beat of subways was stilled. The cry had been: "You'll *starve* in the City!" and there had been an hysterical exodus, slow at first and then faster and faster and faster. The moon marched her train of shadows in the cavern streets.)

In Denver, the moon rode the mountains, calm, misted, serene.

"Parr," he spoke into the comset, and he felt Lauri's hand tighten on his elbow.

He glanced nervously at the sky. He was afraid to see the planet shield blossom as it might any minute to signify the attack had begun. But he feared even worse the absence of it.

"Parr?" the Advancship spat back.

"The Oholos have a defense system around their own planets. *It won't do you any good to capture this one!* You won't be able to get nearer!"

"You are guilty of treason, Parr!"

"You can't get at their inner system! They have a defense ring that can blast your Fleet out of space."

"Lies!"

Parr glanced at Lauri beside him in the darkness. "No!" he said. "They are stronger than you are!"

"They would have attacked us if they were," the Knoug said calmly.

"They don't think like that!"

"A poor bluff, Parr."

"Stop!" Parr said, "Listen . . ." He looked at Lauri again. "No use. They cut off."

"I didn't think they'd bluff," Lauri said. She looked across the street. The street lights had come on on schedule, but they soon flickered out as the power supply waned. The city was dark.

"Will they scorch the planet?"

PARR glanced once more at the sky. "I think they're holding off trying to gain new information on your Oholos. Or maybe they're having trouble getting ready. We'll know very soon whether they'll scorch it or assault it with an occupation force."

Lauri said, "You tried."

"If we could *convince* them, like I was convinced . . . if we could show them you *were* strong and peaceful . . ."

"But we aren't strong, Parr. They caught us unprepared. If we had a year or two . . ."

"How long would it be before you could get reinforcements here?"

Lauri bit her lower lip. "At least a month. We'd have to organize the units and everything. No sooner."

"Oh."

"What were you thinking?"

"I thought," Parr said. ". . . I thought I might hold the attack off . . . for as much as a couple of hours."

"That wouldn't help."

Parr swallowed and cleared his throat nervously. "I don't know. Maybe it would give the Oholos more time to prepare. It might help a little."

"How?"

"I'm going to try that. I've got to do something, Lauri."

He flipped open the comset and started to speak, but the channel was already busy. It was filled with crackling explosive Knoug language.

Parr began to listen intently.

It was a conversation between the Flagship and one of the other ships of the Fleet. ". . . Parr's right," the other ship said. "So they're down there. They say they've fought Oholos, and he's probably right . . ."

"How many are there?" the Flagship demanded.

"Thirteen. All in the engine room."

"Tell them Parr was bluffing," the Flagship ordered.

"I already did."

"Tell them they're guilty of mutiny!"

"I did, and they still won't come out. They're the bunch that were in the assault at Coly. They've been hard to handle ever since."

"All right. Go after them with guns . . ."

"What is it?" Lauri asked.

"Shhhh!" Parr cautioned.

A third circuit opened. "No other

ship reports trouble. It's just this one bunch."

THERE was a harsh curse, gut-teral and nasty. "These channels are open! The whole Fleet knows about that Coly bunch now!"

"What in hell! *God damn it, get them off!* We've got to isolate . . ." Click.

Parr stared at the comset in his hand.

Parr smiled thinly. "I did a little good, at least. A bunch of veterans must have been listening in on me . . . One of the Fleet ships has a little trouble."

"Maybe . . .," she began excitedly.

"No," Parr said. "It was only thirteen Knougs. It's scarcely a ripple. It might make the rest of the Fleet a little uneasy—but they'll still take orders. I'm sorry Lauri, but it's not going to help much."

"How do you know it won't?" she insisted.

The bitter smile was still there. "I've seen something like it before. In five minutes it will all be over."

"Oh."

"Well," he said after a moment, "I better try to get the Ship. I'm going to hold them off as long as I can."

He clicked open the comset again. "Kal," he lied icily. "Advanceman Kal." For the first time he was glad of the tinny, voice disguising diaphragm.

"Get off!" the Advanceship order-

ed. "This is the Commander. We're under communication security, damn it!"

PARR nodded to himself in recognition of what had happened. Commanders were now on the whole communications network. It would prevent ordinary operators from spreading more news of mutiny through the Fleet; it would blanket the manufacturing of rumors. And, if things were running true to course the Flagship was monitoring all channels just in case.

"I've found out the Oholo's disposition," Parr hissed into the tiny comset. "Can you pick me up?"

There was a momentary pause.

" . . . We thought you were dead, Kal. Why didn't you answer our calls?"

" . . . Broke my comset," Parr lied quickly. "I've just killed the traitor, Parr, and I'm using his."

There seemed to be suspended judgment in the Ship.

"If you pick me up, I can give you details. But you'll have to hurry! Two Oholos are closing in right now!"

"How many are there altogether?"

Parr hesitated. "Only twenty, Parr said. I think less than that. It won't be necessary to scorch the planet."

Again silence. Then the Flagship itself cut in, "All right. We'll pick you up. Where are you?"

"Denver." He made out the street signs in the darkness. "I'm here at a street corner. Eighteenth and Lari-

mer."

"Someone who knows the territory from the Advanceship can pick you up. Ten minutes. Hold on."

"Hurry!" Parr pleaded.

He cut off the comset. He realized he was frightened. The night was growing cold and he took two deep breaths. He let the comset slip from his fingers and shatter on the pavement. He kicked it away in savage annoyance, and snarled a curse.

Lauri shuddered inwardly at his violence, but he did not notice. And she forced a smile and touched him with a warm thought.

"I told them I was Kal," he said. "I . . . asked them to pick me up."

Lauri half gasped in surprise.

"They'll hold off the attack until they hear from me again. I'll try to keep them guessing as long as I can."

He was tired. He and Lauri had been walking the streets aimlessly for hours. At first there had been mobs after the mail delivery. Then the governor, conscious of what had happened in some Eastern cities, had declared martial law and only soldiers were supposed to be on the streets after sundown curfew. Already many people had fled the city in terror.

AS he and Lauri walked side by side, Parr felt he had come to know her better than he had ever known anyone. He realized how strong his mind had grown under its month long test, and he knew

that she had come to respect his strength, she who was so strong herself. But it was not her strength he respected. Strangely, it was her weakness—her compassion and her ability to forgive. An unknown thing, forgiveness, a beautiful thing.

She stood silently beside him. Then she said, "What time you gain won't matter."

"Maybe it will!" he said harshly, hating the Empire.

She stared into his face. She shook her head. "No," she said. She touched his cheek. "I ought to say something."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know. That it's a brave thing you want to do . . ."

"After what I've done, I've got to do something to make up for my life."

"What you did doesn't matter anymore."

"Listen," he said. "Listen, Lauri. You better leave. Don't stand here any longer."

She did not move.

He gritted his teeth. "Hurry up!"

Her mind touched his gently, cloudlike, and drew away. "Let me go with you."

"You know that wouldn't work."

After a minute she turned reluctantly.

"Wait!" he cried after she had gone only a few steps.

Eagerly she turned.

"Listen!" He glanced at his watch. "Listen. The Fleet is nervous. The Knougs are nervous. It might not

take much after that Coly bunch revolted . . . They're yellow inside, and the seeds of doubt are there. If we could just make them believe you really had a weapon. An hour from now—give me *one hour*—you're to contact the Fleet on my comset and tell them the Oholos are going to destroy their Advanceship right before their eyes. Then tell them to get out, the whole Fleet, or you'll destroy every ship. That may make them think! That may make them believe!"

"But unless the Ship really is destroyed before their eyes . . ."

"I'll take it into hyperspace without a shield. One minute it will be there, the next minute it won't. Maybe they won't stop to figure it out."

"But you'll be killed!"

"GIVE me just one hour. Go on, damn it. Don't argue!" She seemed ready to cry. Then she bit her lip.

"But—Parr! Parr! I *can't*! How can I? *You broke the comset!*"

Parr's mind was dazed. He tried to think. ". . . Listen. Find the one Kal had! See if you can find that! You've got to, Lauri. It all depends on that. You've just got to find it!"

She hesitated.

"Don't argue," he insisted. "Hurry! They'll be after me any minute."

She seemed to want to say something.

"Run!" he cried. And then she was hurrying away and her mind left

him entirely, so there would be no danger of detection when the scout ship came for him. And then she turned a corner, and was gone . . .

THE silver saucer shaped scout ship zipped down the street, banked sharply and vanished, recording (Parr knew) electronic details for its mothership, the pick-up craft.

Parr waited, his mouth dry.

Finally—after what seemed a long time—he saw the dark, moving patch return. It lowered, and Parr could make out the details of the unlighted surface. He sighed with relief. Fortunately it was the small three passenger craft.

It hovered, closed on the intersection and settled. Hoping that neither of its crew knew him by sight, Parr sprinted from the shadows of the building to the opening door.

The distance seemed to unravel before his feet, lengthening like a magic carpet.

His feet hit the edge of the door almost together and grasping the sides he pulled himself in, falling forward and gasping for the crew's benefit, "Oholos!"

The inside of the craft, operating under low flying procedure, was darkened except for the dull orange of the instruments.

"Up!" Parr cried in Knoug, and the craft shot away pressing him to the floor even though the acceleration compensator was whirring in his ears.

He groaned and stiffened, anticipating the light when they were in second procedure level.

He heard one of the crew say: "Pick-up successful."

"Can you berth your craft on the Flagship?"

PARR felt a dread for he had thought to go to the Advanceship, and that was the one Lauri would name for destruction!

Relief came when the crewman said, "Wrong hanger sort. This isn't combat equipment, sorry."

"All right."

Parr breathed an easier sigh, and the communications set went off.

The lights came on.

Instinctively Parr lowered his head into his arms. He groaned again. "My leg," he mumbled.

"What?"

"Hurt my leg," he lied.

A crewman knelt beside him. Parr realized then that they were carrying an extra crewman.

The Knoug rolled him over.

There was a startled gasp of recognition and Parr hit him in the neck. He slumped down and Parr had to squirm from under his limp body.

"What the —!"

Parr was on his feet.

"That's not Kall!" one of the others said.

The pilot swiveled around.

Parr dove, realizing, even as he was in the air, that each Knoug was reaching for his focus gun.

He hit the standing Knoug. The Knoug teetered. Parr hit him again. The pilot had his gun out.

Parr slammed a mental bolt at the pilot and he was surprised to see that the shield folded like hot butter. Even had he wished to he could not have stopped his assault from crisping the other's thoughts to oblivion. He was almost annoyed at the weakness.

He tried a mental assault at the other sagging crewman with equal results.

The craft started to spin out of control.

Parr struggled forward, was slammed sideways, and far below he could see moonlight flash on water.

He was thrown into the controls on the second spin, and he pulled back the emergency equalizer in desperation. The craft skittered.

And then he was in control.

He found the beam on the dial. He was to the left. He centered on it and followed it in.

He jockeyed below the gaping hatch of the Advanceship and came up slowly. The controls were stiff. It was a ticklish job.

Then he was inside. He shied left to set the craft down.

It bounced and half rolled on the deck. Then he struggled to the door.

When he opened it there was an orderly waiting. "That was a hell of a landing," he said. "For—hey!"

He went down easily under the assault. Parr realized his mind had grown even stronger than he had

supposed. For the first time he began to hope that he really stood a chance of making it.

He glanced at his watch.

Almost forty-five minutes! It had seemed only five . . .

LAURI ran toward the second building. Her mind usually smooth and calm, was now a welter of conflicting thoughts. She had tried to reach the other Oholos. But they shut themselves off. No help from them.

There were no cabs out. And the telephones were dead. She was desperately afraid Kal was in the morgue but she could not risk the time to be sure. Vaguely she remembered the siren that had squalled when the police came for the body of the Oholo and his Earth assailant who had been killed outside the hotel. But she could not remember another siren near the time Kal had been killed. She was forced to assume the police had not come for him.

But she could not be sure.

If the police had not come, she reasoned, then he had not been killed before witnesses. Therefore he had not been killed in the streets.

She knew that he had seen them leave the hotel. That narrowed the range. That he had been killed shortly afterward by the Oholos narrowed the range even more.

He had not been moving when he was killed, and he had just finished reporting Parr's and her flight, meaning that he had been stationary since

his observation. And there would be no reason for the Oholos to move or to hide the body.

Therefore his body should be where it had fallen.

There had been four business buildings in the vicinity where a man could have been killed unseen.

She pushed open the doors to the second. The ground floor, within observation range, was easily checked. So was the second. Third. Fourth. Fifth.

She was back in the street. Two more buildings. Half her time gone. She glanced at her watch for verification. Each of the two remaining buildings had four floors.

The nearest one was locked. But there was a light inside. She was puzzled. Then she saw the cleaning maid come down the front stairs, carrying a brace of candles in one hand and a mop and bucket in the other. The old woman moved slowly, unconcerned, oblivious of the outside world, intent only on her job. Lauri shuddered, but she knew that the face would not be calm if she had seen a corpse in her duties. Therefore, there was no corpse inside.

One building left!

But a few minutes later she was back in the streets. There had been nothing on the lower floor, the second floor, and the two top floors needed only a glance.

She sobbed desperately.

Something had been wrong with her reasoning, and she had only

twenty minutes left to start from the beginning and find the Knoug's body.

PARR ran quickly along the corridor. He passed two incurious Knougs. He continued on, winding upward toward the control room which he had to capture. There would be a delicate balance of timing and luck between success and failure.

He was not frightened now, even though he knew he could not personally win the fight in capture or success. His mind was calm. Strangely, too, it was at peace.

He clambered up the final ladder, his hands unsteady on the rungs. The control room door was closed. He tensed, listening, wondering how many of the enemy were inside.

He knocked, his knuckles brittle on steel. He thought, in that fleet second, of Lauri. He wondered dimly if she had found the comset.

"Yeah?"

"I've got Kal out here, sir!" Parr said briskly, hoping to imitate the orderly's voice.

"What the hell!" a voice from inside roared, "I thought we told you to take him down to the Commander's office."

Parr held his breath.

He heard an indistinct mutter of voices inside and he knew that one of them must be on the inter-phone to the Commander.

"Something screwy here!" the voice roared indignantly.

Parr hit the door and it crashed

inward with an echoing clang.

He catapulted into the congested control room. In a glance he saw there were only two Knougs. One was at the control banks, half turned in surprise. The other held the phone limply in his left hand, his eyes staring.

Parr kicked the door shut viciously and the sound rang in his ears. He launched himself at the Knoug with the phone. He felt his head meet a soft stomach and he heard explosive air pop from the man's lungs. The Knoug went over backwards, down hard.

The other one roared an oath.

PARR walked on the fallen one's face. He stomped the face and it gurgled. He stomped again in fury as all his frustration and new bitterness found an outlet. He locked the other Knoug in mental battle, but the mind he met was strong, catching him off guard.

The Knoug dove for the huge comset to warn the Fleet.

Parr could hear, from the receiver of the dangling phone, the Commander saying over and over again, "What the hell's going on? What the hell's going on?"

Parr brought the remaining Knoug to his knees with a mental assault.

Parr backed toward the door. As he fought mentally, he managed to slide the force bar across it. They'd play hell getting him out, at least.

His enemy was down, quivering. Parr panted desperately, and then

from beyond the door, he felt the growth of mental assault force. Three minds hurrying toward him! Two more minds came in and he staggered and almost fell.

Then he was down, as if from a hammer blow to the chin. He fought, sickened. He began to crawl toward the control board. And fighting, he struggled up, as if under a great weight. New minds came in. And still he could fight. But he was almost down again.

(Five minutes, he thought.)

He found the right lever, pulled.

There was the crackle of the heterodyne mind shield. And the control room was isolated by a high, shrill whine. He winced, recovering, and smiled inwardly at the careful devices Knoug officers had to protect themselves against a mutinous crew.

He dampened all the thrust engines with three hacking strokes at knife switches, being careful to get the right ones. He ripped out the engine room control. The Advance-ship was dead in space for at least an hour.

HE staggered to the comset. He stumbled over the dead Knoug and kicked the body. He shattered the transmitter with a furious blow.

With fumbling fingers he ripped away the seal the Commander had placed on the receiver. He snapped the volume control to the right. The radio whined.

Someone was trying to call the Ad-

vanceship, and Parr smiled grimly.

Another circuit broke in on the call. "Their commander is questioning the advancements they brought up, I imagine. Let him go. The information we got from the Texas advance-man supercedes it anyway."

Parr cursed monotonously.

"Forward bank in!" another circuit reported.

"Nine stations on planet shield. Ready?"

There was a crackling of readiness.

"We'll hit before it. Try to get it set in fifteen minutes."

"In position, there. Eight, back a little."

"Clear hulls. Unscreen."

"Check . . . Check . . ."

Parr glanced at his watch. The hour had only minutes of life. What was wrong with Lauri?

"Ready around?"

The Fleet was getting ready to move. Parr screamed in wild frustration.

At the door, the force field was beginning to show strain. Outside they had a huge force director focused on it. Parr speculated idly how they had managed to get it up from the engine room so quickly. The force field at the door began to peel. In a few minutes it would shatter and the control room would be an inferno with every switch and bit of metal melted into smoking blobs.

SHE was searching the shops, kicking in glass, when necessary to gain entrance. She was listening, now,

and time dribbled away. Standing amid broken glass, she cocked her head hoping to hear the whisper of the still active comset.

Ten minutes.

What had been wrong with her logic? Why hadn't Kal's body been in one of the four buildings? Even as she searched on she reviewed it in her mind, until suddenly, with an abrupt snap she knew that she had overlooked one. There were not four possible buildings but five.

Kal might have been hiding in the hotel itself!

Nine minutes.

And how many front rooms were in the hotel? A twelve storied welter of windows, and he might be behind any one.

Nine minutes.

Automatically she was running for the hotel.

(Not the lower floors, she thought, or the Oholos would have had him sooner. They must have come down and then gone back up or else the whole time element was wrong.)

One of the upper floors then?

She would have to chance that.

She was in the deserted lobby. As she ran across it she marveled at the panic of a few hours ago. She saw a busy looter in the shadows, and there were not, certainly enough soldiers to be everywhere.

In her headlong rush she did not see the human form on the second landing before she crashed into him. She gasped as the breath went out of her lungs.

The man reached out for her. "What happened?" His voice was desperate. "I've been asleep, and all of a sudden, when I wake up—"

"Let me go!"

"What happened?" he said pathetically. "The city's so *still*."

She pushed him back and continued up the stairs.

He ran after her. "Wait!"

At the top floor she saw no exit to the roof.

The corridor was "U" shaped, the bottom of the "U" facing onto the street. Six rooms on it.

"Young lady!" the man cried, rounding the corner of the stairs below her. She dropped her mental range into a low register and struck toward him. But she could not quite find his range and he shook his head and continued up the stairs. She waited, and when he arrived, she said, "Sorry," and hit him on the chin. He rolled halfway down the short flight of stairs.

She searched the six rooms. All were unlocked and empty, and the doors slammed in her wake.

Nothing.

She gritted her teeth and headed for the stairs and the next floor below.

PARR shattered the glass from the emergency deep space suit. He ripped the suit from the hangar and struggled into it with anxious fingers.

It was a minute after the hour.

He hesitated, holding the helmet in his hands.

The force field at the door was nearly gone. The radio crackled with Knoug attack orders.

And then—with infinite relief—he heard her voice, crackling over the other voices. She sounded short of breath and excited.

"What's that?" someone roared in Knoug, and Parr realized they did not understand English, the common language they had used on the planet.

"Idiots!" Parr shrieked. "Fools! Can't *any* of you understand!"

"I'm going to destroy your Advanceship," Lauri said breathlessly. "I am an Oholo. I'm . . ."

Suddenly a Knoug was translating her message.

Last minute instructions to the Fleet ceased.

"I'm going to destroy your Advanceship," she said again. And then, after a breath, she said, "Be careful! Be careful!" And he knew that the last was not to them but to him.

He could wait no longer. The force field was seconds thin. His mind cried desperately, "Hurry!" He clamped down the helmet and all sound vanished.

But her words rang in his mind, "Be careful!" and he was grateful for them. They choked in his throat.

Then he threw the Advanceship into hyperspace.

THERE was a pinwheel of motion that slammed him into the control panel. He could not hear, but everywhere, around him, metal

screamed and wrenched and tore.

The force director beyond the door spun loose and sprayed the Knougs around it, and they vanished. It jerked its current cable and was still. A vast rent in the hull let the air whoosh out into hyperspace, and the Knougs all over the Ship puffed and exploded.

Parr came slowly to his senses. He staggered directionless around the control room. Everything was a shambles.

After a while—nearly an hour had elapsed—he was wandering through silent corridors. It was hot inside his suit.

He found the pick-up ships eventually, but they were ripped from their moorings. One seemed upright and serviceable. He tested the motor. The motor worked. He got out and struggled with the escape hatch. Finally it came loose.

He taxied the pick-up ship out of the mother ship.

Hyperspace was grey and hideous. Here and there lights flashed. The vast, battered derelict of the Advanceship lay below him. Hyperspace sped away. He blasted further from the gutted hull and brought up the space shield of his craft. It wavered around him. Behind him the tortured Advanceship exploded.

He hit back toward real space. The craft skittered under his hands as he wrenched at the controls. The motor was strong, but its delicate shielding apparatus had been damaged and there was a sickening jolt.

The shield was off and Parr was falling, down, down, down, and lights in his head exploded.

And he thought it was infinitely sad that he had done something decent for the first time and now he was to be punished for all the rest. Then he knew no more . . .

THE comset had erupted into a babble of incredible confusion after her message. She waited leadenly. She warned the Fleet once more. "If you do not leave at once, we Oholos will destroy your whole Fleet." She had no way of knowing what was happening.

The Knoug commanders, unnerved, cried among themselves:

"No weapon I ever heard of could do *that*!"

"The advanceman was right! They can destroy us!"

"I say we don't stand a chance!"

"Did you hear? It just *vanished*."

"I'm going to order my ship back."

"I've already shielded for hyperspace."

"What's the Flagship say?"

"What's the Flagship *say*?"

"Commander Cei just pulled out. That makes five."

"As for me, I say, Let's go!"

"*The Flagship has already got its hyperspace shield turned on!*"

Slowly the voices died away. The comset was silent in Lauri's hand, and she knew that the Fleet had gone. The Advancship was destroyed.

Remembering Parr, she bowed her

head. She saw the body of Kal lying at her feet, where she had found it in the second room on the tenth floor. And she was crying without sound.

CHAPTER XI

SHE finally got through to the other Oholos. They listened, because the expected attack had not come.

They came for her and she met their airship in the street. They soared above the silent city of Denver.

"A Knoug!" one said. "Who ever would have thought a Knoug would do that!"

She tried to explain but they did not listen for they were busy with other thoughts. She was still crying, but inwardly now. She said, "Don't you see what he might have *become* within a few years?"

"Imagine hitting hyperspace without a shield," one Oholo said.

"It must have turned the ship inside out!"

"So the Knougs actually believed it was a weapon that did it!" another said, pleased.

Lauri said, woodenly, "He was very strong. He was almost as strong as I am. He would have become even stronger."

"There's no Knoug as strong as one of our best workers, Lauri."

"He was more than a Knoug," she insisted gently. "A Knoug would have just--just gone on being what he was."

She fell silent, remembering.

"It played hell with this planet," an Oholo said. "It'll take years to straighten it out."

"Not years," another said, looking down at the night. "No. I think not years. One of the governments we were primarily concerned with has been changed. The people finally got the chance to overthrow it, and they did. That's a good sign. I think our work will be easier now. It's always easier to rebuild than to change."

Lauri!

She froze. "Listen!"

And they listened, high up.

Lauri!

"Yes!" she cried.

Come to me!

She rushed to the pilot room. She took the controls and spun the ship.

"Did you hear that?" an Oholo said, awed.

"Yes," said another. "... He not only went in unshielded, but he managed to get back!"

They shook their heads.

And within fifteen minutes she had found his ship, lying below in dying moonlight.

SHE brought the aircraft down and within seconds she was running to the wreckage and pulling his limp body from it.

When the space helmet was off his

head, he gasped, "Tore hell out of my big ship. And . . . then I even . . . up and . . . wrecked this one, landing . . . I'm just . . . damned clumsy."

"Get the surgeon!" Lauri cried.

She held his head in her arms while her lips moved soundlessly. Then she bent to kiss him on the mouth after the Earth fashion, and Parr had never experienced such a sensation of trust and surrender and promise. He let his hand move gently down her arm.

"We'll stay here," she whispered. "We'll stay here and help these Earth people, you and I. You'd like that? To help them?"

"Yes," he said. "It would be nice to . . . build instead of destroy. It would be nice, I think. You and I could help them. I'd like that."

The surgeon came, and they took Parr out of the suit and after a while the surgeon said, "I don't know much about Knougs. But I'm glad this one is going to be all right."

Lauri laughed hysterically. The tears were open again. "I couldn't kill him," she sobbed.

The other Oholos looked puzzled and polite.

"It's a joke!" she said, dizzy with relief. "Of course he'll live, because even I couldn't kill him!"

Parr smiled up at her.

THE END

INTRODUCING THE AUTHOR - *Kris Neville*

(Concluded from Page 2)

this down serves to remind me of numerous things I haven't thought about for some time. I remember the day I got in a fight with a boy named John; I was eight or nine years old. I remember telling my father I'd taken up smoking; I was a sophomore in high school. And I remember talking Charlie into waiving his ten day grace period so he could go into the army the same time I did.

And more recently, after I got out of the army and was living in Pasadena, I recall drinking beer at *Sharkey's* with Gus and Nieson and Lou and Dale and O. K. Smith and God knows how many other science fiction fans while meetings were in progress at the LASFS.

And after that, I remember playing hours of bridge in the student lounge of Joplin Junior College; being sea sick on my first trip to Hawaii with the Merchant Marine;

drinking coffee at the UCLA cafeteria with Herb and Glen in preference to attending my American Lit course. . . .

And I remember selling my first story. *Super Science* bought it. I was, as you can imagine, quite elated. Until the next day, when I got back an English examination upon which the professor had noted, "You write like an illiterate." None the less, having sold a story, I kept telling myself in a wee small voice, "Well, Neville, you're a writer. *You sold a story.*"

I can't say - - after looking back over my disconnected assortment of memories - - why I decided to try to write. Perfectly normal people have come from the same environment I did. But I am sure why, after deciding to write, I write science fiction. I've been reading it for the last twelve years!

—*Kris Neville*