

PLANET STORIES



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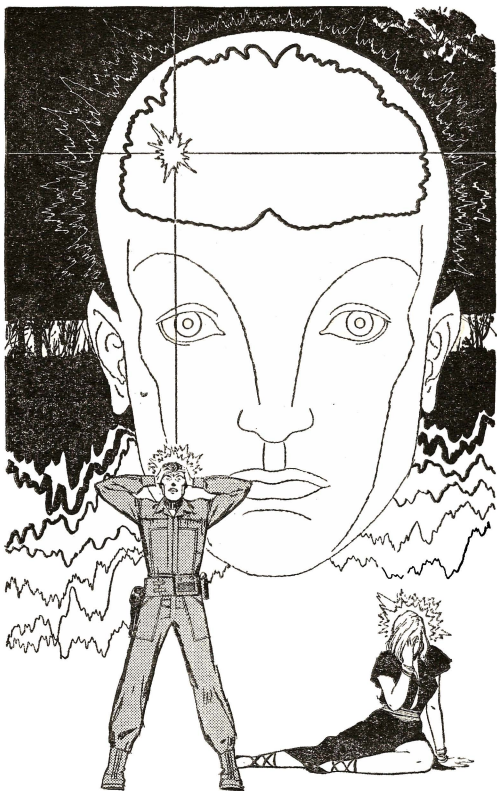
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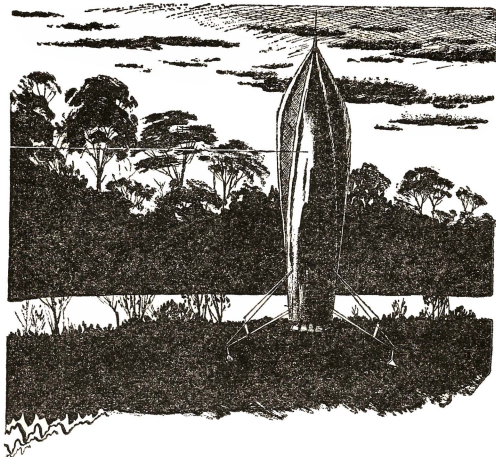
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THE BRAIN SINNER

By ALAN E. NOURSE

An invisible network of human minds lay across the country, delicately tuned, waiting breathlessly for the first spark of contact from the unknown . . . from the unpredictable telepothic Alien.

THE ship skimmed down like a shadow from the outer atmosphere and settled gently and silently in the tangled underbrush of the hill that overlooked the bend in the broad river. There was a hiss of scorched leaves, and the piping of a small, trapped animal. Then there was silence.

Higher up, the sunlight was bright over the horizon; here the shadows had length-

ened and it was quite dark. Far across the hills a dog howled mournfully; night birds made small rustling sounds through the scrub and underbrush. The alien waited, tensely, listening, waiting with his mind open for any flicker of surprise or wonder, waiting for a whisper of fear or recognition to slip into his mind from the dark hills around the ship. He waited and waited.

Then he gave a satisfied grunt. Foolish

of him to worry. All possible care had been taken to avoid any kind of alarm. He had landed unseen from Io.

The alien stretched back against the couch, allowing his long, tight muscles to relax, as he sent inquiring feelers of thought out from the ship, probing gently and tentatively, for signs of the psi-presence. The landing, after all, had been assumed. Already the natives had convinced themselves that ships such as his were a delusion. Such simple creatures, to disregard the evidence of their own senses! There should be no problem here when the invasion began, with the preliminary studies already completed, the disguising techniques almost perfected. A primitive world, indeed, but a world with psi-presence already developing—a possible flaw in the forthcoming silent conquest.

For psi-presence could detect other psi-presence, always, anywhere, despite any disguise. The alien knew that. It was the one universal denominator in all the centuries of conquest and enslavement in his people's history. Before they could come, they must know the strength of the psi-presence on this world.

The alien moved, finally, beginning his preparations. In the center of the cabin an image flickered, swarming flecks of light and shadow that filled out a three-dimensional form, complete and detailed. The alien sat back and studied it through hooded yellow eyes—carefully, oh so carefully, for there must be no mistake, not here, not now. The scouts had come and gone, bringing back the data and specimens of the man-things necessary for a satisfactory disguise. Now the alien stared at the image, regarding the bone structure and muscle contour critically. Then, slowly, he began work with the plastiflesh, modelling the sharp angles of his members into neat curves, skillfully laying folds of skin, molding muscle bulges and jointed fingers, always studying the strange, clumsy image that flickered before him.

It was the image of a man. That was what they called themselves. There were many of them, and somewhere among them there was psi-presence, feeble and underdeveloped, but there somewhere. He cyed the image again, and pressed a stud on the con-

trol panel, and another image met his eyes, an electronic reflection of himself. He studied it, and carefully superimposed the two, adding contour here and there, yellow eyes seeking out imperfections as he worked.

There must be no mistake. Failure would mean disgrace and death, horrible, writhing death by dissociation and burning, neuron by neuron. He knew. He had officiated at, executions before; delightful experiences, but not to be trifled with. He stared at the image again and then at himself.

THE skin tone was wrong. The yellow came through too clearly in places, and in this strange culture that color was reported to carry unpleasant connotations. He worked pale, sickly-pink stuff into his soft, wrinkle-free skin, then molded out the cheeks and forehead. Hair would be a problem, of course, but then there would be many small imperfections. He smiled grimly to himself. There were other ways of masking imperfections.

At last he was satisfied. There was no way to bring the normal reddish color into the pale green lips; there was no way to satisfactorily prepare the myriad wrinkles and creases that crossed the skin of the man-things, but with a little skillful application of projection techniques it did not matter.

The alien struggled into the tight, restricting clothes that lay in a bundle, carefully folded and pressed, at his feet. The hard, board-like shoes cut at his ankles, and the hairy stuff of the red-and-white checked shirt made him writhe in discomfort, but once outside the ship he was glad for the warmth. He stepped out onto the ground, and listened again carefully. Then he made certain arrangements with wires, and threw a switch on a small black case near the air lock, and began marching down the hill away from the ship.

He would no longer need the ship. Not now.

The underbrush grew thicker, and he fought his way through the scrub until he reached a roadway. It was not paved. A flicker of sour amusement swept through the alien's mind. They had been afraid that these simple creatures might try to oppose them! Yet the scouts had said that far to the East were great stone and steel cities—

the places-of-madness, the scout had said. Perhaps. But here there was no stone and steel, only dust, and the ruts of wagon wheels, and a howling dog somewhere over the hill.

The alien trudged on for almost an hour, trying to acclimate his legs to the fierce tug of gravity that pulled at him. And then he stopped short and listened.

He heard them, then, in the depths of his mind, somewhere on the other side of the hill. His eyes narrowed. No psi-presence there, but two of the man-things, beyond doubt. Other whispers, too dull, stupid, vagrant whispers flickering through his mind. Lower life forms, no doubt. Possibly a farm with work animals. The scouts had said there were such. He turned off the road and almost cried out when the sharp barbs of a fence cut through his tender skin.

A trickle of green dripped down his arm, until he rubbed a poultice across it, and it became smooth and sickly-pink again. With a vicious jerk he pulled the fence out, post and all, and left it on the ground, moving through the woods toward the sounds he had heard.

Soon the woods ended and he saw the dwelling across a broad clearing. Black dirt lay open in the moonlight. He started across. There was light inside the dwelling, and the dull, babbling flow of uncontrolled man-thought struck his mind like a vapor. There were other buildings, too, dark buildings, and one tall one that had a spoked wheel on top, and creaked and rustled in the darkness.

He had almost reached the dwelling when a small, four-legged creature jumped up in the darkness, crying out at him in a horrible discordant barrage. The creature came running swiftly, and the alien's mind caught the sharp whine of fear and hate emanating from the thing. It stopped before him, baring its fangs and snarling.

The alien lashed his foot out savagely; it crunched into flesh and bone, and the creature lay flopping helplessly, spurting dark wet stuff, its cry cut off in mid-yelp. The alien stepped onto the porch as the door opened suddenly, framing a tall, thin man-thing in a box of yellow light. "Brownie?" he called. "Come here, Brownie! What's the matter—" His words

trailed off when he saw the alien. "Who are you?"

"A traveller," said the alien, his voice grating harshly in the darkness. "I need lodging and food—"

The farmer's eyes narrowed suspiciously as he peered from the doorway. "Come closer, let me get a look at you," he said.

The alien stepped closer, concentrating all his psi-faculties on the farmer's mind, blurring his perception of the minute imperfections of his disguise. It required all his power; he had none left to probe the farmer's mind, and he waited, trembling. That could come later.

The farmer blinked, and nodded, finally. "All right," he said. "We've got some food on the stove. Come on in."

II

SENATORIAL Councilman Benjamin Towne slammed his cane down on the floor with a snarl, and eased himself back down in his seat, staring angrily around the small Federal Security Commission anteroom. The American Council attaché standing near the door retrieved the cane, handing it to the Councilman with a polite murmur. Instantly he regretted his action when Towne began slapping the cane against his palm, short staccato slaps that rang out ominously in the small room.

The Councilman was not in the habit of waiting. He did not like it in the least, and made no effort to conceal his feelings. His little green cat eyes roved around the room in sharp disapproval, resting momentarily on the neat autodesk, on the cool grey walls, on the vaguely disturbing watercolor on the wall—one of those sickening Psi-High experimentals that the snob critics all claimed to be so wonderful. The Councilman growled and blinked at the morning sunlight streaming through the muted glass panels of the northeast wall. Far below, the second morning rush hour traffic buzzed through the city with frantic nervousness.

The Councilman tapped his cane on the floor, glancing up at his attaché. "That Sanders girl," he snapped. "Give me her file again."

The Council attaché opened a large briefcase, and produced a thick bundle of papers

in a manilla folder. Towne took them and glanced through the papers, lighting one of his long, green-tipped cigarettes from a ruby-studded lighter. "How about Dr. Abrams? Was he questioned?"

The attaché nodded in embarrassment. "Nothing doing. He ran us in circles."

Towne's scowl deepened. "Did you give him the Treatment?"

"He just wasn't having any, sir. Said he'd answer to a Joint Council hearing, and nothing less."

"Stubborn old goat. He knows I've got nothing that will stand up in a Council hearing." Towne went back to the papers again, still tapping the floor with the cane. "Damn that Roberts!"

The attaché glanced down at Benjamin Towne with some curiosity. It was easy to see how the man drew such powerful support from his constituents. There was something overwhelming about his appearance—the heavy jaw and grim mouth line, the shock of sandy hair that fell over his forehead, the burning green eyes, the stout, well muscled body. The attaché's eyes drifted down to the withered left leg and the grotesque twisted foot, and he looked away in embarrassment. What was so awe-inspiring about a crippled man who accumulated great power? Towne certainly had done that. Some said that Ben Towne was the most powerful man in North America. Some also said that he was the greatest man, but that was something quite different indeed. And some said that he was the most dangerous man alive. The attaché shivered. That was none of his business. If he went probing *that* line too far they'd be calling him Psi-High, and he liked his job too much to risk that.

The inner door opened and a tall man with prematurely gray hair strode in, followed by a girl in her early twenties. "Sorry to keep you, Councilman," the man said. "No, no, don't get up. We can talk right here."

Towne had made no effort to rise. He glared at the man, and then his eyes drifted to the girl and widened angrily. "I said a *private* conference, Roberts. I don't want one of these damned brain-picking snakes in the same room with me."

The man nodded coolly to the girl. "Sit

down, Jean. Councilman, this is Jean Sanders. If you're here about the Alien investigation, I want her to sit in."

Ben Towne slowly set the papers down on the floor. "Record this, Roger," he said to the attaché. His eyes turned to Roberts. "I understand he slipped out of your hands again yesterday," he said with vicious smoothness. "A pity."

Roberts reddened. "That's right. He slipped out clean."

"No pictures, no identifications, no nothing, eh?"

"I'm afraid not."

Towne's voice was deadly. "Mr. Roberts, an unidentified Alien creature has been at large in this country for three solid weeks, and your Federal Security teams haven't even gotten near him. I want to know why."

"I'd suggest that if you read our reports—"

"Damn you, man, I didn't come here for insolence!" Towne slammed the cane down with a clatter. "You're answerable to the Joint Senatorial Council of the North American States for every wretched thing you do, and I'm ready to bring charges of criminal negligence against you in this Alien investigation—"

"*Criminal negligence!*" Roberts jumped up, his eyes blazing. "My god, Councilman! We've thrown everything we have into this search. This creature has played us for fools every step of the way! We didn't even get a look at his ship. It blew up right in our faces! Do you realize what we're fighting here?"

"I realize quite well," said Towne, frostily. "You're fighting an Alien who has slipped into our population, somehow, and just vanished. There's no way to tell what he wants or what he's doing. The potential danger of his presence is staggering. And you've fumbled and groaned for three weeks without even turning up a hot trail. You haven't even a coherent description of him—"

"We're fighting a telepath," Roberts said softly. "An Alien with telepathic powers like nothing we've ever dreamed of. That's what we're fighting. And we're losing, too."

The girl across the room stirred uneasily. Ben Towne's green eyes shot over to her

viciously. "And you're using freaks like her to help him hide, I suppose."

"Jean Sanders is not a freak," Robert's voice grated in the still air of the room. "She's Psi-High, and she's the most valuable asset we've got in this search at the present moment. It's a real pity there aren't more Psi-Highs that have had her training."

"And you sit there and tell me you'd dare use Psi-Highs in an investigation as critical as this?"

Roberts sighed in disgust. "Councilman, you don't have any idea what you're saying."

"I beg to differ," Towne's eyes flashed. "I happen to be aware that there are a group of individuals wandering around loose who will have this country in chains in a hundred years if they're allowed to develop as they please. Psi-Highs are a vicious menace, nothing more nor less. We can't help it that we have them. The fools in the government were blind two hundred years ago when they first started appearing, and psi-factors are gene-controlled. But they can't use their extra-sensory powers without training."

He picked up the cane and leaned forward at Roberts. "Thanks to Reuben Abram's meddling over at the Hoffman Center, some of them are already developing their psi-faculties, learning to use a treacherous power that has no place in civilized society. Well, *I don't want them working in Security!* Is that clear enough?"

Roberts sighed tiredly and leaned back in his chair. "You're confused a little," he said. "This is not the Rotary Club. It's not a Federal Isolationist rally, and it's not the Senate floor, either. It's just me you're talking to. And to my knowledge, you haven't succeeded as yet in removing all Psi-High rights. You've gotten laws through Congress to make them take tests and submit to registration; you've passed laws to prevent them from marrying; you've blocked their education and hamstringing their training and development, but you *haven't*, as yet, been able to strip them of their citizenship—"

"Not as yet," said Ben Towne.

"And you can't, as yet, dictate the activities of the Federal Security Commission."

"Not as yet."

Roberts' eyes blazed. "All right. Now you can listen to me for a minute, Councilman,

recording or no recording. We've got an enemy in our midst—an Alien we've never even seen. We can thank a psi-positive citizen out in Des Moines for spotting him in the first place. He had the sense and the loyalty to report it to us. Normal psi-negative individuals can't see him, can't identify him, can't even get near him. We haven't tried Psi-High agents against him yet but we're going to have to, whether you like it or not. Psi-negatives are strapped. The Alien can run circles around them. Our only hope of catching him is to use psi-positive agents, the best-trained we can get our hands on. Like Jean, here. And if you want to stop me you'll have to reorganize Federal Security to do it."

Towne lurched to his feet, his face white. "I may do that, Roberts." He reached for his cane. "I may just do that."

"You'll have to throw the Liberal Council out of office first. They're supporting me, and outvoting your American Council two to one."

Towne gave him a shrewd look. "Better start watching the telecasts, and newstapes," he said bluntly. "Already there are rumors going around about a mysterious Alien fugitive. Oh, I know it's top secret, but you know how news leaks." He gave a nasty smile. "People get nervous about rumors like that, especially when the Administration denies them so sharply. You'd better catch him pretty quick." He nodded to his attaché, and limped to the door. Then he glanced back over his shoulder. "Be sure to watch the telecasts," he said, and slammed the door behind him.

Jean Sanders stood up, white-faced and trembling. "What a vicious man," she murmured. "What did he mean, Bob?"

Robert Roberts shook his head, and fished a cigar from a desk drawer. "I'm not sure that I know," he said slowly.

III

PAUL FAIRCLOTH finished reading the teletape briefing just as the little jet plane slipped down toward the hangar slot in South Chicago. He slapped the spools into the erasure can and flipped the control switch to activate the distortion field inside the can. He stretched his legs, then, won-

dering vaguely whether he was going to come out of this whole mess alive.

Jean's parting hug was still warm in his memory, and he remembered the worry in her big grey eyes as she had kissed him and said, "Be careful, darling. I wish I could go, too. I couldn't bear to have anything happen—" It was the first time she had ever actually spoken that word to him, and he was glad she had. Almost defiantly glad. She had said it aloud, and she had said so much, much more without words. Only vague shadows in Faircloth's untrained mind, but he knew the meaning of those shadows.

A man was waiting down below on the platform for him. The hangar vault was dark and deserted. He took the agent's card and scanned it briefly. "Marino? I'm Paul Faircloth. Better give me a late briefing."

Marino nodded. He was small and wiry, with catlike movements and exceedingly bright eyes under his jet black eyebrows. "We'd be wise to get on over while we talk," he said.

Faircloth nodded and stepped into the little tube-car that was waiting at the end of the platform. It was a tight fit for two men, and Paul ducked by reflex as it gave a lurch and dipped down the chute into a narrow tunnel, hanging free and speeding ahead on its electronic guide beam. "Is the Condor Building where he was spotted?"

Marino nodded. "In Center City, Chicago. First thirty-six floors are commercial, and the twenty above are residential. He's pinned pretty definitely on the forty-second, in a large residential suite. No idea why he chose it or how long he's been there—" He turned apologetic eyes to Faircloth. "I'm Psi-High—I guess you know. We've got him located and triangulated, and we can keep him pretty well pinned if he doesn't try to give us a shower. We're pretty sure he knows we're there."

"Shower?"

Marino nodded, grimly tapping his forehead. "A barrage, the works. This Alien's got a powerful psi. And I mean powerful. He gave it to one of our Psi-High men yesterday. It was savage. Nearly ripped him apart."

Faircloth shivered. "But you can keep track of him."

"Yes." Marino lit a cigarette with nervous fingers. "Roberts put Psi-Highs out to spot him, but he doesn't want any Psi-Highs in on the kill." His voice was flat with disappointment. "Political pressure, I guess. People couldn't bear to give a Psi-High credit for anything—" He glanced at Faircloth and reddened. "Sorry. No offense. It just slipped out." He bit his lip. "Anyway, that's what you're here for. Half a dozen other psi-negatives will help you. I hope God'll be helping you too."

Faircloth grinned tightly. "Got you nervous?"

"It's got me plenty nervous."

Faircloth nodded again, rubbing a hand across his eyes. "All right. I want your best men, every one of them, to go in with me. I don't care whether they're Psi-High or not. Neither does Roberts; he's with you folks all the way. But we've got to get this creature and get him cold. He's slick. Is the building sewed up?"

"Tight as a vacuum."

"Good. Keep it under cover, and try to keep the Psi-Highs from broadcasting any more than necessary."

Marino gave him a queer look. "They'll do their best, of course."

"Right." Faircloth ran a hand through his brown hair and loosened his tie a trifle. "As soon as the building is cleared from rush hour, I want the power shut off all over the building. Elevators, lights, everything. We'll be on the 41st floor, and a squad will be on the 43rd. We'll close in together."

Marino shook his head. "I hope it works. They had him just as tight in Des Moines last week, and he slid right through." The man's eyes were worried. "We just don't know what we're fighting. That's the whole trouble. Even the Psi-Highs are up a tree."

THE car gave a lurch and slid to a stop.

They stepped out into a shiny tunnel filled with people emptying out of the huge building above. The two men waited to board an express surface elevator, and stepped off on the main concourse of the Condor Building. The last sunset rays made a dazzling golden display on the banks of heliomirrors, and Faircloth blinked, shielding his eyes a moment after the softer light

below. Then he glanced at his watch. "Let's coffee up," he said. "We've got a few minutes."

They slid into an eating booth on the concourse and dropped in coins for coffee. It was so clumsy, Faircloth thought. Three and a half weeks since the ship had been spotted down along the Mississippi, and they were still just learning how clumsy they were. They had even thought that the visitor, whoever he was, had been killed in landing until the first Security Team had gotten to the ship. They'd gotten to within just ten feet of it when it had exploded. And even then they hadn't realized what they'd found, until the report came from Des Moines, and they started following up leads. They had followed the alien, true, from the first farmhouse where he had stopped the night he landed, west through the farm country to Des Moines, then northeast to the great Chicago metropolis. But when it came to contacting the creature or capturing him—Faircloth shook his head. Clumsy just wasn't the right word.

He glanced at Marino, and then reached across the booth and buzzed for a news-tape. He glanced over the Washington news hurriedly. Another upheaval in the Liberal Council. The Northern Democrats were trying to drum up Civil Rights Party and One World Party support for their new South American Development program, and they weren't getting to first base. And there was another vicious attack by Ben Towne on the Hoffman Center's training program for Psi-Highs. Towne had even named Reuben Abrams as a leader there, and worked in some high-grade anti-Semitic innuendo into the association. Paul went tense, searching for Jean's name. It was not mentioned. He took a deep breath. If that filthy dog ever dragged her name into public. He finished his coffee, and gave the repeat button a vicious jab.

Then his eye caught a small item with a Des Moines dateline, well hidden down at the bottom of the backside of the tape. He read it, frowning:

WOMAN CHARGES PSI-HIGH CONSPIRACY

Des Moines, Ia., 27 June, 2157. A woman whose name was withheld today placed charges against Miss Martha Bishop, 23, of Oak Park Section, Chi-

cago, whose name is listed in the Federal psi-positive registry. The charge was made at local Federal Security offices, and accused Miss Bishop of mental interference. The victim, who allegedly had information concerning the rumors of an Alien visitor which have been persistently appearing lately, claimed that Miss Bishop had attempted to prevent her from reporting her information. After failing in this attempt, Miss Bishop was charged with using her psi-powers to erase the information from the woman's mind. Miss Bishop could not be reached for comment.

Mr. J. B. Dunlap, spokesman for the Liberal Senatorial Council in Washington, has repeatedly denied that the rumor of alien visitors has any basis in fact. Nevertheless, the charges against Miss Bishop are being investigated fully—

Faircloth crumpled the tape with a snarl and returned to his coffee. Finally he nodded to Marino. "Drink up," he said, "and get in touch with your men. It's time to go."

Ted Marino left for the elevators to corral his men, arranging to meet Faircloth in the concourse five minutes later. Paul found a visiphone relay booth, and sank his long, lean body down in a relaxer facing the screen. The last of the rush-hour people were still drifting by in the corridor; Paul watched them anxiously. Then he gave a nervous laugh, forcing himself to relax for a moment. If only Jean were here! He battled an impulse to call her. Finally he dialed the priority code for the Federal Security Commission offices in Washington.

The relays clicked, and the code carried him through the front-line secretaries without any trouble. He gave a sigh of relief. He was in no mood to argue with secretaries. A moment later he was blinking at Roberts' tri-di image on the screen.

Roberts' face looked haggard. He nodded to Faircloth. "You got there, then. Good. How does it look, Paul?"

"Everything's just real nice," Faircloth growled. "They think they've got him pinned. The building here has a central power source, and we can bottleneck the whole place if we time it right."

"Don't miss, Paul." Roberts' voice was tense. "Whatever you do, don't miss."

"What's the matter?"

"Ben Towne has worked his way into this."

"Oh, god!"

"Well, I can't help it, there was nothing I could do. He has the whole American Council behind him, and the Liberals can't hold out long on negative results. Towne

has the whole picture now, and if we don't wrap it up fast, things here in the Capitol are going to blow sky high."

Faircloth cowered. "Did you see the news-tapes tonight?"

"You mean the Bishop girl in Des Moines?" Roberts nodded unhappily. "Got the report from Des Moines on it this afternoon. Trumped up from beginning to end. I tell you, Towne is not playing around. I don't know how he plans to work things, but I'm afraid that story was just a starter. He'll do everything he can to tie the Alien up with the Psi-Highs in the public eye—and you know Ben Towne when he gets rolling. He'll play this rumor business up to the hilt. And the way things are in the Senate now, that could mean real trouble."

"Who's controlling Security news releases?"

Roberts gave a short laugh. "Take a guess. Just one guess. Don't miss tonight, my friend."

FAIRCLOTH nodded and signalled off. He sat swearing quietly to himself for a few moments. Then Marino came by, and he swung out into the hall again, glancing at his watch. "Ready?"

Marino nodded. "Got the squads placed on the 41st and 43rd. Power goes off when we step off the elevator on the 41st. Okay?"

Faircloth grunted, and spread out a floor plan of the 42nd floor. "Is the building all clear?"

"All the commercial levels, yes. And autolocks go on all the doors but the one we want when the power goes off."

"Good. At least we shouldn't have residents underfoot. You've got Psi-Highs posted outside the building?"

"Yes, in 'copters. Circling the building fairly close, out of sight range of the 42nd."

"All right. We'll move in on him as soon as the power goes off. I want cameras going everywhere—in the corridors, in the stairwells, even in the 'copters outside. If there's a slip-up, I want to see where he goes, and especially I want a picture of him. A good picture of him. Maybe he can fuzz up human eyesight, but he'll have a hell of a time fuzzing up a camera. Let's go."

They stepped on the elevator, felt it rush up to the 41st floor. They stepped off. As

the door closed behind them, the whirring motors died, and the lights went out. Faircloth led the way swiftly to the closed stairwell where they met four other men, one with a motion camera. "Cover everything," Paul said sharply. "If you see him, stop him with a shocker, not with pellets. We want him alive." He opened the stairwell and started up with the men behind him. Moments later they met part of the group from the 43rd; they started swiftly down the dark corridor toward the pinpointed residential suite.

And then, like a savage blow, a wall of fire exploded in Faircloth's brain. He gave a scream and jerked out his arms in an agonized convulsion. He fell forward on his face.

Wave after wave of searing agony burned through his brain; he jerked on the floor, trying to scream again, unable to force a sound through his twisted lips. He heard shouts around him, and a whistle shrilled; there were running feet. Somebody tripped over him, tumbled to the floor with a bone jarring crash. Three shots rang out even as he dragged himself to his knees.

He was blinded; he had never felt such horrible, driving pain, and he clawed along the wall as more footsteps echoed frantically in the corridor. Suddenly Marino was shaking his arm, and together they burst through the open door of the suite as a roar of derisive laughter tore through his mind.

Faircloth opened his eyes and saw the empty room through a burning red haze of pain. He collapsed on a chair, exhausted, as Marino threw open all the doors. He gave a shout down the hall and others came running.

Unbelieving, Faircloth stared around him, then looked frantically at Marino. "You—you got him on the stairs?"

Marino shook his head miserably. "Nobody could see him. Not a soul."

The hoarse laughter grew louder in Faircloth's ears. "The cameras!" he gasped.

"Three of them are smashed. I don't know about the rest—"

"You're certain?"

Marino didn't answer. The answer was obvious. The Alien had slipped away like a ghost in the night.

IV

ROBERT ROBERTS was waiting, nervous as a cat, when Faircloth arrived at the Security office. There were deep circles under his pale grey eyes, and a dark stubble on his chin. He greeted Paul with a silent handshake; then they went back into the rear office, with its modern panelled wall looking out across the valley to the tall white buildings of the Capitol. Once it had been an inspiring sight to Faircloth. Now he hardly even noticed. A rocket rose in the morning air, leaving its white vapor trail like a pillar of cloud behind it. The weekly Venus rocket, probably, or maybe one of the dozens of speculator ships off for Titan. Faircloth scowled and sank into a relaxer with a sigh. "I'm sorry, Bob," he said. "It was a bust. I couldn't help it."

Roberts mixed a drink and shoved it across the desk to Paul; then he touched off the end of a long black cigar. "What's done is done," he said sourly. "You thought he was sewed up, and it turned out that he wasn't." He turned worried eyes to Faircloth. "What we've got to know is why he wasn't sewed up. Something went sour. What was it?"

Faircloth was silent for a long moment. Then he said: "I think the whole approach is sour."

"Very possibly. How do you mean?"

"I mean we're outclassed, that's what. This Alien is out of our league—way out." His eyes caught Roberts'. "He's a telepath, Bob, and I don't mean halfway. He's not just a feeble, groping, half-baked, half-trained, poorly developed Psi-High human. I mean we're dealing with telepathic power no human Psi-High ever even dreamed of—"

Roberts' lips were tight. "Exactly what happened in Chicago?"

"That's just it, I don't know." Faircloth sprang to his feet, his face white. "Look, Bob, the building was virtually escape-proof. The boys had every exit guarded three ways from Sunday. The power was off in the entire building, and there was no way he could get out short of walking through walls. And we had the walls guarded just in case he could. We got him sewed up, and then we went in to get him, and

WHAMMO!" Faircloth clenched his fists, trembling. "I don't want to go through that again, Bob, not for anything. It was murderous. And the horrible part of it was that he wasn't using his full power on me. What I got was just a gentle rap on the knuckles—"

"And he slid through."

"Clean. Smashed the cameras; got away without leaving a trace."

Roberts shook his head, and fished a folder from his desk. "He didn't smash all the cameras." He shoved the pictures across to Paul. "See what you make of those."

Faircloth blinked at them. There were several frames, obviously printed from motion film. Pictures of a man-like figure running down a passageway. The face was not visible. "Not much help," said Faircloth. "Gives us a clothing description, maybe. Nothing else. He certainly looks human enough!"

Roberts nodded sourly. "At that distance anything would. Can't even get reliable measurements. And you didn't even see him?"

Faircloth shook his head. "Like I said, the whole approach is sour. You're never going to get him this way."

"You've got some ideas, I suppose?"

"I have."

"Well, thank God somebody has." Some of the tiredness left Roberts' face. "Let's have them."

Paul Faircloth lit a cigarette and slowly shook his head. "Sorry," he said. "First I want some answers. Straight answers about a certain individual."

Roberts' eyes narrowed. "You mean Ben Towne."

"That's right."

Roberts scowled and threw down his cigar. "All right, I'll tell you about Ben Towne. It isn't pretty. Frankly, this Chicago fiasco was the break Towne has been waiting for. There were Psi-Highs involved in that raid. Towne knows it. And he's going to build a story of Psi-High alliance with the Alien that will carry him to the White House."

Faircloth nodded grimly. "Does he have any conception of the dangerousness of this creature?"

ROBERTS snorted. "Of course he knows it! But Ben Towne is obsessed with a single idea, and it twists everything he thinks into horrible distortion." He leaned forward, staring at Paul. "Benjamin Towne wants to wipe psi-positive faculties off the face of the Earth. He hates Psi-Highs. Oh, I don't know the motives behind it. Maybe the fact of his own imperfect body makes him hate what he considers a sort of super-perfection appearing in the human race. It's a false premise, of course. The predisposition of certain people to high extra-sensory powers is neither a perfection nor an imperfection.

"It's just another tiny step in the evolutionary chain. It happens to be a dominant gene factor, and in our society it happens to put the Psi-High in a slightly advantageous position in comparison to psi-negatives."

Roberts threw up his hands. "But the motives don't really matter. Towne was smart enough to realize that there were lots of people who hated and feared the expansion of Psi-Highs in our society. He started fighting against it, and he's ridden that fight right into the Chairmanship of the American Senatorial Council. If he can split up the Liberal Council just a little bit, he can throw them out of office, and move his American Party right in."

"And where does the Alien fit in?"

Roberts shrugged. "It's obvious, isn't it? Towne has taken an issue and split the country wide open with it. And now, along comes a visitor from the stars, an Alien visitor who steps out of his ship and just disappears like a spirit into the population. An Alien who is fully telepathic. Towne can control the news releases; he has the power to decide on the security classification of information about the Alien. It's been kept top secret up 'til now. But Ben can control the news, and he can tie Psi-High humans and a vicious enemy Alien together so neatly in the public mind that every Psi-High in the country will be in danger of his life. It's political dynamite, and Towne is controlling the fuse."

Faircloth's face was white. "And if the Alien is caught?"

"All the better for Towne. Then the 'rumored' liason between Psi-High humans

and invaders from space can be 'proved.' Towne is in the driver's seat."

Faircloth nodded bitterly, and stood up, shaking the creases out of his trousers. His face was grim. As he reached for his hat, his hand was trembling. "That's just about the way I had it lined up, too," he said. "Good-bye, Bob. Have a nice hunt."

"Sit down, Paul."

"Sorry. I'm not working on Ben Towne's payroll."

"I think you are," Roberts snapped. His eyes flashed, and he sat up straight behind the desk. "You're going to work with us, and you're going to follow through to the bitter end. You and Jean both."

Faircloth's eyes darkened. "Jean is not involved in this."

"I am afraid she is. Just as deep as you are. And you and Jean are going to do what I tell you in this investigation whether you happen to like it or not. That is, if you ever want to marry Jean—"

Faircloth whirled on Roberts, his eyes blazing. "What do you mean by that?" he said softly. "What are you trying to say?"

Roberts' eyes caught Paul's, and held them. "I'm saying that you happen to be a Psi-High, Paul. And I just happen to know it."

PAUL FAIRCLOTH sank down in the chair again, staring at Robert's face. There was silence in the room for a long time. Then Paul said, "That's a pretty bad joke, Bob."

Roberts nodded sharply, his eyes twinkling. "I'll say it's a joke. It's a colossal horse laugh—on Ben Towne. He was so sure that that private file of his contained the names and histories of every psi-positive individual in the country! It's a horse on you, too. It's against Federal law to forge examination papers, Paul. It's against the law for a Psi-High to be unregistered. Both state and Federal registration are required. And it's against the law for two Psi-Highs to be married, regardless of their stage of development. Jean's work with Dr. Abrams has developed her powers amazingly in the last couple of years. Yours must be pretty crude, in order to keep them hidden so well—"

"You've gone out of your mind," said Faircloth flatly.

"Sorry, my friend. I'm afraid not."

"But you have no proof—"

"True, it's strictly a hunch, and a little personal investigation. You were through school when the registry law went through, and you must have found somebody to leak the examination to you early. How you did it, I neither know nor care. But all I need is a good strong suspicion to subpoena you over to the Hoffman Center for a test." He smiled at Faircloth. "Care to have me call Dr. Abrams? He's got some nice definitive tests—"

Faircloth's eyes fell. "That won't be necessary." He sighed, and sank wearily back into the relaxer. "I knew it would be spotted sooner or later. I even thought for a while that Marino had spotted it."

"He had."

Faircloth nodded listlessly. "All right. What do you want, Bob?"

Roberts' eyes were excited. "I want you to work with me. I think we can get this Alien and sink Ben Towne's raft at the same time. There's no single person in the country as dangerous to Towne right now as an unregistered and unrecognized Psi-High. And that's just what you are. And with you and Jean working this thing as a team, I think we can turn the capture of the Alien to the benefit of all Psi-Highs."

Faircloth nodded slowly. "It could be done if my ideas are any good. And they certainly would require Jean to put them across."

"Then you're with me?"

"Okay. You've got the aces." Faircloth gave a defeated grin. "I'll probably hate you for this but let's get Jean over here and do some planning. The first job on the docket is to pin this Alien and keep him pinned."

V

JEAN SANDERS tossed her pencil down on the desk and flopped down cross-legged on the floor. "I think we're going around in circles," she said disgustedly. "Three separate circles," she added, with an owlish glance at Bob Roberts.

"All right, we're tired," the Security

chief sighed. "We've been at this for hours."

"It's here," Faircloth said stubbornly. "We've got all the information we need, if we can only pin down the application. Or at least we've got enough information to make a start."

"The more I see of the whole business," said the girl, "the more it looks fishy to me." She lit a cigarette thoughtfully. Her face was slender, with black brows and big grey eyes, and her slim figure made her look sixteen. "And it gets fishier and fishier the more we talk."

Paul nodded. "Exactly. There's something that we aren't seeing or realizing or that we just don't know about this creature."

"Well, let's try classifying what we do know," said Roberts. "We've got a picture that isn't worth a plugged nickel. We've got a few photos of the outside of the ship before it exploded. We know that he's psitriple-high, fully telepathic, with the ability to fuzz up his observer's perception of him."

"Disguise," said Jean. "It isn't perfect. He needs that to hide the wrinkles in the disguise."

Faircloth walked across the room, staring at the walls. "Then there's the ship. It was found near Gutenberg, Iowa, on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi, three months ago. That's a fact. Farm kids found the ship but didn't go near it. Scared stiff. Told their father and he called Security. I don't suppose there was any way of telling how long the ship had been there?"

Roberts shook his head. "Biologists and geologists both had a whack at it, but the explosion destroyed all the flora and ground area within twenty feet of it."

"Well, anyway, no occupant of the ship was found, and no trace of where the occupant might have gone. Security sent a scout squad down to photograph the ship and it blew into a million pieces."

"That's right."

"How many of the million pieces were recovered?"

"About ten. Magnesium alloy. Told us nothing."

Faircloth nodded. "Okay. Then the Psi-High report came in from Des Moines, and you turned up the farmer and his wife who saw the Alien the first night. What was

their name? Bettendorf, I think. Jacob Bettendorf. Rather dull folks. They fed him and sent him on his way. Noticed nothing odd, but the farmer said his eyes felt tired all the time the creature was there. How did their description jive with the others you've gotten?"

Roberts shrugged. "The same—or I should say, uniformly different. Nobody seems to agree. It's obvious that they don't actually see him in any detail at all. They just think they do."

"You know," said the girl, suddenly, "that's one of the things that bothers me. A lot of those people out there are Ben Towne's stoutest supporters. They don't like Psi-Highs. They keep their eyes open for people that act like Psi-Highs—you know, the way we're likely to nod and start answering a question before a person gets it half asked—or the way we sometimes forget our expressions when we've had an accidental peep at some sweet innocent young girl's inner thoughts. Those people can spot that. But the Alien went right through. Not even a suspicion."

"He got into the city fast, though," said Roberts. "City folks are likely to be a lot less observant than country people."

"All right," said Paul. "That fits well enough. Now, since he destroyed his ship, we can assume that he is planning to stay a while. That probably means that there have been others before him. He's too confident for an advance scout. He knew he could mingle, and stay, and observe, and learn, and get away with it. Probably his job is to accumulate information, detailed information about human beings, and with full blown telepathy he must really be making hay. And unless I miss my guess, the information he wants most of all is information about Psi-Highs." Faircloth faced Roberts and the girl. "This is beginning to add up now. I don't think we're going to catch him in a dragnet. No matter how skillfully it's laid. No matter how many Psi-Highs we have on it, and no matter how well trained they are."

Roberts looked disgusted. "Then you're saying that we aren't going to get him, period."

"Oh. no. I think we can catch him. At least I've got an angle that's worth trying.

We'll have no way of evaluating it first, because of the nature of the thing, but in the end we'll either have the Alien or we won't, and I think there's a good chance that we will. If we keep playing the Chicago game we'll lose every time."

"But what went wrong in Chicago?" Roberts cried.

"Nothing, except that we were licked before we started. Look at it this way. He's outguessed us every time. And if you analyze that a little, it's not really surprising that he has because he's telepathic. He does not need a twenty-page report and a road map to know what's going on around him. All he needs is a hint. Just a bare touch of man's mind, a slight flicker of contact, and he has enough of a head start to sit down and figure out everything that's going to happen from then on. Just like a chess game. You play along and suddenly your opponent makes a move that reveals a whole gambit which you hadn't been able to see before. But our Alien friend spots the gambit on the basis of the first move instead of the tenth. We make a move and he has it pinned. He knows we operate along fairly logical lines. He can follow out the logical possibilities before they happen, and there's no possible way we can trap him. Psi-Highs or no Psi-Highs."

Roberts scowled at him. "Then what do you propose?"

Faircloth grinned. "It should be obvious by this time. We feed the computer with all the evidence we have, and let it meditate a while and plot out a supremely logical approach to trap the creature on the basis of what we know of him now. Then we take that supremely logical approach, and change it a bit. We change it into a completely *illogical* approach."

THE call they were waiting for came through at three o'clock one morning, after they had almost given it up in despair.

It had been a long, heartbreaking wait. Time after time Faircloth had pleaded that they must have been very close in Chicago, closer than they realized, that the Alien was just temporarily frightened, because there had been no sign, no clue to the Alien's whereabouts, no sign that he was even in existence since the Chicago raid. Yet Fair-

cloth felt sure that sooner or later the contact would come.

It was possible, of course, that the change in the search pattern had worried the Alien. Logically, a dragnet should have been set up in Chicago, and the entranceways to all the large cities guarded carefully. That was what the computer had said. "Probability is very strong that the Alien desires to remain in a city, but suggests that Chicago may not be the optimum location for him. Recommended heavy Security measures be taken in Chicago and surrounding cities of size. The probability is very high that the Alien is seeking some specific information. Advise close control of all spaceports, air, and rolling-road escapeways—"

And so forth. That was what the computer had said. Of course, the computer was far from infallible, but its analysis and recommendations were utterly logical on the basis of the information given it. That was exactly why they were carefully ignored.

It was a gamble, and no one was more aware of this than Faircloth. All Security personnel were withdrawn from the Chicago area, Psi-High and otherwise, except for a small crew headed by Ted Marino, who were scattered throughout the city. A gamble, but it was not entirely guesswork that made Paul so certain that the Alien, if left quite alone, would try to make contact with a Psi-High mind sooner or later. Of course, that conclusion itself was the result of logical reasoning. No matter what efforts were made to remove logic from the approach, it crept in. It had to creep in.

It was logical that a telepathically sensitive creature visiting a strange planet would seek to learn something about the segment of the population that could expose his presence. He would seek signs of his own kind of thought. Paul knew too well that a Psi-High mind that was cut off and alone was a sick mind. That was why Psi-Highs always settled in the cities, why they sought each other with such fierce, desperate clanishness which in itself had bred suspicion of them in the minds of psi-negatives. It was not a matter of choice, with them. It was a desperate need. And Paul knew how overpowering that need could be.

No, logically, the Alien would make

contact with a human Psi-High, sooner or later. It would not be difficult to keep control of such a contact. The Psi-Highs were very few, numbering in the hundreds, scattered in colonies in the larger cities of the North American States. With painstaking care each one was contacted and warned, and those in Security Service were spotted in the most likely places for the contact they were waiting for. The roads were left free, and the airports and spaceports were not checked. An invisible network of human minds lay across the country, delicately tuned, waiting for the spark of contact.

Faircloth was asleep when the call finally came. He rolled groggily out of bed, his heart racing, and groped for the visiphone screen. Ted Marino's face materialized on the silvery curve; a frightened, shaking Marino whose eyes were wide with horror, whose hands jerked nervously as he unsuccessfully tried to control them. His voice was on the thin edge of hysteria. "He hit me, Paul. Just a little while ago."

Paul leaned forward, staring at the pale form in the screen. "Ted, are you hurt?"

"No, no. But oh, god!"

"It couldn't have been just another Psi-High contacting you? It's deadly important, Ted—"

Marino shook his head vehemently. "No, no, no. It *couldn't* have been. I've been in Psi-High contact enough to know what it's like. This was different. It was like he'd lifted off my skull and scooped out my brains."

Faircloth lit a smoke, trembling. "Did you try to fight it?"

The man nodded. "I tried. He was clear in before I knew what had happened, but I tried. I—I think it puzzled him. It didn't do any good at all. He just brushed it aside."

"Ted," said Faircloth. "Now listen. Forget about it. Don't write up a report. Don't even think about it. As far as you're concerned, the job is over. Get dressed, and travel south—down to Florida, Rio, any old place, it doesn't matter where, just go. Use an expense account and have yourself the time of your life."

Marino's eyes opened in amazement. "Are you crazy? I thought this was what—"

"It is. Do what I say and don't worry about it. You're finished on this job. When

you've gotten a good rest come back to the Hoffman Center and take up your training with Dr. Abrams where you left off." Paul flipped the switch and turned back to the room, his heart pounding a staccato cadence in his throat. He grinned triumphantly and began to pack his bag.

The chase was on, but this time, the mouse was chasing the cat.

VI

AS IF a dam had broken, the reports began streaming in. Three more came from Chicago. Then a call came from Cleveland, from a Psi-High technician there who was not remotely connected with the Federal Security Commission. Then from Pittsburgh, then New Philadelphia. Like a fearful, ominous flood the reports of the Alien's contacts swarmed in. And Paul Faircloth and Jean Sanders were ready for them.

Their headquarters was a small suite of rooms in a middle class residential hotel in the heavily populated metropolitan area between Washington and Baltimore. Few of the Federal Security agents, Psi-High or otherwise, knew this. They knew only a visiphone priority code number, and a special word-key for scrambling. This was as Faircloth insisted. Of all the agents posted and assigned, only Paul, Jean, and Roberts knew the true nature of the operation, and each of them worked out their own illogical details without telling the others.

The wisdom of such a procedure was graphically illustrated a dozen times over for the Alien at work was thorough. An operative in Pittsburgh had attempted resistance to the Alien's telepathic overtures, as instructed, and suffered a burst of wrath that had left him blubbling in a corner for three days until a crew from Hoffman Center straightened him out with a week's diet of amphetamine and glucose. More and more, the Alien's puzzlement and frustration and wrath began to seep through, and Paul and Jean watched the reports, and nodded approvingly. Three times, when they were sure that the Alien had left a locality, they ordered cleanup squads to make raids on his former quarters, quizzing the inhabitants and neighbors, asking a mul-

titude of idiotic questions, uncovering a half a dozen descriptions and leads which they assiduously ignored. Then they began stabbing erratically at locations where the Alien had *not* yet been, raids which were carried out with a viciousness and singleness of mind that left the unfortunates who were questioned quaking in their boots. On these raids, even the agents themselves were confused as to their purpose.

And there were other tactics, a myriad of disjointed, unconnected, abortive, harassing procedures, as though the whole search had suddenly fallen into the hands of a madman. A rocketship bound for Venus was delayed four days beyond an opposition, adding a half-million dollars to the cost of fuelling it. A whole series of road blocks were thrown up between New York and New Philadelphia, virtually paralyzing the commercial traffic between the cities for two days. Quite suddenly, the order went out to close down on all passengers in the great St. Louis-New York rolling roads, and Robert Roberts put in a gruelling week soothing the ruffled feelings of the businessmen who had been held up and the companies whose products had spoiled when the swift-moving strips had ground to a halt.

The news that there *was* an Alien from the stars at large, that Federal Security was waging a vast underground battle to capture him, was no longer a deep secret. The tension mounted daily.

And bit by bit, carefully sifted bits of information were dropped into the minds of the Psi-Highs who were still in the Alien's path. Long hours were spent in the headquarters suite planning the pattern to be used. But in the end it was a pattern well chosen and worth the effort because it was soon evident that the Alien was heading for the great metropolitan area which surrounded the nation's capitol.

No attempt was made to contact him. It had been entirely passive. The Alien's overtures had received no response other than futile attempts at shielding; no analyses of his contacts were attempted, and this knowledge was planted so that the Alien was sure to learn it. Warnings of traps were planted in his path, "secret" knowledge of closing dragnets and carefully devised Psi-High

weapons to be used against him; occasionally such warnings were followed by abortive raids, either too early or too late to meet him, lead by psi-negative Security men who had no more idea what they were doing than the man in the moon. But one by one, key facts were planted, pointing always in one direction, aimed at one man, and always the Alien moved toward the city.

PAUL FAIRCLOTH and Jean Sanders seldom left their headquarters. Their job was to keep the pattern moving, and to plan out their individual parts quite separate from each other. It was terrifically wearing. As the tension mounted, both of them grew more haggard. Paul had not found time to shave in a week, and there were dark circles under the girl's eyes. Much of the time she just sat, tense, listening, waiting. Other times she helped him work as he fed data into the teletype and tape readers which had been set up in their quarters. But even amid the tension and exhaustion of the work neither of them could forget the simple, awful fact that Paul Faircloth had been exposed as a Psi-High, and that somehow, they would have to rearrange all that the future had held for them both.

Each morning they spread the reports out on the table before them. "Closer," Paul said one day. "And it's on his own volition. He hasn't been pushed. On the contrary, he's been left quite out in the cold. And he doesn't like it."

The girl nodded and glanced at the papers. "And he's definitely trying to ask questions. Karns' call last night showed that better than any other. And of course Karns didn't know any answers."

Faircloth nodded. "None of them know the answers. That's the beauty of it. Try as he will, he doesn't get anywhere."

"Not yet." The girl rose, walking across the room. "Paul, I'm afraid. We're shooting in the dark. We don't know what we're fighting against."

"Are you sorry you're in on it?"

"Oh, no!" She turned around, her face stricken. "I'd never want you to think that, never." His mind was suddenly filled with shadows, impressions struggling to get through, impressions that would make the

use of words ridiculous. "Oh, Paul, I'm afraid! For you, for both of us. If anything should happen—"

"Nothing's going to happen, darling—"

"But what about *us*? If something goes wrong, Roberts knows about you."

Paul's eyes could not meet hers. "It was bound to be found out sometime. I'd rather Roberts knew than Ben Towne."

The girl's eyes were wide with fright. "But we shouldn't be together! Oh, Paul, how did he find out? Why did anyone have to find out?" And then she was sobbing in his arms, and he held her close, trying to comfort her as her body shook against his chest. "Jeannie," he murmured. "Please, darling, don't—"

"But it's so unfair! Why shouldn't I be allowed to marry you if I want to?"

"You know why, darling! It's the law. We tried to fight it but the people are afraid of us. There's nothing we can do about it. They passed the law, and they think it's right."

"Ben Towne think's it's right!" she burst out scornfully. Her tears were hot on his cheek.

"Towne backed it to the hilt, I know. But people are afraid of a man carrying a single psi-positive gene, like you and me. What would they do if they doubled? How could we tell what our children would be like? Look, darling, think! You're just getting a grip on your faculties now. You're learning how to use your psi-powers, and look what you're doing! You can almost get through to me, and I've had no formal training at all, I've been underground, just training myself as best I could. You're nearly top-grade, Dr. Abrams says you'll have almost complete control in five years, and I could too, with the proper training. What would our children be like with the factor on both sides?"

"Well, what would be wrong with it?" The girl was fighting back the tears. "Are we such monsters? Have we done things so terrible that we have to be caged like animals and kept under control like criminals?"

Paul shook his head. "People only know what they hear. Ben Towne has been a terrible, vicious enemy, and enough people believe him to give him tremendous power. The people are nervous, and fearful, and

there's nothing we can do about it." He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at her face with it. "We've got a job to do, Jeannie. It might be the most important thing that Psi-Highs have ever tried to do. We can't flop on this job."

"But Towne will just turn it against us—"

"Not if we work it right. And I've got a hunch that we're working it right."

VII

THE visiphone buzzed shrilly that afternoon, and Roberts' worried face appeared in the screen. "Paul," he said sharply. "There are some bad rumors around. I think something's up."

Paul cursed. "What kind of rumors?"

"All kinds," said Roberts sourly. "They're saying the hunt for the Alien is a fraud, that nobody is doing anything at all about it. There were a couple of out-and-out charges that Psi-Highs are teaming up with the Alien to make an attack on the government—"

"My god, can't somebody put the lid on that man?"

"That wasn't Towne's work. It was some other Federal Isolationist Senator on one of the propaganda programs the Normal Supremacy party has on TV. There's talk that the Civil Rights bloc in the Liberal Council is getting ready to switch to the American Council side and force a Presidential election. And that could put Towne in the White House. He's getting ready to move, Paul. We haven't got very long. The word has been sneaking out all over. Towne is behind it, of course, but he's smooth; oh, he's smooth. Congress hasn't been joined into two solid political parties for two hundred years, but they're doing it now, and it'll be a bloody battle. If Towne can get the Civil Rights bloc to switch to his Council he's got the Senate in the palm of his hand."

"Who's the leader of the Civil Rights men?" Faircloth's voice was sharp.

"That's just the thing. It has been Mike Veriday. His brother's a Psi-High. But his stock has taken an awful nosedive since this rumor campaign started. The polls have got him trailing Kingsley from Kentucky by

three per cent, losing ground fast. Now Kingsley, it seems, is in some mean financial trouble that Towne got him into, and Towne is ready to clear him of some nasty charges if he plays along—" He paused for a long moment. "We haven't got much time, Paul."

"Well, I hope we don't need much. But I think you can call in as many of our men as you need to. If things get too hot for you, list Jean and myself as missing, and throw out a dragnet for us. Because I think we'll be very much outside the law in another day or so."

Roberts blinked at him. "Better tell me what you're planning, Paul."

"Don't worry what I'm planning. The less you know about it the better. Just one thing, though. You remember Eagle Rock? The place we built up on Timagami when we were in college? Put three men at a number where I can reach them, and give them the location of Eagle Rock. Then tell them to stand by with a fast jet scooter. Got that? And don't let *this* leak, no matter what happens."

"I wish you'd tell me—"

"We're fighting for our lives, now, Bob. And for every Psi-High in the country. I won't tell you."

Roberts nodded, and doused his cigar. "Eagle Rock," he said. "You can count on it."

Paul flipped the set off and sank back to wait for the Alien to make contact.

HE STRUCK at ten o'clock that evening, with a ferocity beyond their wildest expectations.

They had known that he was near. The reports had come in, and they had plotted and calculated his pathway, and waited. It was only a matter of time, and the carefully planted information built a tangled, devious circle with a single Psi-High individual in the center.

Jean Sanders.

It had to be Jean. Paul hated it. He wished it could be him, that he could somehow protect her, but Jean Sanders was the only possible person to bait the trap. Her psi-powers had been developed carefully and painstakingly for years under the care of Dr. Reuben Abrams and his staff at the

Hoffman Medical Center. A Psi-High individual was helpless to use his powers without training. Just as a child was trained through long, gruelling years to use the mental faculties of thought, and perception, and logic, a psi-positive mind required training to control its powers of perception and physical control, if its powers were ever to be used.

Paul knew that all too well. He had the psi-positive factor, too. He had not realized, in his teens, when he had plagued and baited the two Psi-High boys in his high school class, that there might be a time factor in psi-positive development. Other Psi-Highs showed the signs of abnormal sensory apparatus at the age of one, or three, or seven. The schools caught them, tested them, registered them and sent them out into a life of fear and suspicion and hatred. They were considered freaks, the more dangerous because there was no physical identification that could be used to separate them from ordinary human beings.

And certain men had seen the great power that stood waiting for the man who took advantage of the people's fears. Ambition is blinding; certain men could see the danger to the comfortable, careless wielding of power if Psi-High minds were to work their way into government. But minds, like Paul Faircloth's mind, matured at different ages, and at different times. And some slipped through the barrage of testing, undetected, only to discover later that it was not the backs of the cards they were reading, but the mind of their opponent that held the cards.

The faculty was feeble in people like Paul. He could not read minds. He could not sort and integrate the confused tendrils of conscious and unconscious thought that broke like an endless stream from a human mind; he could not separate the reality of here-and-now thinking from the strands of fantasy, and memory, and supposition, and frustration, and desire, and half-understanding, and confusion that lay beneath the surface of those minds. He could detect falsehood and he could feel suspicion; he could sense love as he had never felt it before, and he could feel himself gripped in the helpless frustration of pity; he could savor excitement with a thousand tingling

nerves, and he could sense the blackest depths of despair, but he could not sort them out to make a coherent picture of the thoughts streaming from a human mind. It took a lifetime of training of a Psi-High mind to do that.

But Jean Sanders could. That was why she was waiting in the room with him when the Alien struck.

She was walking across the room when it happened. She stiffened, screamed, and even Paul's untrained mind caught the impact of the wave of fear and revulsion that swept from her mind. She sank to the floor, and Paul stood by, watching helplessly as she twisted and writhed in the blind agony of the powerful invasion. "Please," she choked, white faced. "Get me a pillow. Then—then listen—"

"Don't fight him," Paul whispered. "Let him in. Let him clear in. And then jump on him for all you're worth. Dig, dig deep—"

Her eyes became huge, like the eyes of an animal, frightened beyond hope, cornered, attacked and helpless to fight back. Her neck strained back, and her teeth clenched. The blood drained from her face as she began moaning. "I can't, Paul—" she cried. "I—I can't get in—"

"You've got to—" Frantically Paul tried to thrust out with his mind, tried to dig through the wall of immense power that was present in the room. The Alien was close, very close, and the presence of his mind was overwhelming. Paul tried to break through, and then suddenly he felt a pang of white heat sear through his brain, driving him back, a sharp, savage stroke that doubled him up, clapping his hands helplessly to his ears as he fell and writhed on the floor in pain. And then suddenly it was gone as swiftly as it had come. He lay panting for a moment. Then he managed to crawl across the room to Jean. He sank his head to her chest, heard the slow pounding of her heart. He shook her, gently; her eyes flickered open, her face filled with horror and loathing. "Oh, Paul, I got—I got so little—"

"What did you get, darling?"

"Nothing. A picture or two, nothing more. Oh, he was so strong, I couldn't make a dent—"

"What pictures?"

She sat up, her breath coming in gasps. "Nothing definite. Ben Towne—yes, there was something about him—just the flash of a mental picture, no rationality connected with it. And some papers, some sort of file—" She clasped her hands to her head. "He—he stripped me clean! I can't—"

"Jeannie! There must have been something else—"

She looked up at him, a strange light in her eyes. "I don't understand it," she whispered. "There was a picture of a farm—yes, a farm, and a dog, and blood on a pair of pants—"

Paul sat back, staring at her stupidly. And then, suddenly, a light flashed on in his mind, a flash so incredible that he hardly dared think of it. In an instant he was on his feet, the blood pounding in his throat. He began throwing clothes into a bag as the girl sat there, watching him dully, in growing alarm. "Stay here," he said. "I'll call you—"

"Paul—where—"

"It's my show, now, darling. Wait, rest, you'll be all right. Rest, and say a prayer or two. Because I've got this Alien nailed for sure this time."

IT WAS incredibly dangerous and utterly necessary. Paul found a visiphone booth in the rear of a station where there were few people, and quickly threw an adapter across the camera, and spun a roll of film in. The film started when the party at the other end flipped on the switch. The conversation was brief. Paul gave the address of a roof-garden apartment in Central Washington, and then disconnected. After removing the film, he reconnected with a number he had given Roberts a few hours before. Ted Marino's face appeared, and Paul heaved a sigh of relief. "How many men do you have, Ted?"

"Two."

"All Psi-High?"

"Certainly."

Paul nodded. "All right, we're beyond the law from now on, Ted. If you or any of the rest want out, take off."

Marino's dark eyes sparkled. "Roberts said this is the kill," he said.

"It's not the kill you think. But it's a

kill, all right. Take the men to this address." He gave the roof-garden number. "Have a jet scooter there, and see that nobody spots it. Use Security insignia. Send out a bleeper if anything goes wrong. I'll be there."

He rang off, and moments later was rising high above the city in his own scooter. In ten minutes he had reached the roof-garden, and settled the little ship down gently on its gyros. He walked inside and sat down in the darkness, and waited.

He heard another jet scooter land. Marino walked in with two other men Paul remembered vaguely. He nodded to them, and they also sat down. Paul fingered the shocker in his pocket, his nerves screaming a thousand warnings in his ears.

The guard robot on the ground floor beeped sharply. Paul reached for the lock-release switch, and heard the elevator start to whine. He unlocked the door and left it ajar, then motioned to one of the men. "Cover the hallway, and back them up when they come. Don't be surprised at who it is."

The man disappeared down the hall. Paul sat quietly, and then heard the elevator open. There were footsteps, and a tapping sound. The footsteps stopped at the door.

"Come on in," he called sharply. "Bob'll be with you in just a minute."

The door swung open and Senatorial Councilman Ben Towne walked into the room, followed by two tight-faced men. One of the men had a hand in his jacket pocket. Towne blinked at Faircloth, and his grin began to fade into alarm. "Who in the hell are you?"

"One of Roberts' men."

"Roberts said you had the Alien," Towne snarled. His green eyes peered around the room.

Marino swung on the man to the right, bringing him down with a blow to the temple. Paul slapped Towne's cane to the floor, and pounced on the other guard like a cat. The Councilman staggered against the door jamb, trying desperately to reach his cane. Moments later the guards were helpless, and Paul and Marino dragged Towne out to the middle of the room. "The files," Paul said sharply. "Where do you keep them?"

Towne's breath came heavily. "You damned snakes can't get away with this—"

"The files, Councilman."

His eyes went around the room fearfully. "The boys know where they are," he said finally, his voice so low it was hardly audible.

"Any duplicates?"

"Not of the files you want."

Paul nodded to the two men. "Take them down and get the files. Then turn the men and files over to Roberts. Tell him to see that the men forget all about this." He turned back to Towne. "You're taking a little ride."

"When this hits the papers it'll be the end of the road for you freaks," Towne snarled. "You can't stop it now—"

"We'll see," said Faircloth. "Now shut up and get moving."

They left the cane in the room. Paul helped Marino load him aboard the jet scooter. "Take him up to Eagle Rock. Keep him there. Dismantle the engine, if you have to, to keep him there. I'll be there in a few hours."

Marino nodded. "Should I report to Roberts?"

"Don't bother. Roberts would have a stroke. I brought Towne over here on a dummy visiphone film of Roberts, which will put him in enough hot water as it is."

"And where are you going?"

"I'm taking a plane west. I've got a visit to make. I've got to see a man about a dog."

VIII

THE farmer blinked across the table at him, red eyed and fearful. "I don't know what you want," he was saying. His voice was high and querulous. "I didn't ask no trouble of the Federal Men. They asked me all them questions, and I told them—"

"That's all right," said Faircloth. "We're just rechecking. You were the first party the Alien contacted as far as we can tell. The ship landed on your property, didn't it?"

The farmer nodded. "Over by the river. Scrub oak and elms standing over there on the bluff. Haven't never cleared it because it'd be too rocky to farm."

"All right, all right," said Faircloth

sharply. "I want you to tell me what happened that night."

The farmer's eyes flitted to Faircloth's face and back down to the table. "I already told you twenty times. Why do you pick on me?" he whined. "I couldn't help it he happened to stop here. Heard him on the porch about ten o'clock at night—I was just gettin' ready for bed. And he said he was travelin' and wanted something to eat. We don't see strangers around here very often, Mister—" he looked up at Faircloth fearfully. "I—I looked at him, and he looked all right to me. My eyes were tired, like I said. I couldn't see him too well, but he came in, and ate, and I offered to bed him for the night. He said no, he had to make on for Des Moines."

Faircloth watched the man's eyes. "Details, Mr. Bettendorf. You've left some out along the line, haven't you? I have a report here that was filed by our field team that talked to you." He pulled out a sheaf of papers in the dim kitchen light. "Says something about your dog barking."

The farmer's face went white. "There anything wrong with that? I reckon the dog did bark. I don't remember."

"And you went to open the door, and the stranger was there, eh?"

The farmer nodded his head eagerly. "I told you everything—"

"And you brought him in and fed him and then sent him on his way?"

"That's right, that's what I done."

"You're a liar," said Faircloth. He eyed the man coldly. "Try the story over again. Once more now."

The farmer jolted to his feet, his eyes feverish. "I done just like I told you. I didn't tell no lie. I heard the dog yelping—"

"And you opened the door and there was a stranger there." Faircloth's voice was sharp. "Then what happened? Step by step. Minute by minute. I mean it, mister, I want the truth."

"I—I looked at him—"

"What light did you have?"

"This here same light. Not very much—"

"And what did he say?"

"He said, 'I'm a traveler and I'd like something to eat.'"

"And what did his voice sound like?"

The farmer faltered. "It was funny—like

gravel in a tin can. A funny kind of voice."

"And where was the dog all this time?"

The farmer blanched, "He—he done stayed outside. He saw it was all right."

"Where's the dog now?"

"I sold him. I mean he ran away. You can't keep a dog forever, Mister."

Faircloth's face was very near the old man's. "The stranger was out on the porch and you talked to him and let him come in. And then what did you do?"

"I—he sat down at the table, I think—I—I—"

"You went over to get some food from the stove, didn't you?"

"Yes, yes, that's right."

"And then you saw blood on his pants, didn't you? And you remembered hearing your dog give a yelp out in the yard, didn't you? The stranger had blood all over his pants and boots, didn't he?"

The farmer's eyes were wide with fear. He was shaking his head helplessly. "No—no—"

"And so you picked up your gun and you shot him, didn't you?"

And then the old man's face was in his hands, bending over the table, crying like a baby—huge, fearful sobs racking his boney shoulders. "He killed my dog," he choked between sobs. "He killed old Brownie, gave him a kick that split his head open. He didn't have to do that to poor old Brownie. I knew he was a bad one when he did that. I shot him. Yes, I did."

THE news broke to the nation that night, and the country went into a panic unequalled since the days of the Great Cold War. Paul Faircloth spent an hour on the visiphone from Des Moines talking to Robert Roberts, going over the whole business from beginning to end. The Security chief chain-smoked three cigars for the first time in his life. Finally Roberts put a line through to the Speaker of the Joint Senatorial Councils. Half an hour later, while Faircloth was making his way by jet back to Washington, Roberts was in top-secret conference with the Senate Council Leaders, and then with the President himself. And then the news broke. It was an official White House News conference, and it had been dismissed barely three minutes when

the radios and TVs were carrying the casts of the announcement.

Faircloth brought his plane down at Eisenhower Field, and saw the crowd swarming across the landing strip before he got to the ground. A dozen flashbulbs popped, and before he could get into the Security limousine waiting for him, he was in the middle of a tight circle of reporters.

"How long has the Alien been at large, Mr. Faircloth?" one of them asked.

"Sorry. The chief will have to answer that."

"Is there any doubt that he's telepathic?"

"No doubt whatsoever. I know that from personal experience. It's the only way he could move freely in the population."

"How was he first detected?"

Paul smiled to himself. "The President gave you that information, didn't he? A Psi-High citizen spotted him in Des Moines. The Psi-Highs have been on his trail ever since."

One of the reporters was tugging at his arm. "There's been a lot of talk about some kind of—well, liason between the Alien invader and the Psi-Highs in this country."

Paul frowned. "If that were true, would we be working twenty-four hours a day to trap him? Use your head, man. There've been a lot of unfortunate rumors, I'm afraid. But I can speak for the Psi-Highs, and I think Commissioner Roberts will back me up on this—the Alien is menacing our very civilization. He's struck at one of our most beloved public servants in an attempt to undermine the government and prepare our planet for a full scale invasion. There isn't a Psi-High citizen in the country who will rest until the monster is caught, and until Councilman Towne has been returned safely to Washington."

"But what about Towne's anti-Psi legislation? He's always hated Psi-Highs."

"Nonsense. Towne has been a loyal servant of the North American people. He's fought for what he thought was right, and has exposed himself to great dangers and personal vilification to do it. If he hasn't fully understood the Psi-Highs' side of things, that's not a matter for us to be vindictive about." He looked around the circle soberly. "The fact remains that he's in the hands of a dangerous enemy, and it's our

job to save him if it can possibly be done." He nodded, and stepped into the Security limousine. It honked its way through the crowd, and then dipped down into the government tunnel that led to capitol hill and Central Washington.

He picked up a paper inside the car, and peered at it eagerly. The full-color picture of the President's grave face stared out at him in tri-di, and on either side pictures of Roberts and Towne. It was an old picture of Towne, a flattering picture. Paul grinned as he read the story rapidly:

COUNCILMAN TOWNE KIDNAPPED FROM SECRET MEETING

President Reveals Alien Telepath at Large

The President of the North American States revealed tonight in a special press conference that Councilman Benjamin Towne (Federal Isolationist, American Council) was kidnapped from a secret meeting with Federal Security agents last night in what was described as the first step in a plan for large-scale invasion of Earth by an Alien race from another planet. The President reported that one Alien, believed to be fully telepathic, has been at large in the country since his landing near Guttenberg, Iowa, last May 26th.

The Alien's presence was first detected by a loyal Psi-High citizen of Des Moines and was reported immediately to the Federal Security Commission. Robert R. Roberts, Chief of the FSC, has been active in directing a nationwide dragnet to capture the Alien.

Councilman Towne left his home last night at 11:00 P.M. in response to a call ostensibly from Commissioner Roberts. It is believed that the call was forged by the use of a dummy-film, and the Councilman was reported missing when he did not return home. The two attachés who accompanied him apparently have suffered severely from the encounter with the Alien's telepathic powers, and were unable to be questioned at the Hoffman Medical Center this morning.

The President made special note of the excellent and selfless work of certain Psi-High citizens during the past months, in the course of a manhunt that has been shrouded in secrecy. The Alien's telepathic powers invariably overcame the efforts of psi-negative individuals, but through the efforts of the Psi-Highs, Commissioner Roberts has expressed every hope of ending the search within days and securing Councilman Towne's release.

Faircloth flipped the page, glancing at the smaller headlines. An interview with Dr. Abrams reporting the training program for Psi-Highs in progress at the Hoffman Center; a long article, discussing the value of Psi-High powers in combatting a ruthless telepathic alien force; an article by Roberts, very carefully worded, explaining that if one telepathic Alien had come to

Earth, others could be expected. Roberts expressed the opinion that human psi-positives were the nation's strongest safeguard against such an invasion.

Faircloth carefully folded the paper and spoke to the driver of the limousine. The huge car rose at the next tunnel exit, and sped north along the surface, then rose again. Paul waited, impatiently, and then stepped out of the car at the given address. Five minutes later he was holding Jean Sanders in his arms, while Robert Roberts sat chewing a cigar at the far side of the room, looking vastly pleased with himself.

IX

"IT WAS handled beautifully," Faircloth was saying. "The timing was perfect, and there's no question but that it will go across." He looked up at Jean. "You're sure you got everything across to him when he contacted you again?"

She nodded. Her face was still pale. "He turned me inside out. Cleaned out everything I knew. I didn't resist. And then when we'd heard from you he contacted me again, and I knew that we were right. He's been in touch with me ever since. He'll be here soon."

Faircloth nodded to Roberts. "And you've arranged for the raids to start up through New England?"

Roberts nodded. He looked slightly high. "Everything's under control. Marino has a ship ready for takeoff, and we have guns up near Eagle Rock to blast it down. Ain't many people around in northern Ontario. The pictures will be rather bad, probably, but after all—field conditions, you know.

It will certainly look like the same sort of ship that landed out in Iowa, and there won't be enough left when the blasting is over to tell for sure whether the mangled mess that they drag out of it later is man, Alien or oily rags. Those guns do a good job."

Something touched Faircloth's mind, lightly, like a quiet knock. He swung around, his eyes wide. "He's here," he said, and then he saw that Jean already knew. "Tell him to come up."

She nodded, and closed her eyes. Moments later they heard the footsteps on the

stairs, hesitant footsteps. Then the door swung open. They stared at him for a moment, and then both men were wringing the man's hand, offering him a glass, and he sank down on the cot they had prepared for him, exhausted. "You must be dead," Paul said quietly.

"I am, I am," said the man. "Mind if I lie down?"

He was an ordinary looking man. He was slender, about thirty, and very pale. A single-factor Psi-High had no distinguishing physical characteristics; there really was no reason to expect a double-factor psi-positive to look any different. But somehow they had half expected a god-like creature, and he just looked like a frightened young man.

His face was mild and rather sad. But his eyes were clear and sharp, and the mouth was in a grim line, as he sank back on the couch. "I was afraid you'd never spot it," he said. "For a while it looked as though the whole thing would backfire. I mean when Towne was planning the shift in the Council and trying to force an election. I was afraid—and in the midst of that, you started your cat-and-mouse game—"

Faircloth nodded. "We had no choice. We didn't know, and you didn't dare reveal what you were doing at that point."

The man shook his head. "It was better this way, much better. I planned to kill Towne and then let you capture me. Counting on you to work the propaganda right. Then nobody would have known that the Alien was killed before he even got started."

Faircloth smiled. "The computer even listed that as a possibility. Low probability, but that was on the basis of what we knew. We hadn't even considered it—yet every living Psi-High has known for a long time that someday two Psi-Highs would have a child. We could only guess what the child might be like."

The man looked up at them sadly. "The child would be lonely beyond words," he said. "He would be able to hide, yes. He would be able to slow down his psi-powers in order to appear like an ordinary Psi-High. He could never have revealed it. Not even to his closest friends."

"And you knew that the real Alien had been killed?"

"Almost as soon as it happened. He died in agony. He had a powerful mind. He broadcast so wildly that every Psi-High within a hundred miles must have gotten a shower. I was in Des Moines, and got the whole picture clear as a bell. Went down and picked the details out of the farmer's brain. He was too frightened to tell what he had done, and nobody paid too much attention to him anyway." He shifted wearily on the cot. "The Alien must have been working so hard to maintain his disguise that the farmer caught him short. I knew it, and I knew what I had to do. I went ahead and did it."

"Of course Towne will fight," said Roberts later, when the man had drifted off into a deep sleep. "He's clever, and resourceful. When we 'rescue' him from Eagle Rock, he's going to know exactly what has happened."

Jean Sanders laughed happily. "I'd like to see him," she said. "I'd like to see him helpless just once."

Paul grinned. "You will. Things will be too far ahead of him by then. And of course, there will be a physical and mental examination. It will be a pity that the Alien left his mind in such a state of shock and delusion but maybe after a few months of psychiatric treatment we can find out the real reason why he hates Psi-Highs so much. And then, perhaps, we'll have a powerful fighter on our side instead of against us."

He looked around at the others, his face grave. "We can't afford to have the world against us again, not ever. *That* part of the news broadcast was perfectly true. There *was* an Alien. He *was* telepathic. And there will be others coming—maybe in a year, maybe in five, or ten, or a hundred—" He leaned back wearily in the relaxer. "We cashed in on it, this time, but we mustn't forget the parts that are true."

Jean smiled and put her arm around him. "They'll come, sometime—yes. But when they come they'll find the Earth well guarded." Her eyes drifted to the sleeping figure on the cot, and then came back to Paul's and held them. "When they do come, there'll be others—like him—to stop them."