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STORIES OF SCIENCE AND FANTASY

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The FIST of SHIVA

by DANIEL F. GALOUBE

IMAGINATION

*Stories
of Science
and Fantasy*

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Editor

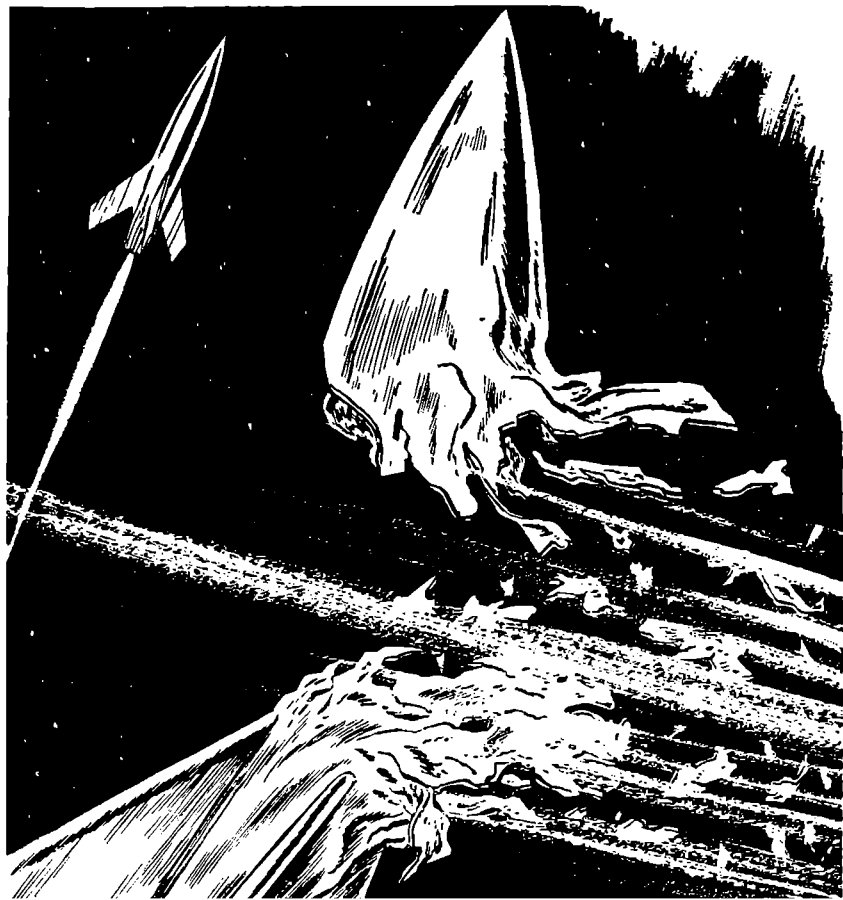
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THE FIST OF SHIVA

By
Daniel F. Galouye

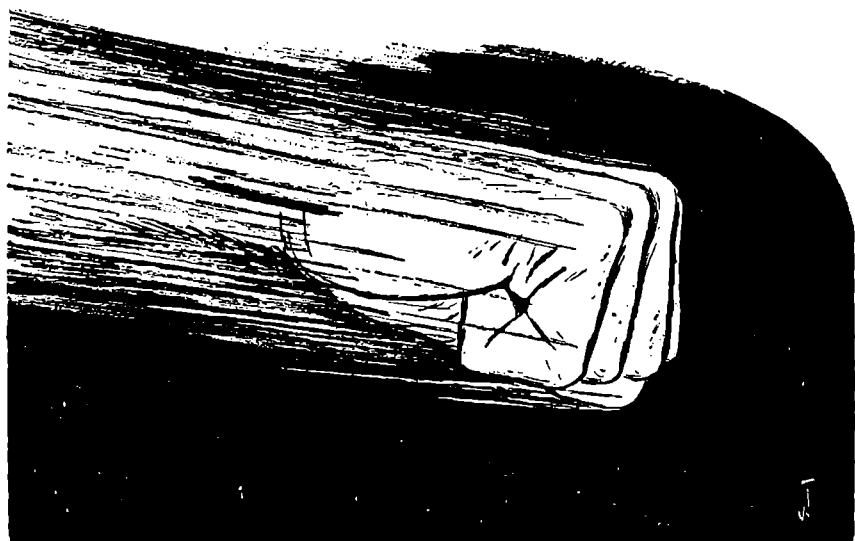
Playing God was a secret game the two boys enjoyed; but neither of them knew then that someday their power might destroy all of Earth . . .

CLARK Granet lay on his chest in the cool, soft grass and teased his captive ter-rapin with a bent twig. Spark, his brown fox terrier, pranced around the shelled creature, barking lustily.

The small turtle blinked its black

eyes and Clark imagined it regarded him thinking, "*Of course you're no god! How could a six-year-old be a god?*"

It was peaceful in the meadow behind his house and he had wanted to lie there all day watching redbirds in the thicket.



But the terrapiñ had come and with it, in the warmth of midday, had come a new interest. That had been half an hour ago. Now the creature blinked its eyes again and on straining legs, turned away. There was a loneliness in its eyes, Clark felt. A loneliness that begged release. Sighing, he let it go, watched the dog leap playfully after it.

Running footsteps jogged toward him and he turned to watch his brother approach.

"What'cha doing out here?" Russell demanded, plopping on the ground. A small furry creature, a pet flying squirrel, left its perch on his shoulder and scampered into his shirt pocket.

Clark snapped the twig between his hands. "Nothing."

"Let's play!" Excitement broke into the other's words.

"Down at the park? Ball?"

"Naw—let's play gods!"

Clark turned away disinterestedly. "I don't want to."

"Aw, come on! It's fun!"

"It is not! It's unfair! It's not right to watch other people."

"Sissy!"

"I ain't a sissy, either!"

"Then let's play gods."

Clark hesitated. "Just once . . . just for a little while."

Russell fell back on the grass and closed his eyes. With a sigh, Clark lay beside him.

Then the warmth of the field fell away like a heavy cloak. Up from the surface he rose—up like the gas-filled balloon he had lost at the county fair, like the smoke from the flaming ball of fire that had buried itself in the ground behind his home three years before.

Below he could "see" the lazy meadow (he laughed at the idea of seeing when he had no eyes with which to look.) He regarded his body and Russell's, lying relaxed as though in sleep.

It is fun, thought Clark.

"Of course it's fun!" came back Russell's unspoken answer.

"This is fun—not spying on people," Clark amended, wondering why it was his brother could hurl thoughts at him whenever he wanted to.

"You'll be able to send all your thoughts to me too, soon—when ever you want to. Just like you learn to do everything else I can."

Clark turned his attention to the scene flying by below. Suddenly he was frightened.

"I'm going back," he said fearfully.

"You're afraid! You *are* a sissy!"

Clark wasted no time in leisure flight. There was no sensation of movement or time passage. But abruptly he opened his eyes and sat up under the tree in the meadow.

"I still say you're a sissy," Russell taunted, rising.

"I think we ought to tell mama about . . ."

"She'll laugh at you, like she did before. Anyway, she won't even let you talk about it."

"But she'll believe if you tell her too, Russell!" He grasped his brother's arm. "You've got to tell her!"

Russell laughed and walked toward the house. "I don't want anybody to know."

"Well, I'm going to *make* her believe me! I'll show her. I'll . . ."

Russell stopped and turned to look at him. His eyes were mad and his fists were closed tight. He looked harder—*harder* . . .

"*Don't Russell!*" Clark shouted. His whole body felt like his hands had the time he spilled the nearly boiling water on them. "I won't tell anybody! Honest, I won't!"

* * *

ALL around Clark snowflakes whirled in their lithe dance toward the ground as they fought a chilling wind. But Clark was not cold. There was no sensation of temperature, he realized, as he thought of his warm body lying on the rug next to Russell in front of the fire.

Without moving, he hovered over the road, wondering whether he ac-

tually sensed his brother's unreal presence, or whether it was just his imagination.

Behind was his home. Ahead was the big house where Elaine Barrow and her family lived. He looked down and saw that the road, grooving through the curve of a hill, was completely covered by a recent snowslide.

Soon, he remembered, Elaine's father would be driving home from town with the latest *Archaeological Journal* for her grandfather. But now he'd have to wait for the snow plow.

Abruptly, he realized there *was* something he could do. He had watched Russell concentrate on a bush and had seen the leaves curl up and smoke and burst into flame.

Clark narrowed his vision until he could see only the pile of snow. Then he thought of heat—intense heat . . .

The white mound began to shrink. Water flowed away from it, down the road and into the gutter. Suddenly steam began rising from the pile!

But as he looked up he started. Like a wave washing up on a beach, a curling blanket of snow lapped over from the embankment along one side and flopped down upon the road.

Russell!

There was laughter—an amused

laughter that came from the other end of the three-hundred foot stretch of snow-covered road.

"Go home, Clark!" his brother's thoughts came. "I don't want you out here! I don't want an eight-year-old kid following me!"

"That was mean," Clark began a reprimand, backing away. "You . . ."

"I ought to be crazy like you and try to help people instead of hurt them?" Russell was advancing now, slowly. "Why should I help people?"

Clark could almost see the hazy, wavering space that his brother occupied. It was like looking into swirling clear air that was about to gather into a cloud.

"Do you know," Russell continued eagerly, "that while you were here melting snow I found out that if we wanted to we could even cause an—*an earthquake?*"

The almost-cloud, Clark imagined, seemed to be striving toward a definite form. He wondered if he "looked" the same way to his brother.

"It would be easy," Russell was near now. "Down there—below the surface—there are layers of rocks. Some of them are huge, heavy rocks . . ."

Clark wanted to streak back to the house and the room where his father and mother were reading before the fire. But he didn't want

his brother to think he was afraid—not too much.

"Why should we do anything like that, Russell?" he asked. "Don't you see . . ."

"Yeah. You're going to tell me again that we're different; that we ought to be doing good with the power . . . We're different, all right! We're different like—*like gods! That's what we are Clark! We're gods!*"

Clark's thoughts were a protest.

"But it's true!" Russell was avid. "I've read about gods—Greek gods and Roman gods and all the others. They went around showing people how powerful they were—killing them off. That's what we'll do someday, Clark—when we're strong enough. We'll let everybody know we're gods and they'll worship us!"

It wasn't true, Clark shouted, more to himself than to his brother. They *were* like other people—maybe just a little different. But the power would go away and they'd be just like everybody else—Russell like a ten-year-old boy and he like an eight-year-old. But again he wondered what made them different. Was it that someone or something more powerful . . .

"There's nothing more powerful than us!" Russell's angry thought broke in.

"But in Sunday school . . ."

"Are you a Sunday school sissy too?"

"God made us different," Clark said bravely. "He gave us the power—to do good."

Russell laughed again. Then Clark winced as something streaked from the hazy area that was his brother. Suddenly Clark felt pain—the pain of heat. It was the same kind of sensation he felt when Russell looked at him squint-eyed.

He turned and streaked back into the house.

* * *

FLAMES licked higher into the night sky. Heat from the fire was intense. And the bases of low clouds, reflecting the blaze, were tinted a dull white-red.

A deep grumbling welled near the front of the building. It grew into an enraged growl as the spire toppled and crashed into the roof. A six-foot wooden cross flew outward. Frightened shouts rose as the crowd surged away.

The cross crashed on the sidewalk and one of its arms snapped off. Clark grasped Elaine's hand and pulled her further back with him, to the rear of the ring of spectators.

"It's awful," she said, not looking away from the fire. "How do you suppose it started?"

Flickering reflections played against her face, etching her anx-

iety in tense shadows and highlights and suffusing her dark hair with a reddish tint.

A bespectacled teen-age girl grasped her shoulder. "They say there was an explosion—in the rear of the church." She pointed.

If only there had been something as simple as an explosion, a natural fire, Clark thought. Sickeningly, he remembered having sensed the ethereal presence of his brother a few minutes earlier while he and Elaine were at the drug store.

He looked to his left and suddenly saw Russell crossing the street. Releasing Elaine's hand, he followed while she continued watching the firemen.

Russell tossed away a cigarette, walked along the side of the school building and went across the athletic field behind it. Then he sat on the stoop at the side entrance to the school, his figure clearly illuminated by the yard light.

Clark approached silently, his fists clenched.

"Why did you do it?" he demanded.

Russell started, then smiled. His hand went up casually to his shoulder to stroke a small, gray thing that was perched there.

Clark looked closer. It was a flying squirrel.

"Recognize it?" Russell asked.

"Why did you burn the church?" Clark repeated insistently.

"Remember when I was a kid?" Russell stared absently toward the fire and the shadows on his face danced as the flames flared and diminished in intensity. "I used to have a squirrel as a pet—one exactly like this one."

Clark stepped forward.

"As a matter of fact," the other continued. "It *was* this squirrel . . . *this same animal!*"

Clark frowned puzzledly.

Russell held the thing up in the palm of his hand and pointed to its head. "Here are the two notches I cut in its ear for identification . . . Remember, Clark? The thing was old when I got it. I was five then. These animals have a life span of only a few years . . . And here, I find it thirteen years later—not much older in appearance than when I first captured it!"

HIS anger tempered by curiosity, Clark watched his brother put the animal on the step and place a pecan beside it.

"Watch," he urged.

The squirrel darted forward, elongated its body in a strained, cautious stretch and touched the nut with its nose. Then it backed away, staring at the object.

Abruptly a violent, visible aura of energy enveloped the nut. Clark gasped as he heard the snap of the shell.

"See!" Russell shouted trium-

phantly, rising, "The thing's like us! It has the power too!"

The animal darted forward again and held half the pecan between its front paws, began nibbling on it.

"Don't you see, Clark?" Russell caught his brother's shoulders in an eager grip. "I imparted some of my god-like powers to it while it was close to me—when I was young. And it has hardly aged at all! That means we'll live hundreds of years!—And you ask why I burned something as meaningless as a church. Of course I burned the church! What in hell is a church? Religion is stupid . . . the kind they have now. When I . . ."

Clark drove his fist into the other's face and he fell backward.

Hidden hate flared into Russell's expression and he jumped up. But he did not fight. Instead he stood rigid, glowering.

He was using the power . . . *the tremendous power!* Clark could feel the searing heat. Damp weeds around him flared into brief flames up to within a few inches of his feet. Suddenly the heat was visible to his special sense of perception and the air around him seemed to glow aura-like.

But there was no pain—only discomfort. The shield-like defensive power that protected him and his brother from each other was holding back the energy that Clark knew would have vaporized any

normal human—as it had nearly disintegrated the church.

Now Clark was hurling back his own destructive force. Now he watched Russell grimace as the invisible energy sphere enveloped him.

But a new expression of determination pushed away the frustration in Russell's features.

"I'll kill you!" he shouted in desperation. "I thought some day you'd see what we really are! That it was meant for us to rule—to have all the wealth and power in the world!"

In an intense exertion, Clark hurled even more concentrated energy at his brother. There was a flicker of additional discomfort on his face.

"You're too damned pious!" Russell's harangue continued. "You can't see that we're *really gods!* But I'm going to be a god Clark! No matter how hard you try to stop . . ."

Clark stepped forward and hurled his fist into his brother's face again, realizing their destructive energies were stalemated, powerless against the counterforce that protected each.

As Russell's head snapped back, the mental barrage stopped. Then Clark hit him again. He collapsed. When he rose finally, Clark swung a wide blow to his jaw. He lay still on the charred ground.

Wracked with indecision, Clark stood over him. He could kill him now! He could choke the life out of his brother, who would be content with nothing less than godhood.

Shaking his head hopelessly, he knelt over Russell's form and seized his throat in his fingers. Then he tightened the grip. But the skin beneath his fingers would not give! As though it were a thin layer that hid a body of marble, it resisted his pressure!

Too late! He had long recognized the parallel development of a special shield that protected them from each other's physical force—just as the mysterious aura negated their physical attacks. And now the physical shield was invulnerable — unless it was not too late for a more violent onslaught to succeed. He looked for a brick.

"Clark! Clark! What happened?"

He rose and turned around. Elaine was running toward him.

CHAPTER II

THE crunch of gravel under rubber was a pleasant monotony as Clark drove Elaine home in his father's car after the graduation dance. The countryside was a fairyland of shadows and pale highlights — a monochrome of

moonlight.

Elaine sat close and as she hummed, her animated vivacity seemed to spill over into him and dispel his thoughts of Russell. His mind had inescapably dwelled on his brother, remembering it had been only a few days after another graduation two years ago that Russell had left home. That had been the day after the church burned down.

But resolutely, he dismissed the unpleasant thoughts and soon was humming with her.

They reached her house and he pulled the car up in front of the gate. With uneasy hesitation he looked at her a moment, then he kissed her.

And the soft, warm breeze that blew in through the window and ruffled her hair against his face seemed to sweep his discouraging thoughts further into hidden recesses.

For a moment, Russell had never existed. There had never been a brother two years older than himself who had wanted to be a god and had disappeared when he found he wouldn't be allowed to be one.

"You're going to accept the scholarship, Clark?" Elaine asked.

He didn't take his arm from her shoulder. "I don't know." There was indecision in his voice. "That would mean another four

years of studying and . . ."

"But four years isn't so long," she objected.

"A lot can happen in four years. People you know can get married, for one thing."

"Some might," she admitted. Then, coyly, "But—but I don't think a girl ought to get married before she's twenty-one, do you?"

He pinched himself mentally. There was no use acting out the impossible dream any longer . . . He was different, he reminded himself. And so was Russell—and the squirrel his brother had shown him. And the squirrel had lived its life span four or five times over. Would he be alive two hundred years after Elaine died?

Suddenly he jerked upright, a tremor of apprehension running through him.

"What's wrong?" Elaine asked.

But the question made no impression.

He had sensed the psychic nearness of his brother!

With an impatience he could not conceal, he went with Elaine up the walk. Then, leaving her frowning at his behavior, he turned and strode nervously back to the car, the hypersensory impressions becoming even stronger.

IN the automobile he watched Elaine go into the house. Then he lay back against the seat and

closed his eyes.

Abruptly the sensation of material existence shrank away and his ethereal alter ego streaked toward his home. Then he saw Russell—not the material Russell, but the insubstantial essence, cloud-like, swirling, ominous hovering over the house.

Suddenly he knew Russell had detected his approach. A lance of energy enveloped Clark with the intensity of a blast furnace.

Almost senselessly, he realized that here was power—terrible power! Energy that might pierce the natural aura of protection surrounding his psychic form . . . perhaps even the intangible shield that cloaked his physical body!

He darted aside, escaping the deadly attack. Then he swung around in a circle to elude another blast.

The second blast missed. But beyond him it hit something solid. There was a fierce flash of combative energy and he turned in time to see the blazing disintegration of his home, down to its foundation! For a moment he thought of his parents, asleep in the north bedroom . . .

Then suddenly another scorching blast swept over him. He tried to rush away but the focal point of lethal emanations followed. Suddenly, with a burst of speed, he was clear once more.

Then he lunged away, outward, up from the ground, wondering with horror whether a psyche, if that's what he was, could be obliterated by the tremendous power. What would happen should his superconscious be destroyed? Would his body continue to exist? He knew it would, but only in death.

In fleeing, he hurled a lance of destructive energy at his brother. It halted his pursuit, but only momentarily.

Another bolt of force swept over Clark and he shouted his agony in a tormented convulsion that must have jarred the entire substructure of nature.

Fighting off onrushing oblivion, he streaked away—*away from the earth!* Below hung the huge half-light, half-dark world. To his left blazed the solar sphere. Between the two orbs was another globe split down its center by a line separating dark from light. Only now did he realize the incredible speed of which psychic transition was capable.

The sun, as he rushed outward, became a tiny pinpoint of light that lost itself in the background of galactic stars. Then a myriad stars that seemed to form a collective group with the sun melted into a faint haze in which none of them was distinguishable.

Ahead were more stars. But even as he neared them he knew some-

thing was wrong. They did not grow in apparent size as he approached! Either they had shrunk or the indefinable area which represented the space occupied by his psyche had enlarged! Had flight at terrific speed resulted in increased mass? But how could it when there was no mass associated with his non-physical form?

Another bolt was loosed and a star ahead and to the left exploded in a dazzling convulsion of pulsating light in which the disk seemed to grow a thousand times larger than its original size and brighter than its initial brilliancy.

He streaked past the entire aggregation of stars and nebulae in what seemed less than a second. The pain of the last hateful blast persisted, but it seemed insignificant in comparison with the terror that was beginning to grow within him.

The entire galaxy now seemed to be a Lilliputian thing and he seemed to be a monstrous entity streaking through its length, stirring celestial bodies and rifts of star dust in his wake. It was almost like he and Russell *were* . . .

"Of course we're gods!" Russell's thought carried through to him with a new enthusiasm, as though he had that instant experienced a realization that overshadowed the purpose of the chase.

Russell was no longer drawing

closer. He was faltering in pursuit. "We are gods and our domain is the entire cosmosphere! Our earthbound existence has been but a constricted distortion in miniature of our actual size—our real omnipotence."

CLARK turned and thrashed out with a lance of might. But Russell did not strike back. And, even as the hazy, insubstantial area that represented the other's psyche turned and moved off in a new direction, Clark was aware of his thoughts:

"This is my true domain!" There was an irrational emotionlessness in Russell's self-directed observations. "I do not belong to the infinitesimal world of green hills and blue waters that revolves around a weak, insignificant star. Not even the galaxy! The entire universe is my domain!"

The thoughts trailed off into nothingness and Russell was gone.

Stunned, Clark hung motionless in the frightening, still, cold and luminous void. Now an overpowering fear engulfed him as he surveyed the spots of light around him. The fear grew to terror as he remembered the apparent tremendous increase in immaterial size of his psyche. Why did it seem that he was now larger than an entire star system? What incomprehensible effect of psychic

existence was responsible for the phenomenon?

He drove the maddening questions from his mind and turned to streak homeward.

But frenzy exploded within him with a stabbing force and he froze again, dumfounded.

Ahead and all around him were thousands of stars—single stars, clusters of them—blotches of nebulous material, streamers of luminous vapor that had either once been suns or were evolving into suns.

And each star cluster seemed alike! Each appeared to beckon him with a maddening allurements, mocking, "Here, Clark, this way is home."

He was lost! He was hopelessly lost!

Tortured with desperation, he raced from cluster to cluster—searching, hoping that one of them would possess some familiar feature.

But there was none!

Stricken with a new form of exhaustion, he hung motionless once more, afraid to move, afraid to remain still, vowing that if he ever found earth again he would never leave it.

But he was not motionless! He was conscious of movement—movement toward a brilliant cluster in the distance. Suddenly, as he gained terrific momentum, he un-

derstood the movement . . . his detached superconscious was being drawn back to his physical form in response to the natural attraction that existed between the two entities.

He added his own thrust to the ever increasing attraction and surged forward in a furious display of speed. And, as he approached, the celestial bodies about him expanded at a frightening rate—expanded toward their natural sizes.

He streaked into the cluster and was drawn toward one of the pin-points of light. Reacting to an intensifying pang of apprehension, he realized now that his brother had grown stronger than him purposefully; Russell had used the two years of his absence to develop his power to the fullest. Clark, on the other hand, had tried to ignore his power, had even tried to forget that he was different from other persons—except for the two months during which he had startled himself with the gradual discovery of a power of teleportation.

But now he could no longer ignore the weird capabilities. In the interest of self defense he must seek to develop them to their ultimate.

CHAPTER III

THE wingless nuclojet speared southward on a secondary

route in the early morning sky.

Brad Darson settled comfortably in the passenger seat and withdrew his absent gaze from the glistening, damp surface below. He turned up the heat, tore off the printed sheet that protruded from the craft's press circuit recorder, and spread the page across his knees.

He had seen the edition an hour earlier, before leaving on the flight, but again the bold type caught his attention:

SHIVA CULT PREDICTS COMET

He started to read the story for the second time, but the driver cast a sidewise glance at the paper, punched the auto control button on the panel and relaxed.

"What do you think about it, chief?" he asked.

Brad looked questioningly at him.

"That Shiva stuff," he explained. "The comet."

"Must be something to it," Brad shrugged. "A lot of people belong to the cult these days."

"Too damned many . . . Doesn't seem possible that millions of people would belong to a world-wide cult that worships a God of Destruction—not in the latter part of the Twenty-First Century, anyway."

"But, Les," Brad corrected with a laugh. "Don't forget—he's sup-

posed to be a living god! That might make a difference."

"He's a crackpot," Les said sarcastically.

"I think he's a smooth operator."

Les frowned.

"You've got to admit he's got plenty of brains . . . How would you react if a guy gets up and says a comet is coming into the solar system—a comet that can't be detected by any scientific means because it's too far away? You scoff at first. Then a couple of weeks go by and suddenly the most powerful telescope verifies the prediction . . . Now you don't think he's so much of a crackpot. You begin to wonder whether there might not be something to the fellow after all."

"I'd still think he's not all there in the upper levels."

"Perhaps so. But then there's another prediction. And another . . . Eventually there's a point at which you stop being skeptical. If the Holy Man from one of his temples should show up and stick his palm out at the same time, you might be moved to kick in a few hundred toward the cause of the living god. Mightn't you?"

"Lock, Brad. I'm your research director. I'm supposed to have a scientific mind. I don't go in for . . ."

"But let's say he's performed

enough miracles to convince you.”

Les scratched his head. “Maybe,” he admitted. “If I’ve reached the point where I’ve stopped being skeptical.”

“Apparently millions all over the world have already reached that point.”

“But the comet—what about that thing?”

BRAD closed his eyes and let his head fall back upon the cushioned rest. For a long moment he was motionless. Even his breathing was imperceptible.

“About the comet,” Les repeated. “Do you think that prediction will come true?”

Still Brad didn’t move.

“Chief!” The driver touched his shoulder, frowning.

“Oh, the comet,” Brad snapped upright and looked at him. He smiled. “I rather imagine the comet will be there—precisely where Shiva predicted.”

Les laughed brusquely. “You’re not ready to kick in with a contribution, are you?”

“Hardly. We’re dealing in science—not superstition.”

“But you say the miracles that guy performs are *not* supernatural.”

“They’re not. They can be explained scientifically, I’m sure. I’m equally sure they can be performed by anyone—with the proper conditioning or treatment.”

Les’ face was distorted between expressions of half amusement, half indecision. “Imagine me proving I can be in two places a thousand miles apart at the same time.”

Again there was a silence that was broken only by the wind swishing along the side of the craft.

Brad returned his gaze outside. More vehicles were in the air lane now. He looked past them at the surface. Features there—roads, hills, streams—were attempting to be pleasantly familiar. But he harshly pushed aside their friendly encroachment on his sentiments, staring at them with cold, impersonal eyes.

It had all been too long ago for any impression to survive until the present:

Les interrupted his thoughts. “If you think this guy’s miracles can be performed by anyone as the effects of a new science, why don’t you dedicate a project to that end?”

“Perhaps we already have.”

The driver started. “You mean this ‘rock’ we’re pulling out of the ground has something to do with it?”

Absently, Brad nodded. A faintly etched memory image shown dimly in his mind—an impression of two small boys. It was late afternoon and they were lost—lost in a wooded area near their home. They were frighten-

ed and were running. Suddenly a fierce, flaming object flared in the sky overhead. It stayed there only a split second. The earth shook as it landed and buried itself deep in the ground only a few hundred yards away. The heat blast was terrific. A little furry thing that cringed in a pocket of one of the boys made a frightened noise. Faces and hands burned as though from the effects of long exposure to summer sunlight, the boys turned and raced away, leaving the area of felled and twisted and charred trees behind. The incident was their secret, for no one must know they had been silly enough to lose themselves . . .

THE craft settled lightly to the ground and coasted to a stop near a steel derrick. Taut, heavy chains stretched downward from the top of the structure and disappeared into the ground. An engine at the base of the derrick puffed restlessly, its clutch ready to grip the winch that would raise the chains.

Two men came out of a temporary shack beside a truck and advanced toward the nuclojet.

Les cut the silent engine and leaped out. "Who's going to be in charge of this new project?" he asked eagerly.

"I am," Brad climbed out beside him.

"Hell, chief, you're already personally directing the space flight section. How can you do both at the same time?"

"You'll take it over. It's almost finished."

They walked toward the two men.

"Will I transfer to the Space Station?"

"No. Everything's in hand up there. You can do it from the ground. You'll stay in the same lab group so we can stick close together until we send the first manned craft out on an interstellar jaunt."

"Interstellar!"

Brad nodded casually.

"Hell," Les hissed. "I ought to get used to these surprises. I ought to know by now you're not a genius . . . you're a superman!"

They stopped to meet the men from the shack.

"She's ready to come up now, Mr. Darson," one of them said, nodding toward the derrick.

"Okay, Jim," Brad walked in that direction. "Haul it away."

The second man went back to the engine and manipulated a lever while Brad and Les stood at the side of the hole. The engine groaned under the weight of the mass that was now suspended at the end of its linkage.

A shaft that needed oil whined gratingly. Chains clanked as their

links fell against the drum of the slowly rotating winch. The engine's staccato thumping became louder as Jim speeded it up.

But Brad was oblivious of the noise as he watched the chains struggle out of the hole. There was a vague emptiness surrounding him, it seemed, and he tried to define the sensation. It was as though he were standing in the center aisle of a deserted cathedral at midnight.

Was it that the very site he was on was *different*? Was it, in its own special way, hallow like a church, or a cemetery? He glanced at the matting of grass at his feet. Was it possible that he was standing on shoots of vegetation which had existed, not since the last winter, but for over a hundred and fifty years—especially strengthened by an indescribable power to withstand the changes of season? Were the trees that surrounded the clearing the same ones that existed when he was last here?

A dark object appeared at the mouth of the hole and he stiffened, his mind relinquishing the vague thoughts.

Jim threw out the clutch. The object hung at the end of the four chains, swaying almost imperceptibly. Brad reached out with a trembling hand and touched it.

Larger than a barrel it was. And black — encrusted with dirt and

small bits of fused material—pitted with holes and nicks of varying sizes.

It was coarse, hard, to his fingers. Instinctively, he withdrew his hand. Then he laughed inwardly at his reluctance.

This was it! This was the object that had lain hidden in the back of his memory for over a hundred years.

“THE rock!” Les exclaimed. “There it is.” Jim shifted the engine's linkage to another chain that became taut and drew the object out from under the derrick and over the body of the truck.

Brad sighed, relieved. “Get it to Laboratory D with that regular shipment. You know how to handle it and where to unload the thing . . . And, remember, I'm trusting to the loyalty of you two. We're the only ones who know the details of this operation. I . . .”

But he had spied a sledge hammer leaning against the shack. He swept it into his hands and aimed an overhead blow at an irregular protuberance on the metallic mass. A chunk flew off. He retrieved it, inspected it and slipped it into his coat pocket.

Jim and his assistant were busy securing the mass on the truck when Brad turned and headed back for the nuclojet. Les followed.

"All right, chief," Les urged. "Let's have the story. You said there'd be an explanation when you got the thing."

"It might not be a pleasant story yet." There was a half-smile on Brad's face. "Let's wait and see how the tests work out."

"But what kind of tests . . ."

Brad had stopped and was staring toward the edge of the clearing. There was a movement in the tall weeds. A weak but excited whimpering became audible as motion in the vegetation traced the slow approach of the thing. It stopped for a moment and the head of a dog appeared above the weeds.

The animal came forward slowly and lay on the ground in front of Brad, still whimpering.

Les whistled. "Damned if that isn't the oldest dog I've ever seen! Seems to be a hermit—out here in the woods all by itself."

Brad reached down and touched its head, bare-skinned in many spots that hair had once covered. It was easy to see that the animal was blind—or almost blind. Where teeth had once grown in the strong, jutting fox terrier jaw were now only eroded, stained crags.

"It seems to know you, Brad," Les observed. "Ever been around here before?"

A dry tongue came out of the animal's mouth and rubbed harshly over Brad's hand.

"Spark!" he whispered incredulously.

The dog made a feeble effort at wagging its tail, sounded a final whine and lay still.

Hardly breathing, Brad stared at the creature, reeling under a mixture of emotions. His mental processes suddenly released an almost forgotten memory.

A GAIN he envisioned the two boys running under the flaming object, a squirrel balled up in the pocket of one of them. Only, now the mental picture showed another feature. Running in close pursuit behind the children was a small fox terrier.

Les was shaking his head. "If ever an animal earned death, that one did. He looks like he's lived twice the age of an average dog. I'll bet he's at least twenty-five years old!"

"At least," Brad agreed.

Les touched his shoulder. "The communisignal." He was pointing to the red light on top of the nu-clojet.

"Have Jim bury this animal before he leaves." Brad strode off toward the craft.

"What!" Les frowned after him. But Brad had already opened the door of the vehicle and had activated the communication apparatus.

"Darson speaking."

"Lab D, sir," a feminine voice said. "One moment. We have a direct from the Station."

He waited.

"Chief?" a strained voice inquired excitedly.

"Trouble?"

"The X19-A's missing!"

"Where?"

"Don't know. Its video system went out four hours ago. We thought we could effect remote adjustments, so we continued with the flight. Now there's no control linkage at all through hyper."

"What was your last fix?"

"It was direct for Centauri, three-point-four out, when we lost video. But we estimate it changed heading at least five times before the complete blowout came."

"Then there's hope of picking it up?"

"No, sir . . . I suppose that'll retard the schedule for the first manned flight?"

"I don't know, Henry." The frown on Brad's face was deeply etched. "Hell, I can't see how that could happen. The control system was foolproof! Unless . . ."

The voice was sympathetically silent. Brad listlessly snapped off the switch. He closed his eyes . . .

Suddenly he could see it! Space — cold, black, unfriendly, star-specked nothingness. A frightening void. So big. So empty. So awful . . . Three-point-four out.

But so much nothing to look through . . . Then he had it—bits of metal, shards of glass, wires, fused plates. A funnel antenna here. One of the tubes over there . . . The flight of the X 19-A had ended in an explosion. But there wasn't anything aboard that could explode!

* * *

AN excited man who called himself a god paced the marble floor in the spacious office of a temple hidden in the mountains north of Los Angeles. The temple's marvelous architecture and giant carved statues were unmatched anywhere in the world. The man was clad in brilliantly hued sequined robes that swished as he walked.

A metallic purr sounded from the broad, glass-top desk and he raced over to flick a switch.

"Shiva," he said.

"Green reporting."

"How'd it go?"

"It's taken care of."

"Was there . . . *You're not calling unguarded, are you?*"

"Of course not. I'm on a counter-pulse circuit."

"Where?"

"Lab D."

"Any trouble?"

"No, sir."

The man who called himself

Shiva smiled broadly. "Tell me about it."

"Two days, eighteen hours out and they lost their picture. The rest came off as scheduled . . . Red must have gotten his instructions straight again. Hell, chief, everybody around here acted as though the laboratory itself had blown up . . . How come you know so much about sabotaging the second-stage drive?"

"Divine cognition," he straightened proudly and arranged his robes, "can hardly . . ."

"You can wrap up all that hokus talk with me, chief," the transmitted voice sounded amused. "I'm the skeptical kind. But I know the right layout when I see it. That's why I'm with you—not because I've been fooled into thinking you're Supergod. You just know some special tricks, that's all."

A flash of rage swept across Shiva's face, but he did not allow it expression in his voice.

The office door opened and a short, stout man in a gray suit entered, brief case under his arm. "Sent for me?" he asked.

Shiva spoke into the communicator, "Stand by, Green . . . Yes, Wellman," he turned. "Sit down."

The visitor took a chair at the side of the desk. "What's the job this time?"

"How are our connections in fed-

eral circuits here—in Europe?"

"The worth of an—uh, connection," Wellman smiled craftily, "is a relative matter. Its relativity is determined by—might we say, cash?"

"Cash is a resource I find unlimited."

"What do you want done?"

"The Trans-At Company has held the franchise for U.S.-Europe service for ten years. There are two other corporations that are after it. A week ago we gained control of one of them. You handled the matter. You know which one."

"You want the franchise busted?"

"Busted and re-issued—in the right direction, of course . . . Can it be done?"

WELLMAN pouted for a moment, then smiled. "It's hard to operate that type of service without violating some of the terms of the franchise. Both governments realize that. I suppose we can dig up an accidental infraction and convince one of the governments it shouldn't have been overlooked—provided . . ."

"You'll have whatever money it will take."

"One question: Why are we getting into the strato-rocket business?"

"I'm quite sure that doesn't concern you." Shiva's smile was

impersonal, unflinching.

Wellman picked up his briefcase and walked slowly toward the door.

The robed man returned to the communicator.

"Green," he called.

"Yes."

"What's the significance of the 'rock' project? What is the 'rock'?"

"That's Orange's assignment."

"Aren't you two cooperating?"

"Yes. But I think you have an incompetent agent there. Orange isn't getting anywhere."

"Take over then. Or, at least help out and . . . Oh, Wellman," Shiva called out in the direction of the closing door.

The stout man stuck his head back in the office.

"You making any headway with that injunction?"

"A little. We expect to reach the right person tomorrow."

"Get them to make it stiff. Within a month I don't want a single shuttle craft hopping between here and the Space Station."

"That shouldn't be too hard. You got them chased out of one state already."

"Well make damned sure they get booted from another."

"They'll just go to a third."

"Find out which one and get to work on the attorney general there even before they set up operations."

"It'd be easier if we go after congressional legislation against the flights."

"Then put out feelers in that direction too. I'll give you a list of legislators who are Shivaites."

"My curiosity would be satisfied if I knew the purpose of this relentless attack," Wellman suggested.

Shiva smiled. "Let's just say it's an extension of the old struggle — science versus religion. Perhaps it's my opinion there's too much interest in Darson's personalized space conquest program — too little in the basic value of life, religion."

"You through with me, chief?" the voice in the communicator asked.

"Yes. Build a fire under Orange. Let's get some results on this 'rock' thing."

* * *

CAROL Sanders stood nervously before the window in the large office of Laboratory D. She ran a hand over her blonde hair, rearranging disheveled strands.

The door opened and she whirled around.

"Hi," greeted Ray Hartley. "You filing too?" He was a small man with thick glasses and he wore a laboratory apron. Still smiling, he crossed to the bank of

files at the other end of the room and slapped a stack of papers on top of one of the metal cabinets.

"I've finished," she said, crossing over to the desk. "Waiting for Brad."

"What's he got you on now?" Ray began dealing the papers into the drawers.

She laughed. "I've become the keeper of the mice. Ever try giving daily physicals to a hundred scurrying animals?"

"What's he keeping so many for? He only uses one on each test run beyond the Station. I understand there'll only be about three or four more unmanned flights."

"He's got something else in mind for the animals, I guess." She elevated herself onto the desk and crossed her legs, arranging the hem of her skirt. "Won't say what it is yet."

"Well," Fred closed the files and crossed to the door, "I hope you wrap it up in a hurry. We could use you back in bioclimatology. But I've got a hunch your next move is going to be closer to this office, rather than farther away." He looked down at her calves jokingly and whistled a shrill note that slurred off into one of lower-pitch.

"You aren't trying to infer," she asked laughingly, "that Master Brains may have a less scholarly side?"

"If he has you could find it, even without trying . . . See you."

She was alone in the room again.

With a sense of growing impatience, she walked around the desk and sat in the swivel chair. Her hand went out to a stack of papers in a bin as she eyed the door apprehensively.

Then she dropped her gaze to the miscellaneous letters, notes and memoranda. The top sheet drew a gasp from her lips.

It was a rough, penciled map marked off in a series of air routes. One end of the continuous, zig-zag line touched what represented Laboratory D's landing area. The other end, three hundred miles away, was the cause of her excited concern. Its terminus was near a small city. The line ended at a spot marked with a small dot. Written below the dot was the notation, "depth, 70 ft."

Biting her lips, she stood up and drummed her fingers on the desk thoughtfully.

The door swung open and Brad Darson strode in.

"Carol," he seemed surprised. "How's the menagerie today?"

"Healthy, happy and hungry," she quipped.

"I'll need the best specimen late this afternoon. Keep him hungry until then . . . Find me a cat with a voracious appetite too." He

reached into his pocket and withdrew the stained lump of metal, set it on top of the notes on his desk.

"A cat!" Carol exclaimed. But then she saw the bit of metal. "Is this the 'rock'?"

She picked it up and inspected it. "It certainly looks like it's been seventy feet underground."

He registered surprise, then anger. "How did . . . ?"

"Now Brad," she protested lightly, "you're not pretending the project is secret any longer—not when you leave notes like this lying around." She thumped a polished nail on the penciled map.

His jaw tightened and he shook his head self-reprimandingly as he folded the map and put it in his pocket.

"Still secret?" Carol asked solicitously.

He nodded. "It has to be . . . top secret."

"That's bad. I can name at least eight persons who were in here while I was waiting for you."

"Give me a list of them—in the interest of security."

"What about those who came in to file before I was here?"

"O'Connor will remember them."

"Your secretary took the morning off. He just came back about ten minutes ago.

"Brad," she asked hesitatingly, "what makes the project so se-

cret—so important?"

He grasped her shoulders. "When I'm ready to tell, Carol, you'll be the first to know. I promise that."

CHAPTER IV

BRAD double-bolted the heavy metal door and snapped on the recess lighting system of the small laboratory room. Crossing to the single bench against the opposite wall, he carried two cages that swung as he walked.

He placed the first on the bench. A frightened mouse scurried across its floor and squeezed itself into a corner, its fur sticking out between the bars like bristles.

Brad took the coop with the cat to the opposite end of the room where he opened a thick metal door. It was a closet. He put the cage on the floor and closed the door. The animal mewed pitifully, the muffled sound coming through the crack underneath the heavy panel. Brad opened the door a bit.

Back at the bench he moved the mouse's cage to one side and tightened the jaws of a caliper-like vice. Its fingers bit solidly into opposite sides of the clump of fused metal he had removed from the "rock".

Protruding from the surface of the bench immediately below the clump was a pencil-shaped metal

pipe, a pinpoint hole in its tip. It lacked only two inches of touching the small mass.

Brad pressed a button and the orifice in the pipe hissed violently as gas under pressure rushed to escape. He activated another circuit and the knife-like, invisible stream burst into vigorous flame.

He regulated the tongue until it bathed the irregular metal lump with its vision-prohibiting purple fire. Then he placed the cage as close to the flame as he could without endangering the mouse.

He backed away and waited—a minute, two minutes, five minutes.

Finally the purple hue of the flame faded in the vicinity of the metallic specimen. It became red, a more brilliant red. Now it was a faint white. A stronger white. A brilliant white.

Abruptly, he extinguished the jet flame. But the lump, heated to incandescence, continued to glow. He placed his hand close to it; withdrew it in an instinctive jerk. It was even hotter than he had expected.

Brad's breathing was rapid and his throat was dry as he pushed the cage closer. His eyes were alive with a fire that matched the glow of the white-hot substance even as they reflected it.

The mouse cringed in the far corner of its enclosure. And once

more Brad shoved the coop closer, until it almost touched the glowing mass.

Slowly, the incandescence faded and the lump was a soft red in hue. Five minutes later it was its original dull gray color.

He removed the cage to the other end of the bench. The heat gone, the almost domesticated mouse began to act normal once more, scampering across the floor of its enclosure and touching its nose to the bars.

Brad removed a cellophane-covered piece of cheese from his pocket, tore loose the wrapping and placed it on the bench a few inches from the cage.

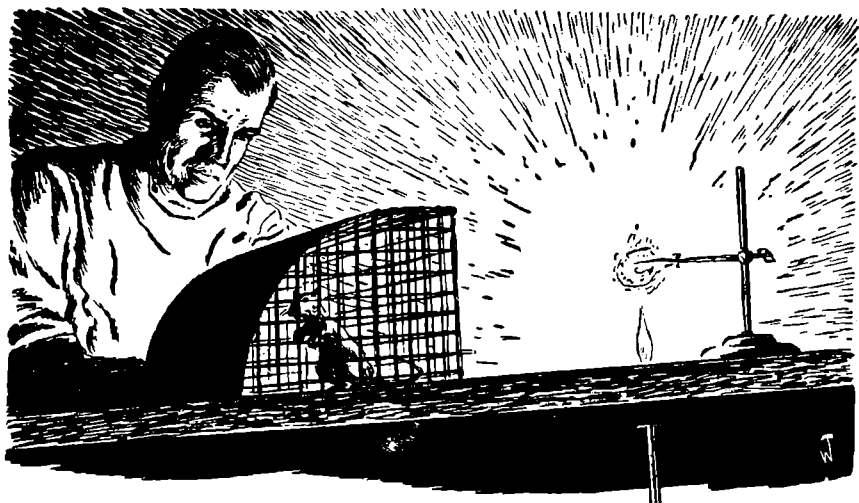
There was perspiration on his face and his hands shook as he held up the food to attract the animal's attention. He let it drop back onto the bench.

The mouse caught the scent and raced over, tried to force its snout between the bars.

BREATHLESSLY, Brad waited, watching the famished animal scurry back and forth along the bars, emitting an intermittent high-pitched note of distress.

Three minutes passed and Brad's expression of tense expectancy began to disappear. It was replaced by disappointment.

"The power!" he banged his fist in frustration on the bench. "Use



the power!"

A cry shriller than usual was sounded by the mouse. But otherwise its behavior did not change.

"You work by *instinct!*" His tone was pleading as he gripped the edge of the bench and stared into the cage. "You've got to be able to use it right away! You don't have to learn it gradually. You don't have to stop and figure it out step by step, like I did!"

Impulsively, he darted from the bench and retrieved the cage with the cat. He opened it and withdrew the animal, placing it on the bench beside the first coop.

The cat tensed and sprang at the enclosed mouse. Its paws stretched wide, bared nails gripping the metal uprights, the animal worked

its way erratically, frenziedly around the cage.

Scurrying across the floor, the mouse managed to keep on the opposite perimeter of the enclosure.

"Protect yourself, damn you!" Brad shouted at the smaller creature. "Fight back! You can kill a hundred like him, without even touching them!"

But the cat continued to scamp around the cage and the mouse showed no deviation from its pattern of confined flight.

Ten minutes later Brad's shoulders sagged. Stricken with final and utter despondency, he forced the cheese through the bars and put the cat back in its container.

With a cage in each hand, he stepped outside.

Ray Hartley was waiting beside the door.

"How'd it go?" he asked.

Brad shook his head sullenly

"Carol asked me to stand by for the specimens. I needed a couple of her pets for a bioclimatology experiment; she went to select them . . . Any special treatment for these two?" Ray nodded toward the cat and mouse.

Brad handed them to him. "Nothing special," he said numbly. "When that piece of hot metal on the bench in there cools off send it to metallurgy. Have them see what it is."

BRAD'S hand was still trembling as he poured another drink from the half-filled, dark-colored bottle and set it back down on his desk.

He downed it in a gulp and wiped perspiration from his forehead.

The door opened and Les entered, half sat on the desk top. "I just got the word that—whatever it was supposed to be—didn't go too well . . . Anything I can do?"

"Yeah," Brad slurred. "You can take a drink and tell O'Connor to scare up another bottle." He poured another and tossed it down.

"It wasn't that rough, was it, chief?—The experiment. I mean."

His eyes, as he stared momentarily at Les, carried all the sarcasm

he could have put in words. He shoved a glass across the desk, filled it, and refilled his own.

"Damn!" Les exclaimed. "You're drinking like a sot who hasn't tasted the stuff in twenty years."

Brad laughed. "Or a hundred and twenty years."

Les walked around the desk and grasped his shoulder. "Whatever it was, chief, it isn't hopeless, is it?"

"Afraid so. You see . . ." Part of the liquor came back up in his throat. He wasn't used to it. Pausing, he mopped his brow with a handkerchief and stood up. He swayed, reached out and grabbed the edge of the desk and sat down again.

"Well, let's just say the hell with it, Brad. Dammit, man—you've got enough stuff working now. What's one more project? After all, isn't space conquest—starting off with a bang with interstellar flights—enough for any *one* man in history?"

Brad laughed sarcastically.

"You mean," Les asked unbelievably, "that even the space deal was secondary to this new thing?"

"The space deal . . . was going to be only a means of, let's say, draining off the by-product of this new thing." Brad was having trouble making his loose tongue perform.

Les frowned, waiting for more.

"Hell," Brad rose, steadying himself and loosened his collar. "I was going to make every man a genius—a, a superman. But first I was going to give them the galaxy so there would be a star for everybody who wanted one. Then, when everybody had his own private sun and his eight or nine planets and all the wealth that the whole of humanity owns now, then I was going to make them . . ."

He gagged, but managed to hold it down. Erratically, he reached for the bottle, but missed, knocking it over. Les righted it; helped Brad back into his chair.

Les' frown changed to an amused smile. "Sure, chief," he pampered. "You were going to make everybody a god—just like Shiva."

"Just like Shiva," Brad repeated. The words slurred into one another. "Just like Shiva and . . ." he hesitated. "*O'Connor!*" The last word roared from his throat, directed at the door.

Les laughed. "Like Shiva and O'Connor, then."

The secretary looked into the room. His slim form stiffened in surprise as he readjusted his eyeglasses.

"Find a couple more bottles of this stuff," Brad ordered.

The corners of the secretary's mouth sagged downward disdainfully as he backed from the room.

"Brad," Les began hesitatingly,

"why don't you forget about work for a few days? You've been at it too long and too hard. Wise up. Look around you. You might find something interesting . . . Carol Sanders, for instance."

Brad jerked upright. The name had a sobering effect.

"You couldn't find a more worthy woman in the whole damned world," Les continued. "Nor a prettier one. They don't come any better."

Brad hiccoughed. "You trying to sell me something?"

"No. I'm trying to help you see the grass under your feet. Why don't you take a few evenings off? Get out and do some of the things other young people do? Try dancing for a change—maybe a few shows. She could use the new routine too. You've been working her pretty damned hard lately."

FOR a moment Brad was even a bit more sober as he stared intently at the paper weight on his desk. Even through the haze of alcohol-clouded thoughts, he could picture Carol clearly—in a laboratory uniform, in a colorful frock, in a business suit. Her dress made no difference. She *was* beautiful in any attire . . . Beautiful like another girl he knew—how many generations ago was it? How long ago had her grandchildren died?

Would he know Carol's grandchildren? Her great-grandchildren?

"I'm not interested in Carol," he said curtly.

"I know you're drunk, Brad," Les leaned across the desk, speaking distinctly as though to force the meaning of his words through the curtain of intoxication. "But are you sincerely not interested in her?"

Brad nodded brusquely, his chin jutting out.

"Then you won't mind if I aim my sights at something that seems as high as your Station right now. I figure that maybe within the next hundred generations the race *might* produce another Carol Sanders—not before."

Brad emptied the bottle in his glass and drank it, his cheeks flushing. After he was sure it was going to stay down, he said, "You've got a green light, Les. She's all yours."

"*And what does Brad get as his part of the bargain?*"

Les whirled around. Brad looked up at Carol standing in the doorway, her features rigidly set.

"Now that I'm through being traded, wrapped and delivered," she said, "let's turn our speculative thoughts to a more pressing matter."

Her heels beat an angry tattoo across the floor as she came to the desk. "O'Connor's holding a high

priority message out there, but he's afraid to bring it in because he says the chief is drunk. The message says your Washington agent has learned the Trans-At franchise is going to be dropped next week when it comes up for renewal . . . Cause?—That half-mile short drop-in on the East Coast terminal last week was considered a disqualifying violation."

Brad's eyes closed and his head wavered. "The hell with it," he said "Drop the thing. I don't want it any more. Liquidate the holdings." He lowered his head onto his forearm on the desk.

"Rather drunk, isn't he?" Carol looked helplessly at Les.

"Rather," he agreed. "Just a moment ago he was talking about being a god."

Her face tensed momentarily, then relaxed.

"I think he's going to be sick," said Les.

Carol rolled up the sleeves of her smock with determined motions. "Get some hot coffee," she instructed, heading for the lavatory. "I'll drag out the cold rags. When you get back you can shove him under the shower."

"Uh—Carol," he called out after her. "I'd appreciate it if you'd forget what you overheard."

She said nothing.

EVERY muscle tensed, Shiva stood beneath the collonade of the two-hundred-foot-high temple that was a masterpiece of carved marble and sandstone. The robed figure was dwarfed by huge pillars in the shape of grotesque human forms, each supporting the overhang of the roof on its head and upraised fingertips.

A broad grin seized his face as he watched the nuclojet appear over the mountain top and settle down on the lawn in front of the steps. Even before the craft came to rest its passenger leaped out and raced up the steps.

Shiva turned before the man arrived at the entrance. He strode in, heading toward his office and beckoning to the other to follow.

He held the door open while the man, breathing heavily, brushed in and continued to the desk, his stride unbroken. Shiva locked the door and joined him.

The man tossed an irregular, metallic object on the desk top and stepped back, his expression begging for a word of approval.

"The rock?" Shiva asked excitedly.

"The rock," the man verified. "Orange got it and relayed it to Green. He thought I ought to get over here with it right away. He called?"

"Of course. What do you think I was waiting for?"

Shiva picked up the object and turned it over between his fingers several times. "Commendable work, Red," he said. "Tell Orange and Green I am well pleased."

He tossed it in the air, caught it and dropped into his chair, placing the mass on the desk directly before him. "What's it supposed to be?"

Red shrugged.

"You ought to know," Shiva said with annoyance. "You're supposed to be an expert on metal."

"But I haven't run any tests yet."

"What's your guess?"

"Well, it looks like something that's been subjected to terrific skin heat. It resembles a good many meteorites I've seen."

"Meteorite?" Shiva asked puzzledly. Then he shoved it aside. "Did you bring the drawing?"

"The reproduction of the map? —Here." Red handed over the folded paper.

Shiva spread it open before him. Then he leaped from the chair in astonishment.

"Why, it's . . . it's . . . !"

He held the paper shakily in his hands while he repeatedly articulated the name of the town near the end of the penciled flight route.

"That notation, 'depth, 70 ft.,'" Red offered, "also leads me to believe this thing may have been a

meteor that buried itself in the ground."

Shiva stared at the map and the object, alternately, thoughtfully. He imagined the two should touch off some associated train of memories in his mind. But somehow they didn't.

"What were they doing with the thing?"

"Orange said they had set up laboratory equipment to subject it to high temperatures."

Shiva's frown became deeper. Heat was another clue, a clue that should have unveiled the association his mind was groping for. But it didn't.

"Did Orange spirit this thing away without covering up?" he asked.

"Started to. But Green put it off a few hours while I manufactured a reproduction to slip in its place."

"Then they don't suspect it's gone?"

"Most probably not."

"All right. Get to work on it. Find out what it is. Where it comes from. What it's worth. What it's for. What happens when it is heated up . . . Work on it in the laboratory here."

"But what happens," Red protested, "when I turn up missing over there?"

"Nothing. You're just an assistant who walked out. We won't

need you there any longer anyway."

Red pocketed the mass of metal and left the office.

SHIVA folded his arms over the embroider work on his ceremonial robe and stood staring out the window at the purpletinged Verdugo Mountains in which his main temple nestled.

If only he could project a perceptive thread into Laboratory D! Then he could observe what was going on without being seen, even while he sat in his office. But the laboratory had been sealed off for years now . . . It wasn't a material shield that prevented his psycho-receptive pulses from entering. It was a psychokinetic protective aura maintained by the subconscious processes of Brad Darson—an aura identical to the one that he, Shiva, had established around his main temple. Both auras were comprised of the same impenetrable force that efficiently protected them from each other's lances of unseen destruction.

Shiva sighed forlornly. It had been stalemate now for a long time—for almost two generations . . . He could not injure Darson physically or psychically. Darson could not hurt him.

For over fifty years they had not attacked each other. It was not that he wasn't willing to con-

tinue trying to break Darson's shield. It was that he was convinced of the uselessness of such tactics. He knew also that Darson's reluctance to attack reflected neither fear nor frustration. Rather, Darson held back the force because each encounter was an open invitation to destruction, death that might affect hundreds of others in the vicinity.

Until now it had been two worlds, not one: Shiva's expanding sphere . . . and Darson's, which might be said to be holding its own, he thought.

Shiva laughed confidently . . . It wouldn't be that way long.

CHAPTER V

BRAD clutched the arm rests of his chair as he strained forward to stare into the face of the man who stood rigidly on the other side of the desk. He was a large, big-shouldered individual with hands that stretched below his cuffs like bludgeons.

"I can't believe it!" Brad said incredulously.

The man dropped his gaze guiltily to the floor.

"Hell, Chet," Brad walked around the desk and stood beside him, looking into his face, "I picked you myself — three years ago. Remember? I even convinced Waymore you were the

first he should sign up for the Station crew."

Chet turned his face away.

Brad sighed despondently and exchanged glances with Les and Carol, seated at one end of the desk.

"How did you do it, Chet?" he asked suddenly.

The man shrugged. "A faulty transformer in the video circuit that couldn't carry the load through more than a hundred or a hundred and fifty remote activations . . . A timing device in the tanks that detonated the bulkhead separating the less-than-critical masses of fuel."

"But why, Chet? *Why?*"

"Well, you see—Shiva . . ."

"Shiva!" Les leaped up.

"Of course. Shiva," Brad snorted. "He's been behind all space project-wrecking moves for the past thirty-five years."

Les was still frowning quizzically.

"He's building *his kingdom* on earth," Brad explained bitingly. "I don't imagine he's receptive to the idea of his potential *subjects* wandering out of his sphere of control."

He turned back to Chet. "What moved you to make this confession?"

"I lived in L.A. before I joined up with you. I was a member of the central cult . . . Sure I believed in Shiva!" His voice rose

suddenly. "I still do."

Then his words dropped almost to a whisper. "But blowing up metal hulls in space with only instruments in them is one thing . . . Soon you're going to be sending up manned craft. I don't want anything to do with this business when there are people in those hulls thousands of billions of miles away from home . . . So I'm finished with this sabotage detail; I don't care who orders it—even Shiva!"

Brad let himself limply back into the chair. "Okay, Chet. Take the next shuttle back up to the Station."

Chet's face, contorting, raced through a series of expressions, settling for one of mixed surprise and disbelief.

"What!" Les shouted, leaping up and knocking his chair over. "You're going to let him *go back!*"

He turned to Carol. "He's broken down! The man needs psycho reconditioning!"

"Chet." The girl looked at the huge man who was shifting uneasily. "You say you still believe in Shiva?"

He lowered his eyes.

"You're an intelligent engineer." She spoke the words slowly, convincingly. "You should realize as quickly as anyone that he's a fraud."

"He's not!" the Station man

protested, reddening.

CAROL set her teeth tightly together. "He's a cheap fraud with an assortment of sensational tricks in his bag. He's a charlatan. A phony!"

Chet balled his huge fists "If you were a man . . ." He glowered at her.

Brad rushed around the desk. Les advanced on the man from the other side, his hand reaching out restrainingly for the spaceman's shoulder.

"The hell with your job," Chet stared back at Brad. "I don't want it!" He turned and strode through the door.

Les looked reprovingly at Brad. "Chief, you're a genius. But sometimes you run out of brains. I hope Carol proved that within a week he'd be ready again to take orders from his superior—his real superior."

Brad nodded submissively and walked over to the window.

Then he spun around suddenly. "Les, do you know what this means? It means the final robot test flight would have been a success! Chet's confession was tantamount to removing the last bug!"

He smiled and enthusiasm spread over him like a visible cloak as he paced the floor eagerly. "We will get on with the plans . . . Les, you recruit a volunteer crew

of three. Contact the Station and tell them to go ahead with converting the X-20 . . . Carol, you get in touch with bioclimatology and have Hartley send a crew upstairs. I want the X-20 as livable as a sun parlor."

He went back to the desk and began scribbling notes rapidly.

Carol pushed a cigarette between his lips and held the desk lighter under it. "I hope this flood of gusto means you'll have more drive to go after the Trans-At franchise again. It isn't too late, you know. It's only been a week since it slipped out of our hands."

He puffed on the cigarette and stubbed it out. "No," he said determinedly. "Our phase of ocean hopping with passengers is over."

"But that was your chief source of income to sustain the laboratories," she persisted.

"Sure, Brad," Les agreed. "That was your main money maker."

"We're through making money now . . . We've reached the spending stage." Brad punched a button on the desk. "O'Connor," he spoke into the communicator. "Get in here. Bring Monrow with you."

LESS than a minute later O'Connor, cleaning his eyeglasses, and Brad's attorney entered. Brad addressed the latter. "I want you to clear the way for

setting up a private educational institution. We're going to start training two thousand young men to push buttons on space craft. Get a charter under the name 'National Spacemen's Academy,' or something like that.

"O'Connor, you draw up a list of assets, resources, as of today. On the basis of one and a half million per ship, estimate how many craft half our available capital will build."

"You want to plan on complete liquidation of all other holdings?" the secretary asked.

"All except one main laboratory—and, of course, the Station."

Monrow puffed on his cigar. "You may run into some trouble getting a charter to train those men."

Brad stretched his fingers wide on the desk. "Then we'll do it on an international basis, if we can't do it otherwise. We'll get a fleet of mothball carriers and conduct our operations from them . . . O'Connor, find out what we can buy aircraft carriers for."

O'Connor and the lawyer left.

"Les," Brad suggested, "you'd better relay those orders to the Station. Then come back and we will draw up some more plans."

After Les left, Carol came over and placed her hand over Brad's. "I'm happy to see you finally shrugged off that 'rock' experi-



ment defeat like this." She smiled.

He looked away, hiding the sullenness that suddenly swept over his face.

"Care to tell me what it was all about now?" she asked.

He didn't answer.

"It couldn't have been very important—it came up so suddenly,"

she offered. "And it seems to be finished already."

He centered his eyes on a reflection of her face in the chrome lamp-stand base. Experimentally, he tried to ignore her beauty—look upon her as impersonally as he would any other woman. But it didn't work.



"I had made plans around that lump of metal for almost fifty . . ." He bit his lips, then went on, ". . . for what seemed like fifty or a hundred years. At any rate, it took quite an extensive search to find it. But apparently my hypotheses were wrong."

"And now," she laughed lightly,

"we can forget about it."

"Yes," he agreed glumly.

"Even without telling me what your ideas were?"

Again he was silent.

Les re-entered, holding up a wire-transmitted copy of the afternoon newspaper. "See this chief?" he asked, placing it on the

desk.

Brad read the headline:

COMET PREDICTION BY
SHIVA VERIFIED

The story carried a Los Angeles dateline and read:

Scientists at Palomar Observatory last night announced they had sighted for the first time a comet whose existence and position had been prophesied over a week ago by Shiva, the self-styled Hindu "deity," at a time when it was out of range of the most powerful telescope.

The celestial object, named "The Fist of Shiva" by its predictor, is believed to be headed in the general direction of Earth . . .

His eyes dropped to a smaller story whose headlines announced:

THOUSANDS JOINING
CULT OF HINDU 'GOD'

Brad looked up and Les laughed. "I haven't yet reached the point of losing my skepticism."

"Good," Brad smiled. "You can hang on to that contribution for a while then."

Taking Carol by the arm, Les went toward the door. Brad watched them leave the office, his eyes studying the girl's back. When they were gone, he lay his head back in the chair and closed his eyes.

Now his ego no longer responded to physical sensations. Instead, his superconscious was only aware

of the vast, pressing nothingness of space as his parapsyche streaked away from the shining blue-green globe.

Ahead, at a remote distance beyond the pitted, milky-white sphere that hung nearby, was the Fist of Shiva.

CAROL left Les on the second floor and walked down to the first. In front of the freight elevator, she paused and looked in both directions down the hall. No one was in sight.

Quickly, she stepped onto the platform and sent it down to the storage sub-level. Down the corridor, she went cautiously past the open door of the lighted room. The clerk had his back turned, so she passed unseen, unheard.

In the main storage vault, her eyes scanned the room for the odd-sized crates that contained the air-restorer units. They should be near the entrance, she assured herself, remembering that they had been sent over from the other laboratory only a short while before — on the same day that Brad had flown to the mysterious spot indicated on the pencil-drawn map and had returned with a lump of gray metal. Laboratory C was in the general direction of the site where the 'rock' had obviously been dug from the ground.

She found the area where the

air-restorers were stored. *

As she walked over to the bulky crates, she thought of the small lump of metal. Practically its entire area was gray, rough, pitted. But one small surface was smooth, shiny—as though it had been broken off from a greater mass.

Hesitatingly, she surveyed the dozen crates. There was nothing about any one that distinguished it from the others—except perhaps the one on the end nearest the wall. There was red lettering on it.

She stood before it and read:

“Defective—Hold in Stock.”

This could be it, she thought.

Eagerly, she attacked the wing-nuts that held on the lid. There were four of them. They all unscrewed easily.

The cover off, she brushed hair out of her face and bent over to look in the box.

Footsteps!

Carol darted around the side of the crate, taking the lid with her, and squeezed in between two taller boxes.

The clerk walked down the aisle where she was hiding.

She held her breath.

He went past, got a small plastic carton off a shelf at the end of the aisle and returned.

Again she held her breath and again he went by, apparently noticing neither her nor the uncovered box.

When he had gone, she stepped out and glanced quickly into the crate.

She had been right! The metal was identical to the piece she had handled.

Excitedly, she wedged a corner of the cover under a small, slender protuberance on the mass. Then, using the edge of the box as a fulcrum, she put her weight on the other side of the lid. The slender knob snapped off and arched out into the aisle.

Carol retrieved it and slipped it into the pocket of her smock.

Then she replaced the lid on the crate and secured its bolts.

* * *

THE communicator signal buzzed harshly, impatiently on Shiva's desk. He threw the switch.

“They've decided to send out the manned rocket!” the voice barked excitedly.

“Is this Green?”

“Yes . . . They're going ahead with it!”

Shiva sat back and laughed—boisterously, long. Then he calmed himself. “They were taken in?”

“Completely.”

“What happened to Black?”

“After he got through with his confession Darson blessed him and told him to get back to work!”

“No!” Shiva exploded in dis-

belief. "You mean he was fool enough to want Black on the Station again?"

"That's what Black reported."

"The fool! The lenient, simple fool! Maybe I should have let Black return. It would have been amusing to make a two-time simpleton out of Darson with the same agent."

"That might have been the wiser course." The voice was indulgently reproving. "Black was a good man to have on the Station. I'm wondering whether it was worth his services just to coax Darson into continuing with his manned ship experiment."

"Agents are expendable. Anyway, I've already received other reports that the maneuver's desired end was achieved . . . Even now they're riding on a false sense of security. And you say they are ready to stumble blindly into their last experiment."

"What good does that do us?"

"The quicker they send out the flight, the quicker they lose the ship with its personnel. When the government learns people have been sacrificed in a mad experiment, it will be easy to get the courts to padlock their enterprise."

"Hell, I'm not sure that'll work. Darson's been able to keep his failures secret."

"He won't keep this one secret—not when Yellow quits the Sta-

tion disgustedly and tells how three ships, the last one manned, were all destroyed in tests."

There was a silence over the communicator. Presently Green spoke. "I'm afraid Darson might still be one step ahead of you. He's out to acquire a fleet of obsolete aircraft carriers. Looks like he intends to run his business on the open seas if any more governments interfere with him."

Shiva stared absently across the room. Slowly, he smiled. Then he spoke softly into the communicator.

"I understand from recorded history that carriers became obsolete because they could be easily sunk. I don't think sitting in permanent drydocks has made them any less vulnerable."

THE conversation over, Shiva collected his robes about him and stepped into the small elevator set in the rear wall of his office.

At the temple's second sub-surface level he strode out and crossed the polished floor of a huge laboratory. Red's figure was silhouetted by the steady, brilliant white flame of a small, raw fire before which he stood.

"Find out what it is yet?" Shiva drew up beside him and stared at the lump of metal suspended in the torch's jet.

"The damned thing defied analy-

sis," Red said without looking around. "Frankly, I haven't any idea what it's comprised of . . . I've called in a couple of experts from back East. They may be able to get somewhere. In the meantime I'm heating it to see what happens. I have practically the same setup that Darson was going to use."

"What do you think's going to happen?"

"I'll let you know in about five minutes."

Shiva leaned against the table and watched the mass hypnotically. Even as it began to change color while it achieved greater incandescence, he did not move his eyes.

Within five minutes it was white hot, seemingly even more brilliant than the flame which fed it.

A frown of puzzlement spread over Shiva's forehead. He must concentrate. He knew there was something he *must* remember! The sphere-like mass, brilliantly aglow, was a vaguely familiar thing.

Suddenly he was trembling and his fists tightened until his nails dug into the flesh of his palms.

He seized Red's shoulder and spun him around. "It *definitely* could be a meteorite?" he demanded.

Red nodded. "I think so."

"It could have been heated to the same degree of incandescence

in plunging through the atmosphere?"

"Undoubtedly it must have been."

Shiva's strained breath blew hotly into the agent's face and he clamped down on Red's shoulder in a brutal grip. "And in a fall it could have appeared much larger than that, couldn't it?"

"Might have. The aura of incandescence might have spread out over a large area. Then, too, anyone observing it fall might have been the victim of psychological exaggeration."

"But there could be more to it than this?"

"It's possible . . ."

Shiva released the agent and backed away. His voice was a hoarse whisper. "*Then I'm no god! It was an accident!*"

Red frowned at him in confusion.

Shiva's face twisted as an expression reflecting sudden realization seized his features. "*And if it happened to me it could happen to anyone else! Even you!*" he shouted, pointing a finger at the agent.

Bewilderment, fright leaped into Red's eyes.

Shiva advanced on him. *Even now*, he thought—*even now the change could have already taken place! Even this exposure of a few minutes could have been suf-*

ficient!

He stiffened. Then he summoned his telepathic powers and sent an unspoken sentence spearing toward the other's mind:

If you can receive my thoughts you are a god, like me.

Red's coat constricted suddenly with terror and he clamped his hands over his ears. Then he screamed.

Shiva braced himself mentally and lashed out at the agent with a single, violent blast of hellish destruction. The agent disappeared in a shimmering flash. Only a circular, black incrustation lay on the floor to mark the spot where he had stood.

But even before the brilliance of the blast disappeared, Shiva turned his attention to the still glowing lump of metal. With another forceful display of psychokinetic energy, he teleported the thing a million miles away. There, in the star-studded vacuum, he imparted to it a terrific impetus and watched it speed on its course out of the Solar System.

CHAPTER VI

AGAINST the brilliantly span-gled ebony blanket of infinity, the Fist of Shiva was a magnificent green teardrop — frightening, awesome, expanding in size as Brad's detached superconscious approach-

ed.

Motionless, Brad stood at a distance and surveyed the dazzling celestial object as it sped past him and continued its inexorable rush toward the central regions of the Solar System.

Even now, he realized suddenly, it should have been close enough for the nebulous material that surrounded it to be forced away in the form of a tail by light pressure of the sun's radiation. But instead, the comet dust stayed close to the main ball, pressing in upon it like a dense halo. He wondered why.

Passing it in its flight, he stood on its course and directed at it a stream of deflecting psychokinetic energy.

Nothing happened.

Even the small amount of force behind his thrust should have caused it to swerve slightly off course.

He retreated before it at a much faster speed, swerving off its course once more and then turning to concentrate another blast of force at the object.

This time the intensity of the blast was sufficient to attain visible proportions. Like molten steel falling to a concrete floor, the lance splattered against the comet in a brilliant pyrotechnical display.

But still the comet did not alter its course by even the smallest

angle.

Puzzled, Brad drew alongside and studied it. Undoubtedly, he had used sufficient force. The last bolt, he imagined, would have been almost intense enough to disintegrate at least a small portion of the object. But its surface was unaffected.

Angered, he mustered the total intensity of the destructive power within him and hurled it savagely outward.

Flaming hell broke loose all along the surface of the stubborn globe. It was a sustained blast that outshone the remote sun toward which the comet was hurtling.

When the blast subsided it was obvious that still not the smallest change had been effected in the course, speed or outward appearance of the comet.

Grimly, Brad swept through the Stygian expanse of nothingness, paralleling the thing, studying its form in bewilderment.

It was large—a quarter or half the size of the moon. Through its nebulous blanket he could almost discern surface features. The comet had a solid nucleus—a large solid core. No nebulous mass of dust particles was this celestial behemoth.

Cautiously, he drew closer for a more thorough inspection. And it grew larger in his field of vision. Now it occupied almost half the

celestial sphere.

Suddenly his approach halted. He had not consciously directed a halt in his advance.

He willed himself to continue to the surface.

But he could draw no closer! It was as though an invisible, impenetrable barrier existed between him and the Fist of Shiva!

Brad's parapsyche circled to the other side and he tried another approach. But again he was stopped.

Abruptly there was comprehension . . . The comet was shielded by a totally enveloping psychokinetic barrier, a barrier constructed and sustained by subconscious intent—Russell Granet's or Shiva's subconscious intent!

Stunned, Brad drifted along with the object in a lethargy of near despair—a half hour, an hour . . . The sensational manifestations that Shiva had wrought with his special powers had been many over the half century during which he had boasted of eternal youth and claimed to be a god.

There had been convincing earthquakes, and tidal waves and volcanoes and fires — for all of which he had assumed responsibility. And each ruse had succeeded in swelling toward gigantic proportions the cult of which he was the self-proclaimed head.

But this was the first time he

had employed a universal threat and had insured against interference.

* * *

CAROL closed the door behind her and strode over to the desk. "Hartley wants to know how big a crew to prepare the X-20 for."

Brad didn't move.

"Mr. Brains," she called, staring at him. He sat stiff in the chair, his head back against its cushioned rest, his eyes closed. But he could not be asleep, she reasoned. His figure was too upright for that.

She called his name louder.

But he did not stir.

Suddenly she gasped, throwing her hand in front of her mouth. Her note pad dropped to the floor.

Brad was not breathing!

Dumfounded she could not remove her eyes from his motionless chest.

Then she snapped into action and rushed around the desk, grasping his wrist and groping for his pulse.

"Oh, Brad!" she sobbed as she knelt beside his chair and clutched his arm desperately.

The rationality that was left within her tried to suggest that he had suffered a heart attack. Then the hope shouted it might not

be too late to do something. But despair was the stronger sentiment that held her in a rigid, trembling heap beside his chair.

Abruptly, she stiffened—unconscious of the hopelessness, the sense of loss that had thrust itself into her chest like the blade of a knife.

Trembling violently now, she released his arm as though she had been holding a poisonous snake. Her wet eyes wide with terror, she leaped up, backing away and stifling a scream.

His arm had been hard! Not stiff, as though in death. But *hard*—like granite, like the most dense alloy.

Beating down the waves of fright, she went back to the chair, extending a shaking hand to his face, touched his cheek.

It was cold! It was like touching a diamond!

Disheveled hair hung down across his forehead.

Bewildered and terrorized, she raised her numb fingers to brush it back upon his head.

But it would not move! His hair was like bristles of steel that could neither be bent nor snapped off!

Petrifying fright was an almost overpowering sensation now as she cast her eyes wildly about the room. But she fought the impulse to flee from the building—to forget her purpose and leave the laboratory, never to return. Even

in her bewildered consternation, a rational thread of mentality called out to her that she must stay, that she had no alternative.

Quickly, she crossed to the lavatory and entered, hiding behind the door where she could see through its crack into the office.

* * *

BRAD'S head nodded forward. He brushed the hair off his face as he rose from the chair and began pacing in front of the desk. There was dismay in his features. His head hung low and his fists were clenched tightly.

In front of the desk his foot kicked a note pad that lay on the rug. But he ignored it as he leaned forward and studied the front page of the paper Les had brought.

There was a picture on the sheet—a picture of a colossal temple that dwarfed the human figures which stood on pyramid-like steps leading up to the main entrance. Dominating the edifice was the gigantic stone figure of a leering god whose waist flowed into the curved lines of the largest of three domes comprising the roof. Arms upraised in supplication and face tilted toward the sky, the great statue stared with burning eyes. Its cruelly twisted lips bared sharp, fang-like teeth.

It was the central Temple of

Shiva. Inset in the engraving was a smaller picture—one of Shiva.

Brad wondered how much resemblance the features in the inset bore to those of the leering god atop the dome. Or was it merely psychological consideration that suggested the similarity?

How long had it been since he had seen his brother? Thirty-five years? Forty?

He walked to the window and stood staring out into the western sky.

There was a knock at his door. But he was only dimly aware of the disturbance as he reached into the inner core of his mentality for the total power of his super-conscious.

He disappeared. Like the extinguishment of a light, he was gone.

A muffled gasp sounded from the lavatory.

THE knock at the door repeated itself impatiently.

Presently the door opened and Les entered. He looked casually at the vacant desk and turned around.

"O'Connor," he called through the doorway. "I thought you said the chief was in?"

"Of course he is."

Les walked to the lavatory. The door was wide open and it was obvious no one was in there.

"Better get yourself tested for

new glasses," he laughed as he walked out past O'Connor's desk.

Frowning, O'Connor looked into the inner room.

"That's odd," he exclaimed. "I was sure he was there." He followed Les down the hall. "If you see Mr. Darson tell him I'm taking off early for lunch."

The secretary stopped at an elevator, but Les continued toward his private laboratory.

At his worktable, he stood before two units of electronic equipment—mazes of tubes, resistors and wires. He got a length of wire with metal clamps on each end from the drawer. Attaching one end to the plate lead atop a tube in the set on the left, he stretched the other end to the second unit and made another temporary connection. He extended another wire from the first unit to his ear.

"Let me have the chief," he said suddenly, speaking softly into the crystal pickup of the unit on his left. He waited for almost half a minute.

" . . . Okay," he said. "This is from Lab D . . ."

Interrupted, he listened.

"Yeah, it's me. Who else? Now listen, I don't have much time: The X-20 is being converted. It'll blast off . . ."

" . . . How'd you know?"

" . . . Oh. Well, anyway, here's the joker. I'm going to make the

first hop . . .

" . . . Now wait, chief. Don't lose all your steam. I've already told you I'm interested in this business. When you sent me on the job I said you were making a mistake—that I'm a scientist at heart and that there was a good chance I'd desert you . . ."

Frowning, Les waited and listened for fully fifteen seconds.

"If that's the way you feel," he said gruffly, "you can have my resignation now . . ."

"Okay, then. I'll stick. But it'll be on my terms. I'll still report in because I'm convinced Darson's an okay guy and I know all my reports will be complimentary. But I'm going to make that first hop."

He paused once more while he pressed the receiver closer to his ear.

"Now don't try any threats," his face set itself more firmly. "They don't work with me. You've got my terms and you'll have to meet me all the way . . ."

" . . . We should be ready to shove off in two or three days . . . That's right, there'll be a report as soon as I get down from the Station."

Les disconnected the shunt and placed the wire in the drawer.

BRAD stepped from a clump of bushes near the roadway in

front of the temple. He could neither see nor feel it, but the shield that was too dense to admit his perceptive probes lay immediately in front of him. He felt as though he could almost reach out and touch the force field.

Stepping onto the roadway, he joined a group of Shivaites headed toward the huge edifice. He walked along with them for twenty or thirty feet, then dropped behind. Once more he stepped into a group of flowering shrubs. He was past the shield. Now his psychokinetic powers could be used without restraint within the shielded area.

He closed his eyes. Suddenly he was looking across a psychic bridge into the office of the temple. Shiva was there—alone. Brad teleported into the room and stood before the desk.

Startled, Shiva leaped up. But almost immediately he regained his composure and reseated himself, smiling and folding his hands on the desk.

Brad braced himself, mentally and psychically. His features became taut.

"Since I value the furnishings here," Shiva said calmly, "you may relax. I have long been aware of the uselessness of force between us."

Brad relaxed—all but his eyes. Tensely, he stared into his brother's face.

"Undoubtedly," Shiva prodded, "something moved you to pay me this visit. What is it?"

"Why are you interfering with my space project?" Brad demanded coldly.

"My dear brother, I assure you that I am not . . ."

"That is a lie," Brad accused. "Chet confessed."

"Chet?—I have no idea who Chet is."

It was apparent Russell Granet would admit nothing. Brad fought the temptation to hurl forth a psychokinetic blast, knowing it would be useless.

"Please, Clark," Shiva feigned an entreaty in an obviously sarcastic gesture, "no cosmic display. If this temple is damaged, I assure you that many of your holdings are quite vulnerable for retaliatory purposes."

It wasn't the threat that restrained Brad. "You're still willing to let others suffer, I see, in an attempt to settle our differences. To you all humanity is still nothing but an inexhaustible supply of pawns for a chess game."

"I don't deny those sentiments, however crudely you may be expressing them," Shiva rose, folding his arms. "What are others, if you'll allow me to be a little dramatic myself?—Insects, flies, pawns? Call them what you like."

Brad hissed disgustedly. "Then

you are still convinced you are a god. And you're continuing your strategy of sabotage so your *subjects* can't become scientifically inclined and go darting away from under your nose to other worlds."

Shiva's smile was the only answer.

It was increasingly irking Brad. "But they are going to, Russell." He made no attempt at constraining his voice. "Soon the first will experience the accomplishment of gaining another star system, finding another world."

Brad waited.

"Is that what you came here to discuss?" his brother asked finally.

"No," Brad replied. "I want to impress upon you the fact that your material holdings are much more extensive than mine—more vulnerable."

"Now, brother." Scorn was thicker in the other's voice. "You're forgetting that I am perfectly willing to revert to roughhouse tactics—any time you're ready to initiate them. What are a few temples? They can be easily rebuilt. As a matter of fact, I welcome the opportunity to have some of my followers martyred to science. There's no quicker way of rejuvenating the interest of potential converts."

A fury was raging inside Brad's head. But he tried not to let it

find further expression in his features.

Suddenly Shiva laughed. "I imagine you find it quite deplorable that I have finally maneuvered into a commanding position. You must admit the comet is an ingenious instrument, together with its shield. It shall perhaps be the proverbial stone that will kill not one, but all the birds I'm after."

Brad leaned forward over the desk. "What about the comet? What do you intend doing with it?"

"The plan is simple. I've never hidden, not even to authorities, the fact that my aim is to enfold all humanity in one mass beneath me . . . The world for Shiva. My following has grown. There are hundreds of millions paying homage now. My power can reach into any earth government. But that isn't enough. There will be *no other authority*. Either I'll have the world, or I'll destroy it and select another with intelligence upon it . . . There are others, you know. I learned that during the seventy-five years you thought I had disappeared completely."

BRAD was speechless with fury. "No, Clark," Shiva continued. "In this new world there will be no place for you—or your science. There will be no space projects—just earth . . . my earth . . . or there won't be any earth."

"Then the comet is a weapon of coercion?"

"I believe that's what I've just said. All earth governments will get the ultimatum soon . . . It's fun Clark—this business. You should have joined me in it."

"You won't do it!" Brad said incredulously, his voice low.

"We shall wait and let time resolve my ability to carry through the plan."

Brad smiled suddenly. "I've a simple solution," he announced eagerly, wondering why he hadn't thought of it before. "I'll merely throw up a shield around earth—just like the one you have around that thing out there in space."

A coarse laugh interrupted him. "I'd expected you would," Shiva said confidently. "The result should be quite interesting. Perhaps you and I shall resolve the eternal proposition — what would happen should an irresistible force meet an immovable object. We'll observe it together."

Utterly hopeless, Brad turned dully and headed for the door.

"There is another interesting aspect that bears watching," Shiva called after him. "Can you imagine how long you'll stay in control of your rockets when people learn the comet is on a direct collision course? But perhaps that won't be your problem when the time comes. I understand another in-

junction is about to be issued to restrain operations from your present site."

Rather than listen to the derisive laughter he knew was coming, Brad teleported back to the fringe of the shield surrounding the temple and walked across the area of invisible restriction.

Even as he teleported back into his office, he re-erected the shield around his own cluster of laboratory buildings.

The laugh that Brad had expected broke the sudden silence in Shiva's office. But it was cut short as the communicator buzzed.

"This is Green," the voice said after Shiva opened the two-way circuit. "They're preparing their manned rocket."

"I know. Everyone has his instructions. There are no changes in the plans."

"Anything else that has to be taken care of?"

"The rock . . . have you located any more of it?"

"No. We scoured every laboratory facility in Labs A through E."

CHAPTER VII

BRAD put out another cigarette in the heap of smoldering butts that almost overflowed his ash tray. He nervously lit another.

Carol, leaning against the edge

of the desk, fidgeted with a hem of her laboratory apron.

"I've never seen you this unsettled," she said, not looking into his drawn face.

The intercommunication box sputtered and he tensed. But no words came out of the speaker.

"Why, Carol?" he pleaded suddenly. "Why did Les do it?"

She shrugged. "He wanted to surprise you. He thought he could have the flight over with and spare you the nervous tension of sweating it out."

"But why did *he* have to go without consulting me?"

"Les knew you'd never consent to his being the third member of the crew. He knew you'd spout off about his being too valuable. And . . ."

He interrupted her, shouting into the intercom, "Am I still connected with the Station?"

"Yes, sir," the submissive voice came back.

"Anything on the tape yet?"

"No, sir. A report should be coming through now."

"It's two minutes late, isn't it?"

There was no answer for a moment. Then, "It's coming through now, chief."

Brad waited. Carol leaned closer to the box.

"It's three-point-six," the voice finally sounded.

Carol relaxed. But Brad's ex-

pression did not change.

"Something wrong?" she asked.

Why hide it, he thought. "They are still dropping behind the schedule we figured out."

"Why?"

Answerless he looked away. "That's why I wanted the flight to be held off for another few days. Kastling's only a few hours away from solving the problem of direct voice connection through hyper."

"But whatever's wrong is only causing a delay, isn't it?" Her face was twisted into a heavy frown. "It doesn't mean they might not—come back?"

Brad glanced into her tense eyes. "You want him back, don't you?" he asked solicitously.

Her eyes opened wider for a moment. Then they narrowed again into an impersonal stare.

"Of course I want him to come back," she snapped.

"Sorry to interrupt, Mr. Darson," O'Connor was at the door. "But you've disconnected the intercommunication system and there's a Mr. Clyde Harrison—from the state Supreme Court."

THE man nudged O'Connor aside and walked in. There was a stiff, folded document in his hand. He gave it to Brad.

"I have a court order here," he announced. "It temporarily re-

strains you from conducting extraterrestrial flights anywhere in this state. I call to your attention the fact that a hearing has been set—the date noted therein—to decide whether a permanent injunction is to be issued against you.”

Tensely, Brad spread the document open and read it.

“You will close down your Space Station,” the server continued, “but you will not be allowed to land it or other equipment in this state. You may, however, land one craft—to return your personnel.”

“There’s nothing here,” Brad tapped the sheet with the back of his fingers, “that concerns the Station. Anyway, it is not in the jurisdiction of this state.”

“But . . . ,” the server began.

“There is also nothing authorizing you or any agent of the state to interfere with any other operations, other than to post guards around the space crafts.”

The secretary was still in the doorway.

“O’Connor,” Brad called, “please show Mr. Harrison out . . . and find Monrow.”

Harrison, red faced, left.

Brad followed him to the door, dropped his hand on O’Connor’s shoulder. *

The secretary looked at him expectantly. “What are we going to do?” he asked.

“As soon as we settle down from

this first flight we’ll dismantle the ships and get them aboard carriers, as we planned.”

O’Connor’s small eyes blinked behind his thick glasses. “But you can’t expect anyone to try to land one of those things on a floating ship!”

“I know, O’Connor. I’ll handle the flights myself until we can find an island and a government willing to sell it.”

Carol was standing by the window. “Brad,” she called, pointing toward the rocket landing field.

He went over and looked. Several State Guard trucks were barring the three entrances to the barb-wire enclosed field. Scores of armed troops were beginning to take their posts.

“Mr. Darson,” the intercommunication box sputtered.

He raced across the room, Carol following.

“Yes.”

“X-20 at three-point-six-five.”

Brad checked his watch. “She’s fallen behind another minute!”

“Yes, sir,” the voice agreed glumly.

Brad’s fingers clenched and unclenched nervously.

“Carol,” he said suddenly. “How about going down to the cafeteria and selecting a nice lunch for me? Have yours while you’re down there.”

“Now?”

"Yes, now," he said sternly.

"Guess I'll be better off if I do stop listening to the bad news." She paused to powder her face.

After she had gone he leaned forward and lowered his head onto the desk, closing his eyes. *Out there*, he thought, *almost all the way to the star slightly larger than the sun, with its smaller companion.* With his psychic vision, he searched . . . Now he saw it.

* * *

THE drumming of the main drive converter beat monotonously into Les' brain. He ran fingers over the stubbles on his chin, surveyed the confines of his small compartment, and returned his eyes hopelessly to the louvered cabinet, watching its indicator needles fluctuate alarmingly.

He removed another panel from the cabinet and began making adjustments with a screw driver.

"Find the trouble?" Matthews' strained voice sounded from the main compartment.

"Not yet," he shouted back.

"Try to hurry." Arlington, also in the other compartment, made no attempt to conceal the plea in his voice. "The whole damned universe outside the ports is going topsy-turvy!"

If he could only find the trouble! But then the mass-increase-

restrictor unit trouble could only be diagnosed properly in a laboratory. Supposedly, it was highly improbable that anything could go wrong while it was in use.

Matthews stepped through the hatch, stood beside Les.

"Any suggestions?" Les asked.

"I'm no electronics expert. I just pilot this crate . . . Is that the thing that's causing the trouble?"

Les adjusted another rheostat, watched for the effect on one of the indicators. There was none.

"Why is that thing so important?" Matthews asked. "And why is it causing all the hallucinations outside?"

"They're not hallucinations," Les said grimly. "Each time there's a power drop in the main circuit, our mass takes a surge upward. Greater mass, more resistance to motion and we slow down a bit. Also, we're displaced partially from the continuum whenever those needles flicker. That's what's distorting the scenery outside."

Matthews scratched his head. "It's still somewhat beyond me."

"If it wasn't for this thing," Les explained, "we wouldn't even be able to travel faster than the speed of light at all. Normally, as speed increases, mass increases. At the velocity of light, the mass of a moving body becomes infinite, offering infinite resistance to motion. There's nothing left for the



moving object to do but pop out of the continuum into some other plane that happens to be moving in the same direction at a compensating speed. There's an equation that governs it. It says m is equal to $m/0$ over the square root of one minus . . . "

"Skip it. I wouldn't know what you were talking about anyway . . . The chief must be a pretty smart joker to figure out things like that and . . . "

"Yeah," Les agreed. "He's pretty smart." He tried to conceive the true extent of the knowledge and ability Brad Darson possessed. He imagined any normal man

would have to spend generations learning as much and acquiring an equal amount of inventive genius.

Matthews joined Arlington in the other compartment. The needle fluctuated again, dipping lower on their ranges than before. Les glanced fearfully out the port. The stars did a fuzzy, mad dance, almost extinguishing themselves, then flared again to regain their normal brilliancy and clarity.

He wiped perspiration from his forehead and swore. Then, with trembling hands, he began making more adjustments.

Suddenly he tensed.

"Matthews?" he called in a low

voice. "Arlington?"

No answer.

He spun around. But there was no one in the compartment. The skin on the back of his neck tingled. There *was* someone in the compartment—or *something!* It was nothing he could see. But it was a presence he could sense unerringly.

Dumfounded, he dropped the screw driver and surveyed the cold, gray bulkheads.

Brad! he thought. It was as though Brad was in the compartment with him! Not physically. But in some inscrutable manner. It was as though he unmistakably sensed the *essence* of the man.

As he stood in the corner, rigid, not breathing, his eyes were again attracted by the needles. They were dipping in another fluctuation. They were beyond their previous low mark! It was apparent they would cover the range in their drop this time. There was smoke coming from the unit!

He closed his eyes and waited.

* * *

SHIVA looked up from his desk, an exuberant smile showing.

"When does the firecracker explode?" he eyed Wellman, seated across from him.

"Right now," Wellman said, looking at his watch.

"Every government—at the same time?"

"Every one. Plus every medium of news dissemination."

"You think they'll listen?"

Wellman leaned back, expanding his chest with a deep breath. "What would you do? Suppose you're the head of a country and the religious leader of almost two hundred million people throughout the world tells you the earth is going to be destroyed within two weeks unless you meet his terms—practically turn your country over to him?"

"At the same time your astronomers verify the fact there has been a change in the course of an approaching comet and collision with earth is inevitable. A large percentage of your country is already Shivaistic. You know that with doom approaching, the majority will turn Shivaistic."

Wellman spread his hands in a gesture of hopelessness. "You wouldn't resist long. I've a suspicion that you'd be among the representatives to attend that—uh, shall we say—surrender conference here next week."

Shiva folded his arms and stared thoughtfully across the room.

"How will the people take it?" he asked.

"Within a week there'll be four hundred million Shivaites. The number should skyrocket addition-

ally during the final week."

Shiva leaned back, contentedly. "Then we have two firecrackers exploding today."

Wellman looked questioningly at him.

"At approximately this minute the X-20 is being swished out of existence."

The attorney raised his eyebrows.

Shiva looked at the clock on the wall. "It's over now," he said with an air of accomplishment.

"When the news gets out," Wellman suggested, "it will be easy to get action through the federal courts—if you let the courts continue operating . . . Incidentally, they're closing the deal on those carriers today."

"Block it."

"But I don't know if I can! It's a private deal!"

"I said *block it!*"

"All right. I'll do it."

"You're damned right you will."

* * *

BRAD raised his head from the desk in time to watch Les materialize in the center of the room. The research director screamed in abject terror and threw both arms over his heavily shadowed face. His stiff, greasy coveralls failed to conceal the trembling of his legs.

For only a second Brad looked indecisively at him . . . If he would only remain frozen in fright and confusion for another few moments!

Closing his eyes again, he sent a perceptive probe leaping back to where the ship sped toward Alpha Centauri. But it was too late to teleport the other two crew members back! His psychic vision enfolded the craft even as it was seized in a tremendous, instantaneous expansion that seemed to increase its size and mass to limits which the entire universe could not contain. Then it was gone, without a trace.

Despondently, Brad rose and walked over to Les, pulled his hands away from his face.

But Les jerked his arms free and backed away, his eyes flashing terror.

"Get away from me, you devil!" His voice was low and hoarse as he cringed in the corner. Once more he clamped hands over his face and shook, sobbing.

"It's not supernatural, Les," Brad attempted to calm him. "There's a logical, scientific explanation. I don't know it all myself, yet. But . . ."

"Mad. That's it! I'm mad!" Les was whispering now. Unexpectedly, he addressed Brad, but his eyes stared dazedly through him. "If I could faint, I'd be out now. But there's some damned thread

of rationality that won't let go . . . Why can't I go completely crazy?" The last was shouted.

Brad reached out for him. But he jerked away again. His flailing arm struck a chair. He grasped it by the back-rest and swung it viciously over his head.

Making no attempt to dodge, Brad stood there pitying the man.

The stout legs of the chair crashed down on his head. Splintered wood flew about the room. As the jagged edges of the legs continued downward with the momentum of the swing they ripped the lapel off Brad's coat on one side, tore a strip out on the other.

But he felt no pain. There was no injury.

"*You're not hurt!*" There was even more incredulity in Les' voice—in his expression.

Brad watched his eyes roll back into his head and he caught him as he collapsed.

The door swung open and O'Connor swept in.

"What happened?" he demanded. "I heard a noise. I . . . *Les-ter Roberts!*"

"Everything's all right." Brad shouted angrily. "Get out."

"But Les! I—wasn't he . . ."

"He didn't make the flight."

"But—"

"Get out!"

O'Connor slammed the door behind him.

Brad propped Les in the desk chair and began slapping his face.

"The X-20's six minutes overdue on its last report," the intercom announced.

"Six minutes," Brad acknowledged automatically, snapping the instrument off.

A MINUTE later Les came to. It was apparent he was in better control of himself. But his eyes were still dazed as he regarded Brad in what must have been a forced stare.

"Don't try thinking," Brad advised. "Just listen. At least it can't seem as irrational as what just happened. But what I'm going to say can't be repeated—I wouldn't be telling you if this hadn't happened. Nobody must know about me until the stars belong to the race."

"I knew there was something supernatural about you," Les muttered absently, "when I found out . . ."

"Not supernatural," Brad corrected. "Superhuman at the most."

" . . . when I found out it wasn't your father who ran your enterprises before you arrived on the scene, but you in disguise—in a disguise that made you look twice your age."

"The story starts," Brad continued, "a hundred and forty-six years ago with two small boys, a squirrel and a dog in the woods.

At least, I thought it started there. Now, since the rock experiment failed, I'm not so sure . . . ”

Twenty minutes later he finished talking. Les' face was still blank. There were no questions. There would be—later, after the shock wore off, Brad knew.

He slapped Les' shoulder. “Now go to your quarters and get some rest.”

Les said nothing as he stumbled from the room.

Ten minutes later Carol returned.

“The ship's lost but Les is all right,” he said abruptly. “We got the wrong information from the Station. He changed his mind at the last minute; didn't make the trip.”

Relief flooded over her face. But was there as much relief as he had expected?

“Thank God,” she said.

But there was no smile. Again her features became an interlocking maze of taut lines.

“The comet's going to hit earth!” she announced, breathlessly.

“What!”

“In two weeks! It changed course. Shiva said he caused it. Astronomers have already verified it's going to hit.”

“And Shiva announced he would save the world if it turned to him?”

“If all governments recognize him as supreme authority over

earth, with unrestricted control over all countries . . . He's going to have all the heads of state come to him for a conference—a surrender conference.”

It was apparent she was dazed. She was staring through him.

He grasped her shoulders. “It won't happen,” he promised. “The comet won't hit and Shiva won't have the earth.”

She looked into his eyes and her brows twitched as though she was striving for comprehension. “I think I believe you, Brad,” she said.

They were both silent.

“Brad,” she said absently.

“Yes?”

“Brad, I . . . ”

“What is it, Carol?”

“Nothing . . . It wasn't anything important.”

CHAPTER VIII

LOOK at them out there.” Hartley stood at the window cleaning his fingernails with a pocket knife. “If it weren't for the troops around the landing field they'd rush this lab too.”

“Why shouldn't they?” Brad asked sullenly. “They didn't spare the other six labs.”

“I understand our people have had it plenty tough at all those installations.”

Brad nodded.

"Total losses?"

"All of them, from the reports we've received."

"Why, Brad?" Hartley seemed confused. "Why are they attacking the laboratories?"

"Look at that mob, Ray." He pointed. "They look like normal people. I guess most of them were, until three days ago—when a fanatic cult leader *and* their scientists told them their world was going to be destroyed. Their scientists said nothing at all could be done. The leader of the cult promised salvation—offered them their only hope. Now they are Shivaites, perhaps in a desperate sense, but still Shivaites."

Hartley was still confused. "And he wants your laboratories destroyed?"

"He's indicated science must go. Perhaps he's even passed the order around without giving publicity to it."

"Yeah," Hartley mused, "I remember that pronunciation: 'There must be a total return to religion; humanity must abandon the worldly'."

Brad watched a score of State Guard troops, wielding gas guns, advance on a mob that was congregating on the northwest edge of the field. They gave way before the uniformed men. The threat over, the troops extended the perimeter of their protective ring.

"Think they'll let up enough to give us a chance to dismantle the ships and transport them to the carriers?" Hartley asked.

"We're out of luck on the carriers too," Brad said glumly. "The deal is off. The government's holding them in a standby status, with the rest of the obsolete fleet units. I guess they figure they might need all available equipment within the next few days."

Hartley swore.

"At least," Brad rationalized aloud, "we were lucky enough to get our platform crew down."

"I don't call that luck," Hartley said acidly. "It would have been better if they'd stayed up there . . . Then Munstaff wouldn't have been able to spout off about the lost flight. That's responsible for some of those people being out there. It partly justified the cult's reasoning that such experiments were too dangerous."

Both men were silent for a moment. Then Hartley swore again, ramming his fist into his palm.

"Damn!" he exclaimed through clenched teeth. "Why don't they blast him out of that temple? Why . . ."

"The answer to that one," said a voice behind them, "has been provided by all the news services." Brad turned to face O'Connor.

"If you kept up with the news,"

the secretary closed the door behind him, "you'd know the main temple's been under attack all day by fleets of aircraft. But he's got some kind of gimmick that keeps the bombs from hitting."

"Sounds supernatural," Hartley suggested, only half jestingly.

"Most observers claim it is," O'Connor offered. "They say there's an invisible, impregnable dome surrounding the temple."

"When did he perform *this* miracle?" Hartley asked.

"Supposedly yesterday," O'Connor moved back to the door. "They say an attempt was made at assassination on the temple steps. Somebody emptied a pocket machine gun at him from a range of five feet."

"Five feet!" Hartley started.

"Five feet . . . but he wasn't hurt." O'Connor returned to the outer office.

For a long while Brad and Hartley stood in silence at the window, watching the deepening twilight. Floodlights went on around the field and around the cluster of laboratory buildings. Camp fires sprang into flickering existence among the throngs that waited impatiently outside the ring of uniformed men.

He was caught in the middle of an assortment of ironic contrasts, Brad thought. There were the floodlights and the rockets on the

one side, and the primitive campfires on the other. And there were the buildings dedicated to scientific advancement, permeated with the essence of hope and achievement—lined up against the aura of hate and intended destruction that squatted around the fires, waiting for the moment when it could engulf that which was so flimsily protected.

"There it is, Brad," Hartley pointed to the east.

Green like a brilliant emerald, shining like an evil leopard's eye in a dimly lighted jungle, the Fist of Shiva hung low on the horizon. It was not a pinpoint of light, as it had been on the night before. Now it was a small, well-defined disk.

Brad turned back to watch the mob. They were no longer ringed around their fires. Now they were standing, almost without exception—standing and staring at the comet.

LES made the connection between the two units in his private laboratory and raised the camouflaged receiver to his ear.

"You're ten minutes late," the voice said immediately.

"I couldn't break away to make contact," he explained.

"What about the complete report on that test flight? You promised it for yesterday."

"I've been correlating all the

material . . . And I still haven't decided whether I'll turn it in."

The voice spluttered angrily. "You've got to turn it in! So help me, if you refuse you'll regret it for the rest of your life!"

"Which might not be too long," Les laughed dryly.

"Why did you change your mind about making the flight at the last minute?"

"If you get the report, that'll be in it."

A terse, vulgar word exploded through the wire. "You've got to cooperate! Are you insane? Don't you realize . . . Who was the third man aboard? Why are there conflicting reports? What happened? How far did the ship get?"

"Look," Les exclaimed impatiently. "I'm as confused as hell on this whole thing. Actually, there was a point where I almost went insane on it. But I do know this much . . . Darson's okay. He's trying to do more for the human race than has ever been done before by any ten men. It's a completely altruistic expression. Perhaps I'll actually go crazy before it's over. But I think I'm doing the right thing by switching loyalty."

"What the hell difference does all that make now? Don't you know Darson's through? That every move he's tried has been blocked?"

"Then it's all over, as far as you're concerned," Les shrugged inwardly. "Why bother about a final report then?—Anyway, you have other sources."

"But none as close as you."

Les was thoughtfully silent. Only the hum of the carrier signal came through the wire.

Finally, the person on the other end of the wireless connection spoke:

"Until now my threats have seemed rather watery. I'm sure you'll think the one you're about to hear isn't . . . If I don't get that report within an hour I'll expose you to Darson."

Les' shoulders sagged hopelessly. What difference would one more betrayal make to Brad? Only a handful of words would satisfy his other obligation. Then, since there would be nothing more to report on, he could completely sever the connection. Then he could devote his entire time to helping Brad in any way he was able . . . Anyway, he could not conceive of how the complete information would injure Darson's cause.

"The flight, even considering the loss of the ship and two lives," he began, "was a complete success. Darson has achieved his goal of perfecting interstellar flight for the masses. In his struggle toward another achievement—one also intended to benefit humanity



—he has run into an obstacle. But I have an idea he will surmount it too. You see . . . ”

* * *

CAROL left the laboratory work bench and checked to make

certain she had locked the door. There was practically no chance that anyone would be passing in the lower level corridor this late at night. But she did not want to be discovered.

Reassured, she returned to the bench and turned up the spear of flame under the glowing bit of irregular metal.

It was white hot now. She backed away, wondering whether it was her imagination that was suggesting the mass was giving off even more heat than it had absorbed.

Eagerly, she removed her clothing, placing the articles neatly across the back of a chair while she watched the metal fragment attain an even more brilliant degree of incandescence.

Then she returned to the apparatus and extinguished the flame beneath the lump. Drawing closer, she let the heat from the glowing metal caress her body. She stooped so its rays could fall on her face, her shoulders. Raising her arms over her head, she turned around slowly and exposed her back to the warmth. She extended her arms and let the shimmering light play across her hands, her forearms, her biceps. Stretching upward on her toes, she felt the heat fall upon her thighs, her knees.

It was a pleasant warmth, a soothing sensation that seemed to

flow in through her skin and permeate the most inward parts of her body—comfortingly, invigoratingly.

Until the incandescence disappeared, she remained before the bench. Then she dressed herself quickly, as though, with a sudden sense of modesty, she had become aware of the impropriety.

Hesitatingly, she looked at the bare wall at the other end of the long laboratory room. Then, tensing, she closed her eyes.

Abruptly, she disappeared and materialized at the other end of the room. Repeating the process in reverse, she teleported back to the bench. For a moment her features were strained with indecision. Then again she disappeared, leaving the room empty. She was gone for not more than a minute.

But when she returned there were glistening snowflakes clinging to her blonde hair and lying on her shoulders. She shuddered with cold and felt her damp feet, still encrusted with snow.

There was surprise on her face, but only for a moment. It faded quickly as deep lines of concern moved in on her forehead. And suddenly she shivered once more. It was not caused by the cold to which she had subjected herself when she had teleported to and walked through the shimmering but normally invisible dome

that surrounded Laboratory D, then teleported four thousand miles to the polar region. The reaction was the result of fright.

A grim terror crept slowly over her and she bit her lips to keep them from trembling.

* * *

“WHY didn’t you report this before?” Shiva sat tensely before the communication unit on his desk.

“I didn’t think it was important,” came the voice from the speaker. “I was only mentioning it casually just then.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure she’s in love with him.”

“But, is *he* in love with *her*?”

“I rather imagine so.”

“What proof do you have?”

Laughter. “After all, I’m in a good position to observe these things.”

“How much does he love her?”

“Enough to try to convince her she’d be happier with another man because he thinks he isn’t good enough for her.”

“I think I understand . . . How does she react to this, this attempted sacrifice on his part?”

“She shows a good bit of reserve over the matter. I am not sure of the reason for that. Perhaps it’s because she resents the at-

tempted sacrifice."

Shiva drummed the desk with his fingers. "So he doesn't think he's good enough." He laughed sardonically.

"Apparently not . . . He once told his chief research director that he, the director, was a more normal human and deserved the girl more. But I didn't think you'd want to know about things like that. As long as we do our job here and . . ."

"Yes, I want to know about it—all about it!" Shiva slapped the desk with his hand.

"Well here's something else . . . Remember when you got the report Darson *disappeared* from his office—the day the comet prediction was verified? Well, she was in the office at the time and . . ."

"What! And she didn't say anything about it to anyone?"

"To no one. She entered about a half hour before he disappeared and didn't come out until after it happened. She was hiding in the lavatory."

Shiva leaned back and stared thoughtfully at the ceiling.

"Through with me yet?" The question came out of the speaker.

"Not yet. Stand by. I'm deciding on something."

Again he turned to his thoughts. Brad Darson—Clark Granet—in love! He laughed. Until now he had been sure that the only things

his brother regarded affectionately were science, research, laboratory buildings and rockets. But now it was something else. Something irreplaceable . . . Darson couldn't be hurt—physically. But, Shiva nodded appreciatively, there were other ways of bringing pain—deeper pain—than through bodily injury.

"Green," he called into the communication unit.

"Yes."

"You've got to get her outside."

"Outside?"

"Outside the reservation—outside the laboratory area. You'll have to decide how you can trick her into leaving. Perhaps you can say he's waiting out there. And I'll have to know the instant she is clear of the—laboratory area."

"How'll I do that?"

"Get one of the others to cooperate with you. Have him watch while you escort her outside. Then he'll be able to report when it's accomplished."

"But I don't understand."

"I have to get her here—in the temple. But all you have to concern yourself with is getting her away from the reservation. The rest will be taken care of."

"It might not be easy. It might take a day or two before the opportunity presents itself."

"Not more than two days!" It was a command.

CHAPTER IX

“IT’S down, I tell you!” The excited voice barked violently in the receiver on Brad’s desk. “It exploded and fell not a half hour ago!”

“How’d you find out?” Brad leaned closer to the communication unit.

“We’ve been tracking it on radar ever since we took the crew off three days ago.”

Carol gripped his arm. “What is it, Brad?”

“Space Station,” he said without looking around. Then he continued talking into the apparatus. “Where’d it fall?”

“In the Atlantic. No harm done. We started to notify you as soon as it exploded and began falling. But we were too busy calculating trajectory so we could get out warnings. Whatever hit it stopped its orbital speed completely.”

“The ships?”

“They’re all okay. They were in orbit five hundred miles farther out and in opposition with the Station.”

The informant was silent momentarily. Only his heavy breathing rasped in the speaker.

Brad cursed himself, realizing now the incaution he had displayed by thoughtlessly dropping the shield around the Station when he

removed the crew. The ships would have been down too, he knew, if he had made the mistake of discontinuing their shield.

Carol walked absently to the window and looked out. Below, a truck coasted down the exit ramp and headed across the lawn for the far corner of the wire-enclosed reservation. The driver seemed to be in a hurry. There was a single-crate load on the platform that bounced as the truck rolled.

Suddenly she started.

“When did it fall?” Brad’s voice rose again.

“A half hour ago, like I said. It was at about the same time that Nanking was being destroyed—just before Sydney was razed.”

“Okay,” Brad sighed. “Alert the coast crew and tell them to see if anything can be salvaged—if any of the ‘chutes worked.”

“Bowers already tried to reach the boys on the beach. It seems you don’t have a beach crew any longer—they went home to their families.”

Brad shut off the communicator.

Carol watched the man park the truck in the corner of the field and walk back toward the building. He was too far away for her to recognize him.

“What are you looking at?” Brad asked.

“Nothing . . . Shiva still destroying cities?” She returned to the

desk.

"If we can take his word for it," Brad looked down at his hands, "he's through now. Sydney was supposed to be the last to go."

"That made seven, didn't it?"

"Seven," he nodded. "I guess the destruction was spectacular enough to convince the governments of those countries they have no choice other than to be represented at the temple conference tomorrow."

A SHORT man in a black rubberoid apron entered. He held a sheet of paper in his hand.

"Your secretary wasn't there to announce me," he said apologetically, "so I just came busting in."

"What is it, Summers?"

"You still interested in Report No. A-1327?"

"At a time like this? You are kidding, of course."

Summers shrugged, wadded up the paper and threw it in the waste basket. "Just thought you might be waiting for it. It was due about a week ago." He turned and reached for the knob.

Brad looked up. "What was it on?"

"That chunk of metal you sent down for analysis. It was assigned to Garfield. But he walked off the job the next day. We found it in his desk, together with the

order, and I put it through the works this morning."

"Forget it," Brad said. "It's not important any more."

"Maybe we'd better find out what it was," Carol suggested. "Summers," she called, "what did the test show?"

The man laughed. "Permolite—we figured you were playing some kind of joke on us, chief."

"Permolite!" Brad lurched up. "You mean . . . ?"

"Sure. The same stuff the skin of your ships and the Space Station is made of."

"But—but," Brad sputtered, "that's impossible! I perfected that alloy myself only eight years ago!"

"You thought it was something else?"

Brad scratched the back of his neck. "Something at least a few hundred years old."

Summers laughed again. "Then the joke's on you."

Brad brushed past him and strode down the hall.

Carol followed. "Where are you going?"

"To storage. Come on."

"But, Brad . . ."

"No time to explain now."

They stepped into the elevator.

In the storage sub-level he raced to the bank of crated air restorers. Abruptly, he stopped and counted them.

"Eleven!" he exclaimed.

Then he quickly inspected the sides of each one.

"It's gone!" he shouted.

IN a corner room on the seventh floor of Laboratory D, a thin man, his actions erratic and uneasy, bolted the door and reached into a cluttered corner of a metal wall closet. His hand withdrew a small box with a grid in one end. He snapped a switch on the other end.

He waited a few moments, then he spoke into the box in a whisper.

"Shiva!"

"Yes?" The answer came from the louvered metal object.

"This is Green . . . It's done!"

"What?"

"The rock. You were right. There was more to it!"

"*There is!* Where . . . Now listen . . ."

"I don't need any instructions. I tell you it's all done. I remembered that on the day he came back with the specimen he was damned particular about a shipment of material coming in from another laboratory. I checked the equipment a few minutes ago. The rock was there!"

"*Where is it now?*"

"I had to act quickly. Darson was occupied and the rest of his staff had their hands full. I got

a truck and transported the crate to where you said—the northwest corner of the reservation—just inside the wire fence. I left it there in the truck just a few minutes ago. Had to pass his office window, but I'm sure he didn't see me . . . I didn't have time to camouflage it, so there's still a chance he might spot the box out there. I hope you've got things set up so you can get it away quickly."

There was a smile of accomplishment on the man's face. It was highlighted by rays from the setting sun that slanted in through the window and turned his eyeglasses into two eerie disks of sparkling illumination. He listened to instructions.

"Stay there," he was told. "I'll be with you in about five minutes."

SHIVA, trembling with anxiety, leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. Excited as he was, it was difficult to concentrate. But he forced himself to constrain his anticipation while he hurled out a perceptive probe.

The great silver dome loomed in the center of his psychic vision. Clustered around it were hundreds of civilians. Between them and the dome were troops. At four equally spaced points along the perimeter of the scintillating hemisphere, right angles of a barb-wire fence protruded. The straight

lines of the fence were concealed by the dome.

He narrowed his vision to include only the northwest corner. The truck was parked there. He looked on its platform. There was no crate! He looked under the vehicle and around it, but did not see what he sought. Hastily, he inspected the other three corners . . . Nothing!

In his office, Shiva snapped upright.

"You lied!" he shouted into the communicator. "It's not there!"

"But that's impossible! I just put it there! *Nobody* could have had time to move it. I still have the keys to the truck . . . Wait, I'll look out the window."

Shiva waited.

"The truck's there!" Green shouted presently. "But the crate's gone!"

"You failed, Green," Shiva said in a low, accusing voice. "You know what that means?"

"Wait! I tried my best!"

"*Do you know what that means?*"

"The girl—she might have noticed!"

"You failed on her too."

"I'll get her out there," Green blurted. "I'll get her out there *today!*"

"You were supposed to get her out by yesterday."

"Today! It'll be today!"

"*Find that rock! Get that girl!*"

Angrily, Shiva slammed the "off" switch down on the communicator.

"Wellman!" He shouted commandingly.

"Yes," the attorney entered from the anteroom.

"I want Laboratory D destroyed! Now!"

"Any particular way?"

"Have the temples nearest the scene flood that mob around the laboratory with the most fanatic members of their congregations. Instruct each priest that his temple will be destroyed, and him with it, if Laboratory D isn't a shambles by tomorrow night. I'll get in there if I have to have every technician killed! By tomorrow night I don't want anything left that Darson would think worth protecting."

"The troops? There isn't any time left to fix their withdrawal with the government."

"We'll *own* the troops by tomorrow afternoon. If we don't, to hell with them . . . Just get enough Shivaites there to surge in over their bodies!"

* * *

A LIMP hand against his forehead, Brad leaned back listlessly against a crate.

"Shiva!" he whispered. "He got

it!"

Carol shifted uneasily, looked away from his eyes.

"How did he know it was here?" His voice was still low, incredulous. "How did he arrange the substitution? How did he get it out when he learned what it was?"

"There must be others like Chet—in Lab D," Carol suggested hesitatingly.

"But only Les knew I brought it here."

"Others *must* have been in on it. Otherwise, how else could you have gotten it in here?"

"The loyalty of the men who brought it up can't be questioned," he continued thoughtfully. "Besides, only they and Les knew where it came from. There was no way Shiva could have guessed its significance! Only those three men had the information to betray me . . . those three men and—you."

"What is its significance, Brad?" Carol asked uneasily.

"You!" he repeated, his face reflecting confusion. "Those three men and *you* were the only ones!"

"Brad," she backed away. "You don't think I . . ."

His eyes focused on infinity as his thoughts went back to the day he had ineffectively fought the inexorable advance of the Fist of Shiva. His superconscious had returned to his office and he had

paced the floor there a few minutes before teleporting to the site of the temple. Now he recalled the toe of his shoe coming in contact with a note pad, sliding it under the desk . . . It had been Carol's pad! Why had it been on the floor? Had she dropped it at a moment of surprise—perhaps over seeing his torporific form in the chair?

"You saw it!" he said accusingly. "You dropped your note pad when you saw me in the chair! Then you left without saying anything to anyone. And you hid your surprise expertly!"

"I—I don't know what . . ."

He stared piercingly into her eyes. It was there! It was all there—the guilt, the deceit, the cunning. She was one of them!

Brad fell back against the crate, stunned.

"You—a Shivaite! And to think that all the time I trusted you—more than anyone else in the entire organization. Even more than Les!"

The cunning left her eyes and for a moment he thought there was pity in them. The impression only spawned rage in his chest. He tightened his fists and his features became rigid with scorn.

"And to think I actually fell in love with you!" The words were bitter. "I loved you enough to sacrifice you to another man be-

cause you could never be happy with me—not for more than a few years.”

She smiled broadly. Was she ridiculing him? Was she blatantly expressing her derision?

“Carol!” he shouted, anger again surging within him. “Why did you do it?”

She advanced and placed a hand on his trembling arm. “I could never be happy with you, Brad? Not for more than a few years?—Come with me, to my laboratory.”

She backed away.

Then she disappeared.

IT was as though a lethal bolt of psychokinetic energy had seared his mind.

Paralyzed, not breathing, Brad was staring at the spot where Carol had stood smiling unaccountably, even appearing alluring despite his new-found hate.

Then she had disappeared! She had dematerialized, just like . . . She had said, “Come to my laboratory.” She had *teleported* to her laboratory!

But it was impossible!—Unless it was a trick . . . That was it, he assured himself. It was a trick. She had had access to the meteorite! She had exposed herself to its incandescent glow! *Then it had worked!* His hypothesis had been correct!

Whether it was a trick or not,

he must follow.

In her laboratory, he whirled around. She was behind him.

“What . . . ?” he began.

But then his eyes focused on the crate behind her—the one with the red lettering. He attacked the wing-nuts on its lid.

“The rock’s in there,” Carol said, still smiling. “When you were talking with radar I watched a truck drive it toward the edge of the dome. I couldn’t see who was driving it. But at least I was able to teleport it back up here before the truck went through the dome.”

Bewildered, he snatched off the lid and stared at the meteorite.

“But—but, I . . .” Confusion had paralyzed his throat. Was she *actually* on his side after all?

“It won’t take long to tell my story. Clark Granet,” she said.

Another bolt of bewilderment rammed into his conscious.

“You—you know me?”

“Yes.” Again she was smiling mystically. “And you should know *me* too. Perhaps you would—if I hadn’t dyed my hair and altered my appearance . . . for the sixth time, incidentally.”

“Who . . . ?”

“You once told me you didn’t want to take a scholarship to the university because ‘a lot can happen in four years; people you know can get married, for one thing.’

And I believe I said, 'I don't think a girl ought to get married before she's twenty-one.' At that time I didn't realize I meant before she's a hundred and twenty-one."

"*Elaine!*" he gasped. "*Elaine Barrow!*"

"**Y**ES, Clark. I'm like you. I didn't know we were similar until I recognized you accidentally four years ago. Even then I would have thought that the resemblance was just a coincidence. But then, there was another person who resembled someone else I once knew—Shiva—Russell Granet. The double coincidence couldn't be ignored.

"I joined your staff—as a spy. You were right when you suspected that much. But I was spying only for myself. I wanted to know why I could extend my vision anywhere in the world; why I could teleport for short distances—even as far as fifty feet; why I was growing old at the rate of about one year every twenty-five years; why I had to live in one place ten or fifteen years, then move on, changing my name and appearance so people wouldn't begin to suspect.

"Then this Shiva burst on the scene a generation ago. And, in the past few years, he started boasting of immortality, not trying to hide it. Then I found you.

"If I ~~was~~ ^{were} to learn all the answers, it would have to be under-cover and either from you or Russell. Both of you had apparently accepted your superhuman aspects and abilities and had settled down in some sort of definite plan.

"But I couldn't let you know who I was. How could I know that both of you weren't being motivated by ulterior purposes? It was even possible you were working together in a camouflaged threat over the rest of the race . . . At that time I had no conception of the tremendous power you both possessed.

"I considered the possibility you were working together even more seriously when I watched you teleport to the edge of the dome surrounding Russell's temple and go in for a talk with him.

"But I was really confused when I looked in on his displays of destructive powers and your ability to teleport yourself and other objects inconceivable distances. It was doubtless that both your powers were equal. And in many ways I was like you and your brother. But why was there the difference?—I had no power, no destructive power, at all.

"It was when you brought up the meteorite that I learned *why!* When I saw the sample and location of the thing, I remembered. . . I remembered a scene of two boys

running through the woods; a dog following close by; a flaming meteor crashing down; the boys cringing from the heat of the thing.

"You see, Clark, I was in that picture too. But I was so far behind the boys, not wanting them to see me following, that I felt little heat from the object.

"When I saw the setup you were going to use to experiment with the specimen from the meteorite, I guessed that rays from the incandescent glow of the thing were what would do the trick. I experimented to make certain. I was right. After the test I was able to teleport great distances. But still I had only little assault power. I guess it takes considerable exposure to increase that . . . It's not that I want power—I don't. I don't even want the ability to teleport or see without looking. It would have been better, even, if none of us had enjoyed any unnatural longevity at all."

BRAD was reeling under the effects of the disclosures. "And you didn't tell me about it?"

"I couldn't—not until I was sure that you weren't actually aligned with Russell, or that you weren't out for some sort of world control yourself. Not until I was sure I wouldn't be locking myself up in an execution chamber by letting myself be known.

"I would have told you several days ago, as I said. But watching you go to Russell confused the entire issue. But I didn't give up hopes then—or even abandon my 'spying.' I even obtained your specimen of the rock and ran it through a metallurgical test to find out why it didn't work for you. That was why I was so anxious a few minutes ago for you to hear out Summers on his report. Again I was becoming convinced that the entire series of events wasn't a scheme by you and your brother.

"You see, before then I suspected that even if you weren't aligned with Russell, you wanted the rock as a means of making yourself more powerful than him and usurping his dominant position. If that were the case, then I would be caught in the middle of a power squeeze and would be asking for elimination. You see, I can't control comets and raze cities and hurl bolts of destruction. I can't even erect domes that thought stuff can't go through—or other domes invulnerable to bombs."

"Elaine Barrow," he murmured. Trembling, he took her hand.

Then she was crying. Her throat convulsed with deep sobs and she shut her eyes to hold back the tears. Trying to hide her face, she came to him and pressed her cheek against his chest, clinging desperately to him.

"It's just a reaction," she explained bravely.

He held her around the waist. "Go ahead and cry it out."

"Oh, Clark," she cried. "It's been torture—the nostalgia that stayed for a century; then finding someone like myself and having to work against him . . . And now—this—the chaos, the comet!"

He held her close. "It'll be all right now, having the meteorite and being able to experiment with it. I'll get more power! Additional exposure is bound to result in more power. Then his shields won't stop me . . . But we've got to find out who has been working against us in the laboratory. We can't let *anyone* know about the rock . . . If only we knew who brought it outside the shield!"

She used his handkerchief to dry her cheeks. "I'm sorry I failed on that. It would have been simple to use the power to look into the truck and see who it was at the wheel, but I guess I was too elated to think of doing it . . . too elated in realizing that since you were actually being sabotaged by Russell's agent, it was even less probable that you were working *with* him."

"*Mr. Darson . . . Mr. Darson . . . Mr. Darson.*" It was the public address system in the corridor.

He went out the laboratory and to the nearest hallway responder

box. "This is Darson."

"Mr. Darson," O'Connor's voice was almost shaking, "the troops have invaded the building!"

"I'll be right down."

CAROL followed Brad into his office. An Army officer sat at his desk.

"I'm General Lampson, US Army. We've superseded the state troops here."

Brad looked suspiciously at the two sergeants on either side of the desk.

"You have the necessary legal documents to show your authority?" he asked.

"Hell, man," the general replied irritably, "I don't need any documents. What's going on all over the world isn't a Sunday school picnic . . . Can you fly one of those crates of yours?"

"No," Brad lied. "I hire men to do that."

"That doesn't quite correspond with previous information we've been given . . . Sergeant." Lampson nodded to the man on his right.

The non-commissioned officer sprang around the desk. Before Brad could move he clamped handcuffs on his wrists.

"We've already taken into custody four of your employees." The general glanced at notations on the desk pad. "They are Les-

ter Roberts, David Schoneman, Herve Masters and Cyril Pane. They will be held on a standby basis to fly four of those ships on the field. You will fly the fifth at our direction . . . Sergeant, take him to confinement."

"Brad!" Carol raced to him.

"Don't worry." He winked as the sergeant led him out the door. "I'll see you soon."

CHAPTER X

O'CONNOR squirmed uneasily in the leather waiting chair in the outer office.

Carol, seated beside him, studied his face as he stared across the room at the colonel who occupied his desk. The secretary's thin form was rigid with unspoken protest.

He leaned toward the girl. "Do you suppose they're really acting under government orders?" he asked. "Or are they taking over so they can use the ships personally?"

"I can't see that it makes any difference."

There was indecision on his face. "Miss Sanders, I'm afraid there can't be any safety for us here now. Again I ask, won't you let me try to get you off this reservation? If the mob out there gets enough courage to attack the troops, there may be a good deal of trouble. I'm sure Mr. Darson

would feel easier if he knew you were away from here entirely."

Inattentively, she shook her head.

O'Connor sighed impatiently and reached to the vacant seat on the other side of him. He got a small, louvered box and placed it on his lap.

"What's that?" Carol showed interest.

"Mr. Tatum put it together for me in the radio lab so I could keep track of what happens outside now that our communication channels are down . . . It picks up audio signals from the commercial stations."

He turned on the set and rotated its only dial.

Carol cupped her chin in her hand and closed her eyes.

Brad, she thought, can you hear me?

The answer came immediately, *Yes, Carol.*

What's happened? Why . . . ? I'm all right. I'm in a sixth floor room with Les and the two pilots.

They can't hold you!

Of course not. But I've got to wait until I can escape by normal means. If they get the impression I used supernatural force I'd never be Mr. Darson again.

Oh.

I've already transported the rock out of the laboratory. It's in the woods. As soon as I can get

free we'll go there.

No more impressions came from him.

The colonel went into the inner office and closed the door.

Sounds began issuing from the speaker of the box O'Connor held . . . tumultuous roaring, the muffled hissing of a nuclojet's engines. The sound intensity diminished and an announcer's voice broke in:

"These are scenes of the final stages in the destruction by Shiva fire of the city of New York. No comment is necessary."

Carol was glad the little box couldn't bring in the picture too. It wouldn't be nice to look at.

Again only riotous sound crackled from the speaker. After almost a minute, it faded abruptly.

"And now," the announcer began once more, "the Presidential Mansion—where President Lindarn has just announced the United States will be represented at the Central Temple conference tomorrow. The announcement followed by less than an hour the disclosure by Argentina that it, too, would send its chief of state. Argentina was the second to last nation to submit to the demand for a world meeting . . ."

Sound welled in the audio receiver—angry shouts, shrill whistles, the bark of gunfire.

The noise attained stentorian proportions.

Carol stiffened . . . Not all the sound was coming from the receiver. There were other whistles lusty shouts, more gunfire—outside the laboratory building.

The inner office door burst open and General Lampson, followed by the colonel, raced into the corridor, their sidearms drawn.

Carol rushed to the window. A hundred spotlights, casting their swinging rays from atop every building, illuminated the field around the laboratory enclosure.

A score of rapid-fire gun placements spat ferocious streaks of blazing lead toward the wire fence—breached in a dozen places. The hundreds of attackers who spilled through the gaps returned even more gunfire than was being hurled at them.

"It's too late, Miss Sanders," O'Connor reproved in a trembling voice. "I told you you should have let me take you outside."

Clinging to the now silent receiver, he mopped his forehead with a handkerchief. His trembling hand dislodged his eyeglasses. They clung to one ear for a moment, then fell to the floor, shattering. But he made no attempt to retrieve them.

Carol watched the masses sweep over the gun positions and race for the buildings. Most of the lights were out now. But still the scurrying figures were easily dis-

cernible in the weird green illumination that shone down from the Fist of Shiva, almost overhead, larger than anything in the night sky except the moon.

“BRAD,” Les whispered, “if you’ve found the rock and if you can use it to make yourself stronger than that damned comet-hurler, let’s get the hell out of here!”

“As soon as . . .”

“I know! As soon as that conference is finished in the hallway so you’ll have a chance to break the door down. What difference does it make if we just disappear? To hell with considering the future . . . There might not be one!”

Brad looked at the three pilots who stood by the window watching the restless crowd in the field. Then he closed his eyes. “It won’t be long. They’re getting ready to break up in the hall now.”

“But what if they leave a guard out there?”

“I’ll find a way to attract him down to the other end of the hall.”

“I don’t like it. Carol . . .”

“She can take care of herself.”

“Since you told me she’s like you, I don’t doubt that at all. But she’s just a girl. She still doesn’t know all the tricks you know.”

Brad laughed.

“She can be hurt, can’t she?” Les persisted. “And you’ve admitted there are still Shiva spies in the laboratory. Suppose . . .”

Brad frowned suddenly. “All right . . . Let’s get to work.”

The night air outside was suddenly a sea of riotous sound. Gunfire drowned it out.

“They’re attacking!” Les shouted.

Brad turned abruptly toward the window, his eyes focused on the three pilots.

The trio disappeared.

Even before he heard Les’ gasp, he explained, “I sent them out near the road where they’ll be safe.”

He turned, faced his research director and closed his eyes in concentration. When he opened them he said, “O’Connor was with her. I teleported both of them out in the woods with the rock . . . Let’s go.”

THEY materialized in front of Carol, who was looking helplessly at O’Connor. The secretary, his eyes casting frighteningly around him, was backing away from the girl and the large, pitted mass of metal.

“You should have left him there,” Les suggested. “Looks like he isn’t going to be easy to handle.”

“He’ll snap out of it, I hope

... O'Connor! Don't be frightened. I . . . "

"You're like Shiva!" the secretary gasped, still clinging to his receiver. "You can do miracles too!"

It might not be as bad as he imagined it would, Brad thought. "Yes, I'm like Shiva. So is Carol Sanders." He took her hand. "But it's all a rational process. And . . . "

Les stepped between the two men. "You get on with what you have to do, chief. I'll take care of him . . . You see, O'Connor, it's this way . . . "

Brad and Carol went over to the rock. For a moment he stood before it, staring intently at its charred and rough surface. It cast a double shadow on the ground on either side—one, its silhouette thrown by the bright light of a gibbous moon, the other, a well-defined outline etched by the almost equally bright comet-shine.

"If only I had time to experiment," he said regretfully. "For almost thirty years I've dreamed of placing a subject before its heat—a human subject! Of seeing . . . "

"But you're already certain!" Carol objected. "You, me, Russell . . . And I went before it a second time."

"All I want is a chance to find out if the power it gives can be

utilized immediately . . . if, when a person is placed before its intense glow, he can at once have the benefit of protracted vision, teleportation, telekinesis, psychokinetic action. Or whether there must be a long period before the power coalesces within an individual; before he can use it.

"You see, it took us—Russell and me—years before we achieved full use of the power. But I feel that was because we didn't suspect it was there and had to wait until we accidentally discovered its various effects. On the other hand, if a person is subjected to the experiment, and told that he can teleport himself, will he be able to do so immediately?"

Les walked out into the clearing. "Sounds like an interesting test. I'll be your subject. O'Connor can stand his bewilderment a little longer."

"Thanks," Brad acknowledged, "but I'd rather do the ground work with someone a bit less valuable."

"It can't be dangerous," Carol suggested. "It didn't hurt us. It didn't hurt me the second time."

Brad paused indecisively. "Okay, Les," he said finally. "You're covered." He turned toward the rock.

But Carol caught his arm. "Can we risk the loss of time?"

"We're not risking anything. I can expose myself at the same

time that I learn what I want to know."

"Then," Les reminded, "all you have to do is find a way to heat that thing up." He pointed to the meteorite.

Without answering, Brad stared at one edge of the mass. An intense aura engulfed one of the larger protuberances and the clearing was suddenly illuminated by the fire-like manifestation.

But it was extinguished abruptly as Brad looked around. "Where's O'Connor?" he asked.

Les surveyed the clearing. "The last I saw of him he was following me back here, still clutching that little black box."

"Box? What box?"

"An audio receiver," Carol explained. "He's been listening to telecasts with it. Said Tatum made it so he could follow world events after we lost contact with our outside sources."

"Tatum!" Brad snapped. "Tatum was transferred to Lab A over a month ago!"

Les swore, spun around.

But O'Connor was nowhere in sight.

* * *

"**S**PEAK louder, Green," Shiva instructed over the communicator. "I can hardly hear you."

"I can't speak any louder," the

whispered voice disclosed. "I can be overheard."

"Where are you?"

"Somewhere in the woods — a few miles south of Laboratory D, I believe. There's a mountain range . . ."

"What! What are you doing?"

"I have the rock! I have the girl!"

Shiva gripped the corner of his desk. His hands were white, the skin taut. "I'll tell you how you can help me get a fix on your location. All you have to . . ."

"You didn't tell me he was like you," Green said bitterly.

"That's not important now. Concentrate on . . ."

"But it is important. He can kill me any second. You should have warned . . ."

"Look, you've got to think!"

"You didn't tell me the girl was like you too. Did you know that? Were you holding that from me too?"

Breathless, his pulse pounding, Shiva clutched the robes in a tight wad in front of his chest. "The—girl—too?"

"Now that I know he's like you," Green continued, "I can understand why you fought him so much. You knew what he was but you were afraid to try to get him out of the way because he has as much power as you . . . So you hired us to nip at the heels of

Goliath, so you wouldn't get hurt." There was acid in his voice. "I'm through. You can get yourself another sucker!"

"Green," Shiva was unconcerned with the other's emotions. "Are you sure she's like him?"

"You know she is. A person with that kind of power couldn't exist in the same world without everybody else with the same power knowing about it . . . And to think I've been playing with a double-dose of hellfire!"

"You can't quit, Green!" Shiva shouted.

"The hell you say."

"Don't go! Listen — I'll give you the power too!" The exhortations were frantic. "If she's got the power, he gave it to her! With the rock! That's how he did it! I can give you the same power with the same rock! You've got to help me get the rock. And the girl, too! With the rock we can destroy him! And her too! Then there'll be just the two of us . . . Green! Green! O'Connor!"

Only the background crackling of the communication circuit answered him.

"O'Connor!" he shouted desperately.

After an eternity. "I'm still here."

"You'll help? You'll stay with me?" Shiva's voice was desperate.

"You make the arrangement too

enticing . . . I'll describe this location."

CHAPTER XI

LES tried to subdue the noise of his progress as he raced through the dark shadows of the trees.

Suddenly, he checked his dash. Ahead, in a small area bathed in a shaft of moonlight stood O'Connor. The metal box was pressed close to his face.

Slowing his pace cautiously, Les continued forward noiselessly. Now he could hear O'Connor speaking into the communications unit:

" . . . make the arrangement too enticing. I'll describe this location."

Les sprang the last few feet, crashing his fist into the side of O'Connor's face. The blow landed just as the secretary detected the approach and as he turned, startled.

His head snapped to one side and the box flew from his grasp, crashing against a tree. He fell limply and lay on the ground, not moving.

"I found him, Brad," Les shouted. "No damage done."

"Hold on," Brad called back. "I'm coming. Did he report our position?"

"No." Les sent his heel crashing

through the thin metal side of the receiver. "He was about to, but I stopped him in time."

Brad arrived as Les swung O'Connor, still unconscious, over his shoulder and started back for the clearing.

"You can warm up that rock," he told Brad, who was beside him now. "We've got the guinea pig."

MORE than a quarter of the surface of the metallic object glowed brilliantly under Brad's steady stare. Les and Carol had backed away from the immediate vicinity of the incandescing mass. But the full, brilliant glow bathed O'Connor's limp form, on the ground only a few feet away from the rock.

"Aren't you through yet?" Carol called urgently.

"Almost. This is a rather crude way of transmitting the power." He spoke through the side of his mouth so he would not have to turn from his task. "It can be worked out on an intravenous basis so the transference will be thousands of times more efficient and more economic. At this rate the meteorite wouldn't last for more than a hundred subjects before there'd be nothing left to it."

"When are you going to start dealing this juice out on a universal basis, Brad?" Les asked.

"Not for a long time—perhaps

two or three hundred years. First, humanity's going to get used to having the galaxy as its heritage so they don't destroy it in a fight for this one world."

O'Connor groaned.

Brad took his eyes from the meteorite. The glow began to fade.

O'Connor raised to his knees. Then he saw Brad and fear contorted his features.

"You won't be hurt," Brad assured. "This isn't going to take any explaining. You already seem to know almost as much as we do . . . I've subjected you to an experiment to give you some special powers. You are capable of projected vision. You can teleport yourself. You've also received the sense of telepathic communication."

O'Connor rose hesitatingly. "You aren't going to kill me?"

"It's more important to experiment with you." Brad did not speak the words.

Immediately, he received O'Connor's impulses of surprise. "It's true!" he told Brad telepathically. "I can do it!"

"Teleport to the other side of the rock."

The secretary disappeared and materialized at the spot where Brad had indicated.

"Good God!" he cried incredulously. "I'm—I'm not human!"

I'm like you! I'm like Shiva!"

"What else can you do?" Brad asked.

Les and Carol came forward and stood beside him.

"I can travel instantaneously! I can talk without speaking! I can see without looking—thousands of miles!" O'Connor's eyes were closed and the excitement in his voice was uncontrollable. "I'm looking now—a *thousand miles away!*"

Carol grasped Brad's arm. "Kill him, Brad!" she whispered urgently. "Kill him—now! He's evil—*like Russell!*"

"You made a mistake, chief," Les grasped his other shoulder.

An undeniable sense of foreboding surged within him and, without hesitating, Brad gathered his own psychokinetic powers and hurled a bolt at O'Connor. The site where he stood flared brilliantly, even outshining the still incandescent meteorite.

Les sighed. "That was close—too close. He might have . . ."

"He's gone!" Brad exclaimed.

"Thank God," Les added.

"No . . . he wasn't killed! He teleported away—just before the energy struck the spot!"

Les swore.

"Oh, Brad," Carol gasped. "What's he going to do? How . . .?"

"It's not all that serious," he said. "I only suggested that he

was capable of harmless applications of the power. He still doesn't know about his destructive energy—about the shields."

"But suppose he goes to Shiva?" the girl asked frantically.

Brad hadn't considered that. If O'Connor had gone there to report, he realized, it was doubtless that Russell would come to the site of the rock without delay.

* * *

"GREEN!" Shiva's face was flushed and his hands were wadded into whitened fists as he pleaded with the communication unit. "Green! O'Connor! Answer me!"

He was hoarse now, but again he jiggled the switch and called out for his agent.

It was no use. The connection had been broken.

Despondently, he dropped into his chair and buried his face in his hands.

He continued to shake. But now it was from disillusionment, apprehension, uncertainty . . . For over a century it had been Russell Granet and Clark Granet, he thought. The power that they possessed was possessed by no other person in the universe.

But now, suddenly, there were three of them: Russell Granet and Clark Granet and a girl. He caught

his breath with a sudden, demoralizing comprehension . . . There were three *now*. But soon there would be four! Then five! Then a dozen! A hundred! A million!

Tomorrow the world would have been his. At the most, it would have been his and Clark's, considering that he might eventually have to make a concession to equal power. But now it would belong to three. And soon it would belong to three million! *Soon the total three billion of the world's population!*

He laughed a dry, sarcastic laugh. "Three billion Shivas," he murmured. "Everybody a Shiva. Everybody a superman . . . like Clark wanted!"

Tears were on his cheeks as he rose, his shoulders sagging. He'd leave! Another world—another galaxy—anywhere. Any course would be better than remaining and watching the materialization of Clark's plans.

But suddenly he stiffened and rammed his fist down on the desk. Hope returned and with it came rationality, clearer thinking . . .

Maybe it wasn't too late! If he could get the rock, then there would be no more Shivas! He could never hope to eliminate Clark. But the girl—perhaps she wasn't as strong as him. She couldn't be! She could be eliminated! Then there would be only Russell and

Clark once more.

Where had O'Connor said they were? — South of Laboratory D, only a few miles away from the research facility. Abruptly he dropped the shield of psychokinetic energy that protected the temple from metaphysical intrusion. He would find them with protracted vision.

Now he was looking down on the general area. There was the laboratory buildings, ablaze with gutting fires. Five broken space ships lay on their sides, where they had been toppled by the sheer weight of surging, climbing humanity.

He sent his circle of vision sweeping southward.

But suddenly he sensed an abnormality in his office. Abandoning the search, he opened his eyes.

O'Connor stood before his desk! "Green!" Shiva exclaimed. "I'm trying to find them. Where are . . ."

But suddenly he jolted under the effects of a terse, painful realization.

"You teleported here!" he rasped. "You're like us!"

O'Connor smiled. "Yeah, I'm like you now. I don't have to take orders any more. I don't have to bow down to a damned fanatic who thinks he's the Lord God Almighty . . . I've watched you manipulate your damned miracles twenty years now. And now I'm going to start working a few myself."

O'Connor was the fourth one! Shiva threw a damp hand over his forehead and staggered back. *The lowly O'Connor—a travel agency clerk until he joined the Central Temple staff!*

Uncontrollable rage exploded within Shiva. He turned on O'Connor while he felt the vortex of destructive energy swirling up from the depths of his superconscious. Then he lashed out hatefully with the lance of death power.

O'Connor disintegrated where he stood.

Shiva gasped unbelievably, then smiled. It was not too late! The third and fourth Shivas were not equal in power with the first and second. They could be destroyed!

Again his hypervision sought out the area south of the laboratory. After a moment's search he saw the bright glow emanating from the clearing in the woods.

The glowing object was the rock! The rock in its entirety! And it was enclosed in no shield that would prevent him from teleporting it away.

He saw the two men and the girl standing nearby, but he ignored them as he reached out to cloak the meteorite with a blanket of teleportive force.

BRAD did not try to constrain the sense of urgency that well-

ed within him once more as he stared at the rock. But this time he did not cast out the energy that would heat it to incandescence. Instead he summoned the special power to erect an impregnable shield around it—a screen of force that would make it as much an undisturbable object to Russell as the Fist of Shiva was an undisturbable object to him.

In only a moment, the undetectable force had coalesced around the still warm meteorite.

But before he could turn around, Les shouted hoarsely.

"She's gone!" He stumbled backward. "She disappeared!"

Frenziedly, Brad scanned the area. But he could see Carol nowhere. Then he closed his eyes. Now he was looking at the Central Temple. There was no shield around it! He looked into the office.

Russell was there—*with Carol!* She lay stiff on the floor.

Brad teleported into the temple office.

"I knew you'd come," Shiva said.

Brad bent over the girl, grasped her shoulders. But he couldn't lift her!

"I'm afraid you'll find she's adequately shielded against any influence by you." Shiva stood calmly behind his desk, his hands spread palms downward upon it.

Brad turned upon him. "Let her go!" he demanded.

"Perhaps I shall . . . I hoped you would follow. That's why I made it possible for you to teleport into the temple. I thought perhaps we might be able to—uh, bargain."

Puzzled, Brad remained silent.

"You see, I was going to teleport the rock here instead. I was going to place a similar shield around it. But I'm afraid I was a second too late. Just as I reached out for it, you erected your screen . . . So I took the next best thing—the girl. I suspected she would be a good bargaining point."

Not breathing, Brad stared at him.

"You release the rock," Shiva continued with a shrug. "You let me bring it here and slap my own shield around it . . . and I'll release her."

Brad drew closer. "And what . . . ?"

"If you prefer not to accept the agreement," Shiva interrupted, "then I shall allow you to see her destroyed . . . She isn't very powerful, you know. She hasn't yet achieved a personal protective coating, like you and me—otherwise I would have been unable to place her here."

Indecision held Brad immobile.

"You see, Clark," Shiva said em-

phatically, "I'm quite determined that although there are three of us, there will be no more. O'Connor was here a moment ago. I've destroyed him."

Brad groped desperately for a stalling point.

"Do we make the deal?" Shiva demanded.

Brad stared at Carol. Almost instinctively he had no doubt that his brother would not allow her to live after he got the meteorite.

Suddenly Brad turned and faced him again.

"It's too late for bargaining. Russell." He smiled confidently. "You're one half a day too late. I treated O'Connor tonight as part of an experiment—I made certain that he did not learn the total extent of the power at his disposal. I didn't even let him know that he could erect a shield around himself that would make any attack by you fruitless. O'Connor was a spy. I wasn't very considerate of him."

"But, I was much more considerate of the safety of the one hundred employes of mine who were transformed this afternoon . . . They are all as invulnerable as I."

"You're lying!" Shiva gasped. "There were only four of us. Now there are only three."

"Of course I'm not lying," Brad forced conviction into his voice. "I wouldn't take any chances with

her life . . . I'll contact the first of the one hundred telepathically. You can listen in."

Brad prayed that Les had been close enough to the glowing meteorite in the woods to absorb some of its power.

"Les," he sent out the thought impulse. "*Les Roberts. This is the first chance you've had to try out telepathy. Les Roberts, this is Darson.*"

"Chief! Brad!" came the answer. "*Where are you. What . . . ?*"

Shiva jolted. "*It's true!*" Dazed, he dropped into his chair.

But suddenly he rose again, scorn in his expression. "I've lost a world, Clark," he said. "But *so have you!*"

He fell forward across his desk.

Brad touched his shoulder . . . Like granite! His superconscious was detached from his physical form!

CHAPTER XII

COLLAPSING on the floor, Brad let his parapsyche streak from his physical being — upward and outward.

Now the earth was below. Above and all around him shimmered the celestial sphere, ablaze with its planets and myriad stars and the flaming sun with its coronal tongues vacillating in the black

space about it.

Then his searching perception orientated itself and he looked upon the huge ball of green hell—the Fist of Shiva. But even as he looked, the comet surged forward in a frightening display of speed.

But where was Russell?

As though in answer to the unspoken question came the thunderous, sustained laugh in a telepathic impulse that defied the universe.

And the comet lurched forward in another burst of acceleration.

Brad collected the entirety of his psychokinetic force and hurled it in sustained pressure against the comet. But the blasting energy was still powerless against the shield!

Now he could sense Russell's malevolent presence as the impelling force behind the sphere of destruction. Brad drew closer and to one side of the onrushing Fist of Shiva and, for the first time, his protracted vision could perceive the vague area of distorted ether that signified the space occupied by his brother's parapsyche. It seemed to be attached to the rear of the comet.

Brad hurled a frantic barrage of vicious explosive force at the insubstantial figure. But there was no effect . . . The psychic entity was as adequately protected against him as was the comet.

And all the while the Fist of Shiva gained momentum in its rush toward the earth.

Abruptly, Brad imagined himself, the entirety of the psychic being that was Clark Granet, as an opposing force—a vortex of energy with the comet itself as a focal point of application. He imagined the force pushing back, countering the power which Russell was applying—hoping all the while that he had absorbed sufficient energy from the incandescing meteorite to exert his power on the object despite its shield.

Suddenly he was aware the comet was gaining no more momentum! He *was* countering the effects of the impersonal shield!

But his efforts failed to retard the progress of the object. True, his power cancelled out Russell's and the Fist of Shiva gained no acceleration, but there was nothing Brad could do to decrease its speed or alter its course!

THEN he was aware of the presence of another superconscious.

Carol!

She was out here too!

Now he saw the vague, ethereal configuration that represented her presence. It, too, was immediately behind the comet, next to the formless, insubstantial mass that was Russell. Her psychokin-

etic force was being applied concertedly with Russell's!

"Carol!" Brad called.

But there was no reply.

And again he received the impression of his brother's laughter. Words followed. "She will not answer. Her actions are no longer under control of her will . . . But, Clark, there is no shield of protection around her! There is nothing to stop you from destroying her parapsyche, if you wish—and her along with it . . . Destroy her, Clark! She is one of the forces threatening the world with destruction now!"

The Fist of Shiva surged forward in new, frightening acceleration. Now it swept the relatively weak force that was Clark Granet before it, like a toreador being thrust backward on the horns of a charging bull.

Desperately, he fought it. Desperately, he drained his super-being of all the stored power it contained as he tried futilely to halt the advance of the comet.

But his strength—even with its recent intensification before the meteorite—was as nothing before the momentum of the body and the force being applied by the two parapsyches.

Faster and faster the comet came!

Abruptly, he thought of its mass and the change it must be under-

going as the result of the enormous speed. There was no electronic mass-increase-resistor unit attached to the Fist of Shiva, he realized.

How many thousands of miles a second must it be going? How close must it be reaching toward the limiting speed of physical things in the universe?

The question seemed to strike a chord of abrupt comprehension. Suddenly he knew what he must do!

Withdrawing the force he had been exerting against the object, he hastily imagined a change of direction of application. Now he focused his total energy behind the Fist of Shiva, impelling it forward together with Russell and the slave-psyche which his brother controlled!

He sensed Russell's bewildered reaction. And, as the emotion gained in intensity, he was also aware of the other's sudden release of his hypnotic control over the girl's superconscious.

Seizing control, Brad hurled her psyche earthward, watched it cover the distance in a fraction of a second as it rushed back to her physical form.

Then he reapplied his force to the comet, sending it hurtling toward the brilliant sphere of blue and green shadings that hung in space, unprotected.

RUSSELL had overcome his bewilderment. Brad could sense that! Now his brother was again applying his enthusiastic force to the driving motion.

And more rapidly did the comet plunge toward the cataclysm!

It must be only seconds away now!

But still it gained speed! Terrific speed!

As though his point of perception had suddenly become detached from his area of cosmic energy application, Brad viewed the comet, the earth, as though from a distance.

With frightening speed the gap between the two masses was vanishing.

But now he saw the change in mass he had expected of the comet.

The Fist of Shiva was no longer the apparent size of the moon. It was tremendous! It was larger than the sun—now larger than the solar system—now larger than the cluster to which the sun belonged!

Now! thought Brad.

He snapped his parapsyche from the immediate vicinity of the comet.

In his mad enthusiasm, Russell continued to apply force.

As the Fist of Shiva gained even greater speed, its expansion became more marked. But the extension was in an unfamiliar dimension! It grew in size in a direction which

Brad could not wholly perceive.

Now it was larger than the galaxy! Larger than all infinity!

But it was no longer an object existing in the universe! As it had gained size and mass, it had lost substance, paradoxically. Any object approaching the speed of light, Brad remembered, could be expected to react in that manner. Any object exceeding the limiting speed, he rationalized, would no longer exist in the material universe.

He started. The Fist of Shiva, having gone faster than the laws of nature would countenance, was gone! It was no longer evident in the vast reaches of infinity! And the superconscious, the spark of intelligence that sustained life in Russell Granet, was gone too, leaving only a normal, dead body behind in the temple . . .

* * *

IT was an unnatural quiet that lay over the desolate area that had been occupied by Laboratory C. Fires that had gutted the buildings during the night were out now and only thin wisps of smoke curled up into the pink sky. Where thousands had fought a fierce battle, goaded by hate and superstition, now there was only stillness—stillness and bodies.

Brad helped Carol over the fall-

en barb-wire and they walked to the edge of the landing field.

Topped from their steel supports the five space craft lay on the concrete apron like fallen giants. Their once smooth metal skins, ruptured from the force of the impact as they fell, were pierced with jagged metal struts from the interior of the ships, like broken bone through flesh.

Brad surveyed the vessels despondently.

Carol clung to his arm. "You've other ships, Brad," she encouraged. "A fleet of them." She looked up beyond the sky.

"They were built out there," he shrugged hopelessly. "They can't come down into the atmosphere."

"But surely some of the laboratories must be in good enough shape to salvage something—enough to finance more shuttle ships, another Space Station."

He shook his head dejectedly. "There's nothing . . . We have to go into orthodox business again to get capital. It'll be years — decades — before we're ready once more to build ships and space stations and academies."

He leaned against one of the fallen craft and ran a hand through his hair.

Carol sat on a fin beside him. "But we'll do it," she smiled. "We will get the capital and we'll build the ships and we'll give every man,

woman and child a star. And then we'll give each one an injection, that will make them just like . . ."

She frowned suddenly. "Brad . . . suppose—suppose the effects of being exposed to the heat of the meteorite aren't hereditary?"

His tired face relaxed and he smiled. "At least, that's one thing we don't have to be concerned over. I worried about it for a good while—until I found out that Spark was still alive. That offered an opportunity to do some checking. We learned that seventy-five years ago a newspaper in that vicinity carried an account of a strange litter of puppies. It was a humorous feature story which told of a farmer's frustration over six disappearing puppies and his almost futile attempts at killing the 'haunted critters'.

"I'm sure, though, that was the only litter Spark sired. It seems certain that in the animal world normal animals instinctively shy away from superanimals. That must have happened in the case of Russell's squirrel too. Otherwise we would certainly have a species of supersquirrels in that vicinity that would be sweeping away all other life forms before it."

"Then, in the case of your dog," she suggested, "it seems that the power was both hereditary and dominant."

He nodded, looking at his watch.

"Les should be getting back now."

"What did he have to go into town for?"

"He had to report."

"What?"

"I'm afraid I'm guilty of spying on him—just as he's been guilty of spying on me for the past several years."

CAROL'S face was a mask of disbelief.

"When he seemed so anxious to get to town," Brad explained, "I tracked him with protracted vision. He filed a report to the federal Office of Internal Investigation."

"You mean . . . ?"

"Yes—he's an agent. All along the government was investigating the feasibility of space flight, along the lines of our experimentation. They were also concerned over my intended application of the fleet I was gathering together."

Carol laughed. "Poor Brad . . . You didn't have *anyone* who was completely loyal, did you? What are you going to do about Les?"

"When he gets back I'm going to pat him on the back. He's had a rough time trying to decide whether to be loyal to Washington or to me."

Les walked from behind the wrecked ship. "I'm damned glad to hear that, chief. I've been sitting under this hunk of metal over an hour trying to prepare a speech

to tell you what you already know."

Brad said nothing. His smile was one of complete understanding. Grinning, Les sat beside them.

"And the age of miracles isn't over yet," Les continued. "They feel responsible over the loss of your laboratories and the Space Station and ships. They want to make it good . . . Don't get the wrong idea—you're not being subsidized. There're no obligations. It's just that they feel they didn't give you adequate protection against the forces that were working against you within the government. I understand there'll also be a grant-in-aid for your academy project."

He leaped to the ground and started to walk off.

"Where're you going?" Brad asked.

"It's been a little rough and I guess it'll be some time before you get all this mess cleaned up. I'm going to take a couple of weeks' vacation before I get back on the job. Anyway, there's a girl back home and . . ."

Carol placed a hand on his shoulder. "Les . . ." she began solicitously.

He laughed. "The brushed off would-be suitor doesn't need any condolence. I thought you were pretty classy, Carol—until I found out you were old enough to be my great-great-grandmother. Uh-huh, no Methuselah for me!"

Brad and Carol watched him teleport away.

THE END