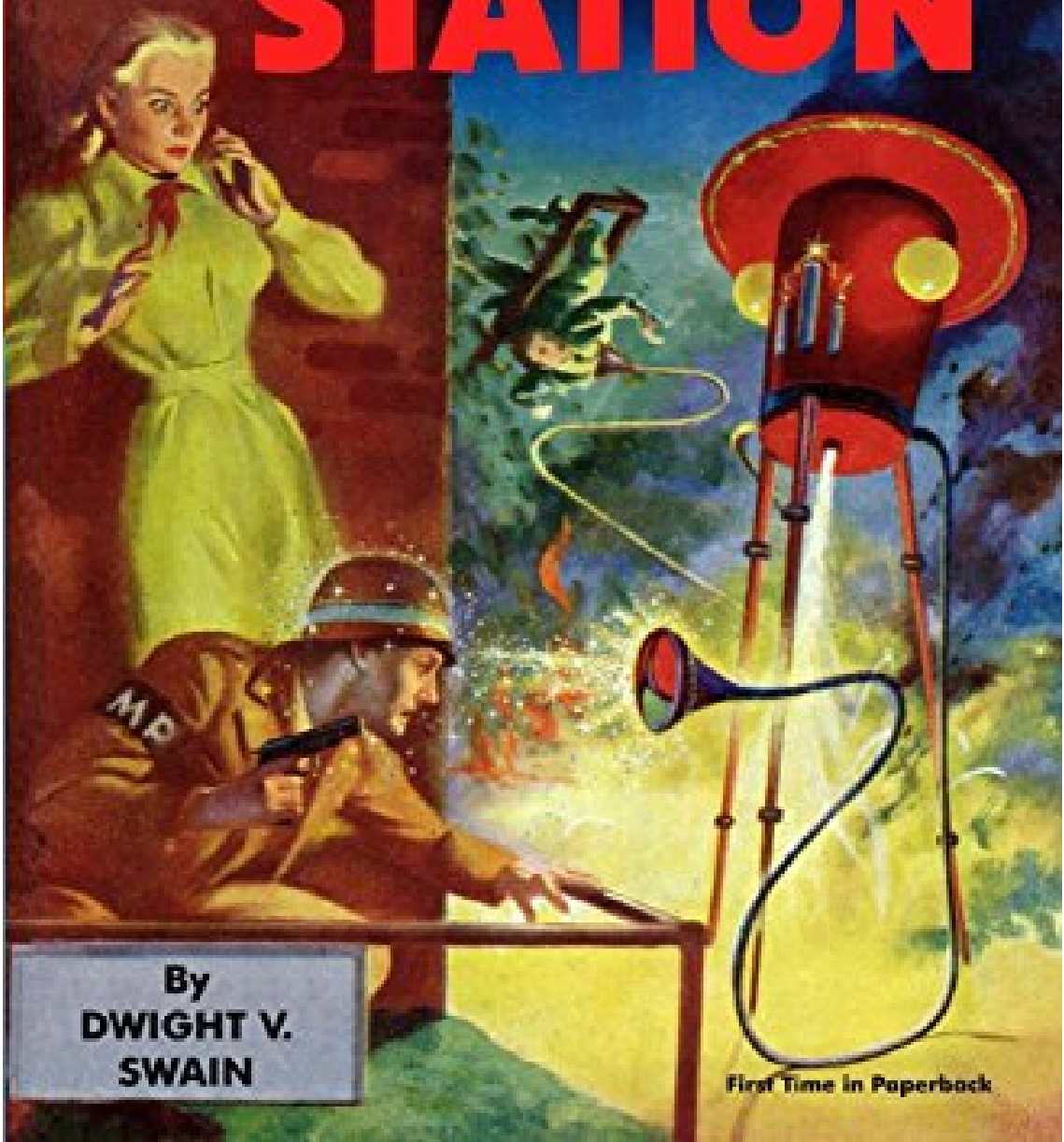
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TWO COMPLETE NOVELS

MIND CONTROLLING ALIENS TAKE THE FIRST STEP TOWARD INVASION...

TERROR STATION



By
DWIGHT V.
SWAIN

First Time in Paperback

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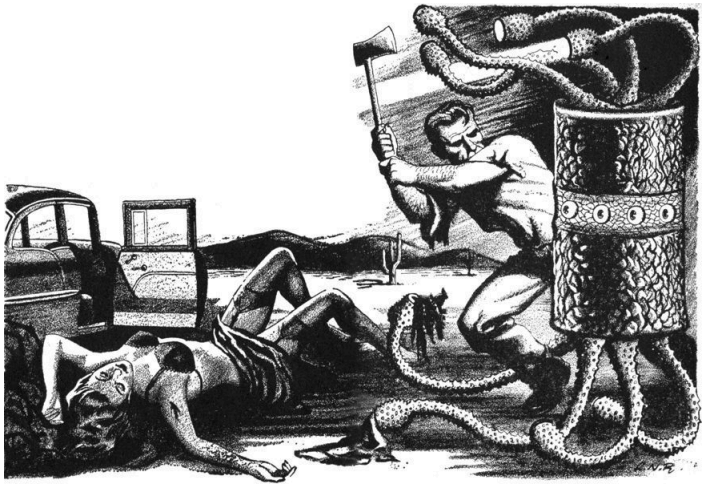
*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK TERROR STATION ***

Transcribed from Imaginative Tales, September 1955 (Vol. 2, No. 1).

Terror Station

by **Dwight V. Swain**

It was sheer madness—monstrous creatures appearing out of nowhere at a top-secret desert Base. Yet Stone knew it was not madness he was fighting but a vicious enemy. The Stake: Earth!



He saw the woman first.

Blindly, she stumbled out of the moonless desert night a hundred yards ahead, into the dim right edge of the path slashed by his headlights. Lurching, staggering, she scuffed through the gravel of the highway's shoulder; reached the asphalt and took two short, uncertain steps out on it, swaying as if the sudden change to smoother footing had almost made her lose her balance.

Stone jammed on his brakes.

Only then, before the car could even start to stop, movement flickered in the murk from which the woman had emerged. Stone glimpsed a shifting scarlet glow, a dipping, twisting streak of color. Oozing through the backdrop of the night, it drew swiftly closer to the roadway and the woman ... then faded, swallowed up in the glare of the approaching headlights.

But as it vanished, a spot of strange translucence materialized to replace it.

Formless, almost without perceptible substance, the splotch moved faster now, gliding across the shoulder and out onto the highway.

Beyond it, the woman half-turned; threw a frantic glance back along the way from which she'd come even as she took another stumbling step.

In the same instant, the translucence swept down upon her.

The woman's face contorted. Sheer terror etched her features, so deep that even Stone could see it. She tried to lunge away.

But now gleaming tendrils lanced forth from the translucence, curled about her, held her helpless.

The woman screamed.

That scream: It echoed even through the shriek of Stone's scorching tires, seared itself into his brain so deep that he never would, never could, forget it.

Then, abruptly, the scream cut off. The translucence swirled back towards the roadside and the shadows, dragging the woman with it.

Savagely, Stone jerked the steering wheel right with all his might, trying to follow the horror with his headlights. Skidding, the car rocked round on two wheels. For a spine-chilling split second Stone thought it was going to go over. But at the last moment it righted itself and shuddered to a halt in a choking cloud of dust beyond the shoulder.

Straight ahead, woman and translucence hung spotlighted less than fifty feet away.

Stone snatched his Colt from its holster on the steering post. Leaping from the car, he raced forward.

It was as if the sight of him gave the woman new strength. Her whole body convulsed. Tearing free from the monstrous thing that held her, she lurched towards Stone, blood streaming from a dozen wounds.

The translucence seemed to swell and darken. Then, in a rush, it hurtled towards the woman.

But now Stone was abreast of her. Cat-footed, he leaped between her and the monster; he blazed three fast shots into its center.

The shining surface quivered. For the fraction of a

second it drew back.

Stone could see the creature more clearly now. Murkily transparent as oily water, it stood nearly a head taller than his own six feet.

Except that it didn't have any head.

Instead, a barrel body splayed out into many thin, cable-like tentacles at top and bottom, each terminating in a round disc the size of a quarter. Its only truly opaque matter appeared to be concentrated in a narrow, dully scarlet band perhaps three inches wide that girded the center of its body.

Staring at it, Stone wondered if he were somehow going mad.

Then, abruptly, there was no more time for thinking, observation. With a rush, the monster lunged towards him, moving on its lower tentacles as if they were so many skillfully-coordinated feet.

Behind Stone, the woman cried out: "The light—! Watch out for the light!"

Stone glimpsed it as she spoke:

A small, lensed cube or box that suddenly shot out at the end of one of the creature's upper tentacles.

He leaped sidewise.

Almost in the same instant, a vivid purple streak blazed from the box.

It missed Stone by inches. Desperately, he snapped a wild shot at the lens, then fired twice more in the onrushing monster's midriff.

This time, the thing didn't even hesitate.

Stone jerked the trigger again. A hollow click. The gun was empty.

With a curse, Stone hurled it at the nightmare thing before him. Then, whirling, he raced headlong back towards his car.

Like an evil, gleaming shadow, the monster sped after him. It moved fast—horribly, incredibly fast.

Panting, Stone veered left, not even daring to look back. The headlights blazed blindingly into his eyes.

Something brushed his shoulder. He felt his shirt rip.

Then he was past the lights. Twisting, he dived headlong beneath the car, heedless of the gravel that slashed his face and chest and knees and shins and belly. Driving his elbows into the dirt, he whipped himself out on the far side of the vehicle.

A tentacle groped for his heel.

Savagely, he stamped the disc against a rock.

The tentacle jerked back. Sobbing for breath, Stone scrambled to his knees and clutched the doorhandle.

He got the door open just as another tentacle came through the window on the far side of the car, reaching for him.

Cursing, he jerked back barely in time, slammed the door shut on the tentacle with all his strength.

The latch caught. The car shook as the monster tried to writhe away.

Stone spun about. In three steps he was at the trunk —clawing aside his luggage, breaking his nails on the jack.

His hand closed around the axehandle in the same instant that the car gave a sudden lurch. There was a sound like that of a gigantic rubber band snapping. Then, like an echo, a tentacle-disc slapped against his right ribs just below the armpit.

Clutching the axe, Stone leaped back.

But the disc clung as if it were part of him. Agony exploded around it, tearing at his flesh. Before he could shake the red haze of pain from his eyes, the monster—free of the car now—was upon him.

Convulsively, Stone swung the axe.

It bounced off the barrel body as if it had struck solid rubber. More discs slapped at him.

Stone staggered, axe sagging. The tentacles had him now—constricting, engulfing. He lurched against the monster; felt the discs' pressure growing, seeking to rend his very body.

Pain-knotted, barely conscious, he twisted the axe-blade against the opaque scarlet band that girded the creature's midriff.

Reflex-like, a disc low on his spine jerked him back, away.

Stone forgot the agony, the pain-haze. Fiercely, he slashed out with the axe.

A surge of triumph raced through him as its blade bit deep into the unshielded scarlet band.

Now the tentacles tore at him in frenzy, clutched at the axe.

Before they could seize it, Stone swung again—horizontally, this time, so that the rubbery body might have no chance to deflect the cutting edge from the nerve-band.

The blade struck home with a sound like that of a melon shattering on pavement. Clear to the eye it sank—

The tentacles hurled Stone backward, slamming him hard against the side of his car as they let go their hold. He sagged there, raw-nerved and sick and bleeding.

Shambling, uncertain, the monster moved away—and towards the spot where the woman still lay prone and silent.

With an effort, Stone dragged himself erect. Then, axe still in hand, he stumbled after the nightmare creature.

The thing speeded its pace.

Stone forced himself to a run, cutting wide around his adversary.

Ten seconds later, he stood between it and the woman.

The creature hesitated.

Stone bared his teeth in a savage grimace. The fact that he had outdistanced the hideous thing; that it paused now, grasping and indecisive—such were more than enough to strip away his own pain and weariness.

“Damn you!” he grated harshly. “We’ll see who gets her!”

He lifted the axe; took a quick step forward.

The monster fell back before him.

Then, of a sudden, a tentacle speared out.

—The tentacle with the lightbox.

Stone charged in, swinging, as the purple streak blazed forth.

The creature shifted, undulating away from the axe. The streak of purple fire missed Stone.

Missed, by far too wide a margin to be coincidence.

Like an echo, a choked cry of agony rose behind him.

Stone spun about, numb panic flaring in him.

The woman no longer lay limp and prostrate. Now, instead, her whole body jerked in a continuing spasm. Her hands clutched her side, and her lips spilled blood.

Stone whirled again, back to the monster.

But the creature was already fleeing—gliding out of the arc of the headlights' beam, into the empty blackness of the desert. Even as Stone glimpsed it, the night swallowed it up.

Only a lunatic would have followed.

With a snarl of frustration, Stone ran to the woman; dropped on his knees beside her.

Her whole side was burned black where the purple beam had struck. She clutched his hand, her nails biting deep. "Kill me, quick! Please! I can't stand it —"

Sweat stood out on Stone's forehead. Desperately, he forced his voice gentle, level: "Easy, now. You'll be all right. I'll get you to my car. It's only a couple of miles to the proving ground—"

"No, no. I can't stand it. I'm dying—" The woman's

voice trailed off in a bubbling scream. Her body twisted. Then: “Maybe—my husband—the robots—back there beyond the mesa—”

“Easy....” Stone whispered. But his lips were dry.

“My ... my husband....”

A shudder ran through the woman’s body. Then, suddenly, she sagged limp.

Dead.

Sickness twisted at Stone’s belly. Gently, he crossed the woman’s arms across her breasts ... straightened the tormented twisted body ... wiped away the blood and smoothed the dark hair back from the small, plain face.

She was young, he saw now; far younger than he’d thought—not more than twenty-five at most.

So young ... and so dead.

And somewhere, out there in the desert night, lurked the creature that had killed her.

And what was it the dying woman had said, about robots on a mesa—?

Stone’s spine prickled. Stiffly, he started to get up.

Only then, out of the night, a voice clipped, “Hold it!”

A chill, somehow familiar voice.

Stone froze.

“That’s it. And get your hands out where we can see ’em.”

Wordless, Stone obeyed.

“Now turn so the light shines on your face.”

Again, obedience. “Well! If it isn’t our Mister Stone!” The words carried an ugly inflection. And then: “Come on, you guys....”

Figures converged from the blackness—erect, helmeted, uniformed figures, armed with rifles and carbines.

Soldiers.

The tension drained out of Stone. Of a sudden he felt weak, wobbly, half-hysterical.

And that voice—of course it was familiar!

“Sergeant Bjornberg,” he announced, “I’ve never been so glad to see anybody in my life!”

He dropped his hands.

Instantly, a gun-barrel gouged his back. “Keep those hands out!”

“What—?” Stone stared. “Sergeant, you know me....”

“Do I? Don’t try to pull any fast ones on me, mister!” The sergeant moved into view as he spoke. His usually good-humored features showed heavy now, set in sullen lines. Striding over to the woman, he flashed a light onto her dead face. “Well, now! Ain’t this pretty!”

With an effort, Stone held his temper. “The way she was killed was anything but pretty, sergeant. And the thing that did the job is still running loose. I’d suggest you post a heavy guard, then get me to headquarters as soon as possible.”

The sergeant sneered openly. “*You’re* telling *me* what to do?”

“I’m merely suggesting.” In spite of himself, Stone’s voice took on a brittle edge. “However, I do happen

to have charge of certain aspects of security for this area, and I doubt that Captain Hayes would think I was out of line."

"Oh?" Sergeant Bjornberg grinned—an ugly grin, utterly without mirth. "Well, I think I got a better idea, *Mister* Stone."

"Well?"

"I'll post a guard, all right; and I'll take you to headquarters."

"Fair enough."

"But I'll do it my own way, you lousy civilian phony —and that's under arrest, as a prisoner and a murder suspect!"

CHAPTER II

Glines' taste ran to richly aromatic tobaccos. Even now, long after midnight, his office hung heavy with the stink of the stuff.

Stone wrinkled his nose in distaste, again shifted his weight in the hard chair, trying to ease his aching muscles. The welts where the monster's discs had clutched him stung like new burns. Bruises and scratches plagued him every time he moved, a continuing, continuous irritation.

And still Glines did not come.

Now, in the silence, the ticking of the leather-embellished desk clock seemed to grow louder, till the sound of it echoed in Stone's ears like an infuriating off-key drumbeat. He found himself resenting the desk itself, with its precise, too-neat arrangement of office trivia. The air the lazy ceiling fan pushed against his face pressed thick as warm, wet cheesecloth.

Yet his mouth stayed dry. When a rill of icy sweat trickled from his armpit, it sent a tremor through his whole body.

He gritted his teeth, squeezed his eyes tight shut, trying to shut out the awful memory of the monster and the woman.

But shutting his eyes only made the picture come back clearer, sharper. Better to leave them open....

Once more, he shifted cursing under his breath as

new pain pulsed through him.

Besides, the chair creaked.

Stone frowned. It was idiotic, the way he found himself giving way to every tiny irritation ... almost as if the whole base—this office especially—somehow had come to radiate tension.

And tension was one thing he couldn't afford just now.

Grimly, he sucked in air—a deep breath that filled his lungs held it for the count of ten ... expelled it in a rush, letting himself go limp and jelly-like.

The third time he did it, he knew that some of the raw-nerved stiffness was leaving him. Closing his eyes no longer conjured up macabre visions.

Now, however, he found his mind turning to Bjornberg.

The sergeant's open hostility baffled him. In the past, they'd always been on a pleasant enough footing—friends, almost. Back in his service days, he'd even soldiered in some of the same places as had the sergeant. It gave them a common ground of past and interest, something to talk about over a beer.

Yet tonight, Bjornberg had called him a "lousy civilian phony".

Stone shook his head slowly. It just didn't make sense.

He became aware that the clock's tick was growing louder again ... fraying at his nerves—

Then, abruptly, footsteps echoed in the hall outside. The door opened. Glines waddled in.

It was typical that he should be freshly shaven and

fully dressed, even to tie and clean white shirt. Emergencies might come and go; but if they wanted Glines' attention, they'd have to wait till the last button was properly secured and the pink chops smooth and anointed with perfumed shaving lotion.

With an effort, Stone kept his voice pleasant. "Hi, Herb. Sorry to drag you out with this nonsense."

"Nonsense—?" Glines' fat face stayed stiff, his manner unbending. "I'm not sure I like your choice of words there, Stone."

Stone stared. "Herb! What is this? Just because you take over my job for two weeks while they call me in to Washington—"

"Don't evade the issue, Stone!" Glines posed, too erect, beside the desk. His lips pursed. "As I see it, neither your job nor your trip to Washington has anything to do with the things Sergeant Bjornberg's told me."

"I see." Stone clipped his words. "In that case, Glines, maybe we'd better get a few things straight. It happens I'm your superior here. And if I'm not 'Carl' to you, then I'm damn' well '*Mister Stone*.' Is that clear?"

"No."

"What—?"

"No, I said. It isn't clear—not clear at all." Glines stood openly defiant, insulting. Insolently, he thrust out his puffy lower lip. "You talk a lot about being my superior here, don't you? Well, as of this moment, I'm not at all sure that you are."

Stone drew a deep, incredulous breath. Then, slowly —very slowly—he came up from his chair. When he

spoke, his words were measured: “Glines, you’re either drunk or crazy. In either case, I’m sick of it. The MP’s have my statement of the facts of what happened tonight. I’m worn out, and I want to get a shower and have the medics disinfect these cuts and then go to bed. This cross-examination business can wait till morning.”

He turned on his heel, strode towards the door.

Behind him, a drawer rattled. Glines’ voice rang, shrill and angry:

“Oh, no, you don’t!”

Stone ignored him.

“Stone! Stop or I’ll shoot!”

Stone came up short; half-turned, staring.

Glines stood crouched behind the desk, his eyes black, beady slits above fat cheeks. He gripped an automatic, a heavy Army Colt, in one pudgy hand.

“Back!” he cried shrilly. “Come back here, Stone, before I shoot you like you deserve!”

Stone stood very still, trying without avail to fathom the things that seethed in the black eyes.

First Bjornberg; now Glines. Had the whole base gone mad?

“Easy, Herb,” he said soothingly. “Easy does it. I’ll come back.”

Careful of every movement, he made his way to the desk. “You can put the gun down now, Herb. I won’t try to leave again till you say to.”

“I’ll say you won’t!” Glines bared uneven teeth in a taunting smile. And then: “Oh, you were clever, all right, Stone. But not clever enough to fool me.”

“I wasn’t?”

“No. It all came to me in a flash as soon as Bjornberg told me about you and that woman, and the crazy story you tried to put out about fighting some monster.”

Glines’ face grew more flushed as he spoke, his words and breathing jerky and uneven. The hand that held the gun quivered.

New prickles of tension touched Stone’s spine. “Sure, Herb; sure....”

It was as if his fat little aide hadn’t even heard him; as if the man were talking to himself, almost.

“The minute I woke up, it all clicked into place. Just like that.” Glines giggled, high and ragged. “Oh, I’d been suspicious all along, of course. I checked your record while you were gone—the way you sneaked into security work, pretending to be an American agent while you fought with the Communists in Spain; the business of playing professional soldier in China; those years you spent with the OSS during the war. You cut quite a figure, all right. It made you look tough, dangerous, trustworthy, experienced. But it was all aimed at just one thing: This job here, in charge of civilian security on the country’s top top-secret project. You were willing to wait, to bide your time. Because you knew that when you got this spot here you could really do the job right when you betrayed us!”

A numbness crept over Stone. It was incredible, this mad net of distortion Glines was weaving about him.

Something was behind it, surely ... some dark and evil pattern.

Yet what—?

It was a question pregnant with frustration. Because he didn't dare to argue; not with an obvious madman. He couldn't even probe too deeply.

He tried to speak calmly: "Did you figure out the rest of it, too, Herb?"

"The rest—?"

"Sure. How it all fits together. How the business about the woman and the monster could help me betray anything?"

Scorn distended Glines' eyes. He radiated contempt. "Do you think I'm completely stupid? I knew it the instant I woke up, of course, just like the rest. You wanted some kind of cover to hide behind so that no one would suspect you when news about the project got out. So you killed that poor woman, then made up the story about the monster. You knew that as soon as it got to the papers there'd be dozens of reporters swarming over the base; you can't guard every inch of a government reservation as big as this one. Then you could blame the reporters for the leak on the project."

"I see." Stone nodded slowly. "Well, I guess you've got it all, then. You might as well call in MacDougal."

"Don't worry. I'll call him." Again Glines giggled. "Only first I'm going to wrap this all up good and tight. You're too good a friend of his for me to take any chances. Besides,"—his eyes grew suddenly cold and wary—"besides, I'm not too sure where he stands. Even a base director's suspect, when he's

friends with a traitor!”

Stone made an elaborate business of shrugging. “That’s carrying it a little far, isn’t it, Herb? Mac’s going to have the final report to make on this business, and he might not like it if he thought you were trying to pull a fast one on him.”

“If he knew, he might.” Glines’ eyes glittered. “But then, I plan to handle it more simply than that, without any red tape. Bjornberg understands. He’ll take care of it.”

“He’ll—take care of it?”

“Yes.”

Glines smirked. “*Ley del fuego*, they call it in Spanish. The law of flight. Shot while attempting to escape.”

Stone’s palms were suddenly slick with sweat. The ticking of the desk clock echoed in his ears like the knell of doom. He made it a point to breathe deeply, evenly. “That’s a big responsibility for a man to take, Herb.”

“Let me worry about that, Stone. I think I’ll find it a pleasure.”

As he spoke, Glines came round the desk, waddling as always.

Ordinarily, the way Glines moved made Stone want to smile. Only now, of a sudden, it wasn’t funny.

Especially when the gun the fat man held stayed so very steady.

Abruptly, ignoring the weapons, Stone turned to the desk ... picked up the clock ... stared down at its face.

“You’d better hurry, then, Herb.”

“What—?”

“Time’s running out. The sergeant goes off duty in a couple of minutes.”

He lifted the clock so Glines could see it.

The black, beady eyes flicked to the dial.

Stone hurled the clock, square at Glines’ head.

His aide jerked away, barely in time to dodge the missile.

But in that split second of distraction, reflex movement, Stone lunged in—knocking Glines’ gun aside with a left-foreman block, driving a hard right into the pit of the fat man’s bulging paunch.

Glines crashed back against the wall, tottered, and slid to the floor his face scarlet as he fought agonizedly for breath.

Stone stomped down on his wrist; kicked the Colt aside. Then, scooping it up, he stood straining his ears, listening for some outside reaction to the scuffle.

None came. Wordless, he strode to the door.

Panting, now, Glines glared up at him eyes sparking hate. “Go—go ahead—Stone! See—how far—you get!”

“Bjornberg?”

“That’s right. I gave him orders to stand guard outside the building—and to shoot on sight!”

Stone smiled thinly. “That’s why I’m not going out.” He threw the door’s heavy bolt in place. “You see, there’s just one catch to all your theories, Glines:

They're not true. So we're going to get MacDougal down here right now and square things away."

As he spoke, he strode swiftly to the desk; picked up the phone, dialed the base director's quarters number.

Four rings. Then MacDougal's sleep-thickened voice: "Base director speaking."

"Carl Stone, Mac. Get down to Glines' office fast; this is urgent. And it might be smart to bring along a couple of guards."

The sleepiness faded from MacDougal's voice. "Of course, Carl. If you say so." A pause. "I didn't know you were back. When did you get in?"

"Awhile ago. But something's happened I don't want to talk about on the phone, and I can't leave the office, here."

"I'll be there in five minutes."

He made it in four—a big, shaggy man with shoulders like mine beams and John L. Lewis eyebrows. Two armed guards followed him in.

"You've got troubles, Carl?"

"You might say so. Glines, here,"—Stone gestured to the fat man, still sitting slumped against the wall —"has suddenly decided I'm a traitor. His solution to the problem was to arrange to have me shot while attempting to escape."

MacDougal's shaggy eyebrows lifted. "Well, now! That's one way of eliminating a problem, isn't it?— Though I doubt that he's actually got it in him to pull

the trigger when the cards are down."

Stone shrugged. "He didn't plan to."

"No?" The base director cocked his head. "Then who —?"

"Sergeant Bjornberg. Whether he shares Glines' delusions or not, I can't say. But Glines tells me he stationed the sergeant outside the building, with orders to shoot me on sight."

MacDougal frowned. "Things really have been happening to you, haven't they, Carl?" And then, turning to Glines: "How about this, Herb? Got anything to get off your chest?"

The fat man scrambled to his feet and stood pompously erect in a belated effort to regain his dignity. His eyes sparked. "I certainly do, Mr. MacDougal. There's not a word of truth in what he says—about the shooting part, that is. What actually happened was, Sergeant Bjornberg caught him down the road a couple of miles, crouched over a woman's corpse. You can see how cut up he is"—a contemptuous gesture towards Stone—"as if they'd fought before he killed her. He tried to alibi himself with a wild story about them both being attacked by some bug-eyed monster—"

MacDougal interrupted: "You can skip that part, Glines. The driver from the motor pool told me about it on the way over."

"Yes, sir." Glines nodded tightly. "Well, anyhow, after he'd given his story to the MP's, Sergeant Bjornberg still wasn't satisfied. Under the circumstances, and all, and what with Stone acting so peculiar, he asked me to come over and talk to him. When I got here, Stone was ugly and insulting.

He refused to talk to me, and insisted on going to his quarters. I was already worried about the way he was acting, so when he got so hostile I pulled a gun on him. After all"—he flushed—"we were alone here. I hadn't thought to have a guard stand by."

"And then—?"

"He attacked me. I didn't want to shoot him, of course, and he's stronger than I am. He got hold of the gun, and then called you."

MacDougal frowned; studied the floor briefly. Then, after a moment, he turned to Stone: "Well, Carl?"

Stone could feel heat rising in his face. "What do you mean, 'Well, Carl'? Glines picked a fight with me from the moment he walked into this room. He accused me of being a traitor, went through a long rigamarole about how I was to leak information on the project—"

"If you'll check his record, you'll see that I have ample reason for thinking as I do, Mr. MacDougal!" Glines broke in sharply. "He fought with the Communists in Spain. He trained troops at Yenan. He went into Yugoslavia for the OSS; served more than a year with the Partisans. He's a Communist and a traitor, I tell you—"

Of a sudden, Stone's patience ran out. Inside him, something snapped. In one long stride he closed the distance between him and Glines; caught the fat man by the coat-front. Savagely, he slapped the pudgy cheeks—once, twice, three times.

The next instant the guards were upon him—dragging him back, slamming him against the wall.

"Gentlemen!" MacDougal roared. "We'll have no more of this!" His face was beet-red, his blue eyes

flashing.

With an effort, Stone slowed his breathing. “Sorry, Mac,” he apologized. “I guess I just haven’t had enough practice at being called a Communist.”

“Nor in curbing your temper, Mr. Stone!” The base director’s voice rang ice-brittle. He pivoted to the panting, ruffled Glines. “Mr. Glines, I’d diagnose your aliment as jealousy, pure and simple. If I see any more symptoms of it, it may show up on your efficiency report.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. MacDougal.” The fat man made jittery motions, smoothing and straightening his coat. “I’m sorry, sir. It won’t happen again.”

Ignoring him, MacDougal swung back to Stone. “As for you, Carl—well, I’m still in doubt.”

“In doubt—?” A cold knot seemed to draw tight in the pit of Stone’s stomach. Of a sudden he seemed to sense a change in his friend’s manner—a strange, rising tide of latent hostility like that he’d felt in Glines and Bjornberg.

“Yes, in doubt.” MacDougal’s brows drew together into a shaggy hedgerow. “The dead woman, and this monster business ... your accusations and violence against Glines, here ... your expressed fear that Sergeant Bjornberg, one of your best friends on the base, plans to assassinate you—I don’t like the sound of such talk.”

Stone stood mute, not trusting himself to answer.

“Take your tale about Bjornberg,” MacDougal went on. “You claim he was on guard outside this

building, waiting to kill you. But it so happens that when I called the motor pool for transportation, they sent him to drive me. He'd been there ever since he brought you to this office."

The walls seemed to close in about Stone. He knew every eye in the room was upon him; knew he had to speak. "So—?" he asked at last.

MacDougal paced the floor, bigknuckled hands clasped behind him.

"I don't like to do this, Carl," he said finally, "but considering the delicate nature of our work here, the high degree of secrecy surrounding our mission, I'm afraid I don't have much choice."

The cold knot in Stone's stomach drew tighter.

MacDougal ended his pacing; dropped on one hip on the corner of the desk. His tongue moved slowly back and forth along his lower lip, and his eyes stayed focussed on the floor. When he spoke, his words were careful, casual.

"Did you know we'd acquired a psychiatrist since you left for Washington, Carl?" he asked.

"A psychiatrist—!" Stone burst out in spite of himself. He started forward.

A guard's restraining hand stopped him. "Yes. She's here on a research project." The base director's eyes still studied the floor. "Supposed to be pretty good, too. Up on all the latest stuff."

Between clenched teeth Stone grated, "MacDougal, if you think I'm crazy, say so. But so help me, if you turn me over to some headshrinker, count on it that you'll regret it to your dying day!"

As if the words were a signal, the base director's

massive head came up, jaw jutting. The blue eyes shone hard and expressionless as marbles—shone with the same strange light that Stone had seen in Glines' and Bjornberg's.

MacDougal said, "That's all I needed, Carl: Your threats and hostility turned on me. That's the convincer that you *do* need help." He turned to the guards: "Mr. Stone's hereby ordered to the hospital for mental tests and observation, on my responsibility.

"Take him away!"

CHAPTER III

Dawn. A chill, grey desert dawn that made Stone shiver beneath his blankets.

Or maybe it wasn't the cold. Maybe it was the things in his mind, the thoughts and nightmares that kept him tossing, twisting, restless. There'd been little enough sleep for him, Lord knew—fitful moments only, from which he started up in wild-eyed terror, racked by aching bones and stinging cuts and the dark uncertainties that wormed insidiously through his brain.

And now, the dawn.

Fretfully, once more he squirmed and shifted—closing his eyes against the dim light, striving to find some new position that would ease the nagging restlessness that plagued him.

But the thin-padded hospital cot only creaked the louder. New lumps and knots created pressure points against his body.

With a curse, he gave it up. Rising, he shrugged on a robe and shuffled to the open window.

If he could call a window open, when it was fitted with a safety screen so heavy that a man with an axe couldn't break through it.

He laughed aloud—short, harsh, without mirth.

Outside, the base still lay bleak and silent, a hollow city with no excuse for being except The Project. The bare, regimented streets stretched deserted between

their rows of characterless prefabricated housing. To the south, the tiny airstrip spread desolate, its lone helicopter strangely skeletal at this distance in the chiaroscuro of early morning.

Stone crossed to the other window, the closed one; peered west, towards the bulk of the central Project Building.

The next instant he stiffened.

For where two weeks ago the structure had loomed square and squat, now a tower rose, from its center—a tower somehow disconcertingly unique in styling, not quite like anything he'd ever seen before.

Protuberances of unfathomned purpose marred its symmetry. Catwalks rimmed it at half-a-dozen levels. Even the material of which it was constructed resembled nothing with which he was familiar.

Stone frowned. True enough, there were plenty of things he didn't know about The Project. That was as it should be, at a base at which security measures were so vital.

Yet at the same time, it seemed strange that he'd have heard no hint as to a construction job of such proportions.

It didn't even fit in with the architectural plans. He'd seen those, and they contained no provision for a tower. None was needed. This was a development base, not a proving ground.

Of course, plans changed. New discoveries and problems necessitated new measures, new approaches.

Even new buildings.

The trouble was, so many things seemed to have

changed here in the brief span of his fortnight's absence.

The attitudes and atmosphere, for instance. And the people.

People like Bjornberg and Glines and MacDougal.

Or maybe it was he that had changed, the way they said.

Maybe he was really crazy.

He was still brooding about it when the door opened.

The click of the lock took him unawares. There'd been no warning, no sound of footsteps.

Instinctively, he spun about.

Reva stood framed in the doorway.

It rocked him, hard. So hard he could only stand gaping at her cool blonde loveliness, groping for words he couldn't find.

"Good morning, Carl." Her face, her voice, were grave. Briskly, she stepped across the threshold, crisp and neat in a starched white smock, and closed the door behind her.

The spell broke. "Reva—!" he choked. "Reva, what are you doing here?"

Her manner stayed detached, impersonal. "I was assigned here nearly two weeks ago, Carl." And then: "I'm *Doctor* Adams now, you know."

"You mean—you're the psychiatrist?"

She nodded, grey eyes steady. "I'm afraid so, Carl. And I know it's going to be difficult for both of us after the ... personal ... relationship. But I didn't have much choice, since I'm the only qualified person

here. Mr. MacDougal made that rather plain."

Pin-pricks of rising fury seethed through Stone. "You're going along with this farce, then? You'll run me through the mill like any other screwball, in spite of everything—the way it was between us, as close as we were together?" He didn't even care that the words came out thick and angry.

The grey eyes dodged his, now. As if to cover it, Reva moved to the room's lone chair; sat down.

"Answer me!" Stone stormed. "Give it to me straight: Are you going to help them frame me?"

"No one's going to frame you, Carl. It's just that you may be ... sick. That's all that I'm to check on."

A tremor crept into Reva's voice as she spoke. Hastily, she brought out a pencil and a notebook. "There'll be a few tests, that's all—Minnesota Multiphase Personality, Inventory, Rorschach, TAT, electronencephalogram, in case you're interested in the names. And I'll want to talk to you, of course—discuss these things you've done that seem to bother Mr. MacDougal and the others. There won't be anything unpleasant about it. We can work most of it out over coffee, probably—"

"We'll do it straight, you mean!" Stone clenched his fists, trying to fight down the red tide of rage that surged within him. "Forget your damn' coffee, Doctor Adams! I'm just one more nut to you. Quit trying to hide it!"

Reva's face went stiff. She rose quickly; stood very tall and straight "Very well, then, Carl. We'll handle

it just as you prefer. The electroencephalogram comes first. The machine's down at the end of the hall to your right. Just follow me."

High heels clicking, she left the room.

As quickly as it had flared, Stone's fury ebbed. Numbly, he stumbled down the hall after her.

What was it that held him so on edge, so close to the ragged brink of violence? The fight with the monster? The trouble with Bjornberg and Glines and MacDougal? The lack of sleep?

But no. Those were only symptoms of an ever-growing inner tension.

Yet why should he be tense? He'd seen trouble before —lots of it. Violence, too; blood by the bucket. But it hadn't affected him this way. Through all of it, he'd won a reputation as a man who thrived on situations fraught with worry and frustration. That was why they'd sent him here in the first place, to handle security problems on this base....

And to blow up at Reva, still feeling about her as he did ... to let go at her, when all he could really think of was the hunger in him for her; the desire to take her, hold her, crush her to him....

Ahead of him, the heels stopped clicking. Reva pushed open a door; stepped aside. "In here please. Lie down on the couch. I'll attach the electrodes. It won't hurt a bit...."

The morning came and went, a jumble of accordion-folded graph sheets and pictures, ink blots and questions. Stone sorted cards, made up stories, drew figures, lay in black silence while electrical impulses eddied through his brain.

There was no coffee, no byplay. Reva stayed Doctor Adams. To the hilt. Lunchtime found Stone alone in his cubicle.

Thirty minutes later they were back at the tests.

But only half Stone's mind was on them.

The other half kept reappraising Reva.

She'd changed, somehow, just like the others. Her impersonality carried a hard, suspicious edge. A dozen times—a hundred—Stone caught her eyes upon him. Not just measuring either: Cold; almost actively hostile.

Especially when she probed him with questions about the woman, and the monster.

Late afternoon found them in her office, with Reva cross-examining him about his feelings toward Glines and Bjornberg.

The implication was that he'd always hated them both; that the clashes were only the culmination of long-repressed resentment.

Stone's palms grew moist, his heart action uneven.

Of a sudden, he could take no more of it.

"Damn it, Reva!" he exploded. "They jumped me, don't you get it? They started sticking knives in me the second that they saw me!" Vaguely, he was aware that his voice had risen; that he was shouting. He didn't care. "What would you have done, damn it? How would you feel if people accused you of murder and treason to your face, when you'd done nothing—?"

He broke off, seething.

The phone rang before Reva could speak again. She picked up the receiver, cool and efficient, her eyes still on her notebook. “Doctor Adams speaking.” A pause. “No, Mr. MacDougal. I’ve hardly begun, let alone finished. These things take time.” Another pause. “Yes. Yes, I have uncovered a certain amount of pertinent data. But—”

A longer pause. While Stone watched, the smooth planes and curves of Reva’s face seemed to stiffen. Her fingers tightened visibly on her pencil, pressing down. The point snapped, loud in the stillness.

She said, “Very well, then, Mr. MacDougal. If you insist.—Yes, I’ll be waiting in my office.”

She hung up the phone.

Stone smiled thinly. “Report time?”

She didn’t answer.

“I know how it is. They always push you.” Stone leaned back in his chair. For no good reason, all once he felt more in command of the situation than he had since this whole mad tangle had erupted.

Reva looked away, still saying nothing.

Stone pressed on: “It’s too bad things had to work out the way they did.... Between us.”

Reva’s eyes stayed on the wall. “We each got what we wanted.” Her voice was flat, controlled.

Too tightly controlled.

“Did we?” Stone grimaced. “Maybe you did. I didn’t. Because I wanted you. And I didn’t get you.”

Was it his imagination, or did Reva’s breathing quicken just a fraction?

"Being married to a security man's no cinch. I know that. It can get pretty damn' worrisome and lonely, like you said when you broke it off. But right now, I'm wondering if psychiatry can't be lonely, too—"

The mask that was Reva's face drew tighter ... tighter.

"Especially if you're a woman, Reva—a woman like you, who knows what love is, and needs it—"

In a flash, like an eggshell shattering, the mask cracked and fell apart. Reva turned on him—teeth bared, eyes suddenly streaming. "Shut up!" she screamed. White-knuckled, her small fist beat a convulsive tattoo on the desk's polished surface. "Shut up, I tell you! Leave me alone—alone ... alone...."

Her voice died. She slumped on one arm across her notebook, face hidden. The slim shoulders shook with her sobs.

From the office doorway, MacDougal said, "That was dirty, Carl. As dirty as anything you've ever done."

Stone started. Reva gasped aloud and came erect in one swift movement, even as she turned away.

MacDougal stalked heavily to the nearest chair and sat down. Face hewn in granite, he ignored Stone; addressed Reva: "I'm sorry about this, Doctor Adams. Believe me, I wouldn't run you through such a mill for all the world, if it weren't absolutely necessary."

"It's ... quite all right, Mr. MacDougal." Face almost composed once more, Reva resumed her seat. "I'll give you my tentative report as soon as the attendant returns Mr. Stone to his room." She reached towards a buzzer button.

MacDougal halted her with a gesture. His blue eyes were cold. “Don’t bother, Doctor. I’m not inclined to spare Stone’s tender feelings, after what he just did to you.”

“It’s not a matter of feelings, Mr. MacDougal.” Abruptly, Reva was very much the doctor. “There’s a therapeutic issue involved. And Mr. Stone’s my patient.”

Tight-lipped, Stone leaned forward. “Get on with it!” he clipped. “I want to hear what you’ve got to say as much as he does. If I’m crazy, I’ve got a right to know it.”

“‘Crazy’ is hardly a meaningful term, medically speaking, Mr. Stone.” Reva stared down at her notes. “However, if you insist....”

“I do.”

“Very well, then.” She turned to MacDougal; tapped an accordion-folded graph on the desk. “Are you familiar with electroencephalography, Mr. MacDougal?”

The base director shrugged. “Only vaguely.”

“Then let me begin by explaining that the electroencephalograph is a device which measures currents within the brain and records them on a chart. A trained technician can then interpret the patterns in diagnostic terms.”

“I see.”

“In Mr. Stone’s case”—Reva studied the chart—“the electroencephalogram shows marked deviation from

the norm. I'm inclined to believe that the pattern indicates he's a victim of epidemic encephalitis."

"Encephalitis—?" MacDougal frowned. "I'm afraid you'll have to explain, Doctor. I've never heard of it."

Reva nodded gravely. "That's not surprising, sir. No acute cases have been reported since 1925. The ones we see today are chronic—the aftermath of an epidemic that swept the country, beginning in 1919."

"And the results?"

"That all depends." Reva sketched meaningless patterns with her pencil. "You see, the disease wreaks havoc in the brain. There's tissue damage and, later, of course, residual lesions. Ganglion cells and neurons degenerate or disappear. Behavior difficulties often follow, too—chronic irritability, emotional instability, psychopathic conduct."

"You tell it scary," Stone said tightly. "There's just one catch, though: So far as I know, I never had any such disease."

Reva didn't look up. "I'm afraid that's easily possible, Carl. It may have run concurrently with influenza or some other sickness. Plenty of cases weren't detected. But the damage still was done."

"Then how is it I've survived? Why haven't they carted me off before now?"

"Because of the nature of the disease, Carl." For the first time, Reva faced him squarely. "You see, it can become progressive, even after months and years. When that happens...." Helplessly, she spread her hands.

A numbness crept through Stone. He slumped in his chair. The room seemed to grow dim around him. He

hardly heard the things the other two were saying.

Was this to be the end for him, then? Must he live out his life walled away from the world in some mental hospital?

Again, he lived through the night before ... tried to recall the way he'd felt, the things he'd done.

He'd been tired, yes; but that was to be expected, what with the long trip in. And his spirits had certainly been good enough.

Then he'd seen the woman ... fought the monster.

And whether anyone believed him or not, the battle had been reality, not delusion. He had the scars to prove it.

Chronic irritability? Emotional instability? Psychopathic conduct? Those were terms that fitted Bjornberg and Glines better than they did him.

Though he had to admit he'd been on the jumpy side, ever since he'd reached the base.

Ever since he'd reached the base—!

With a rush, the pieces fell into pattern. Last night, he'd fought a monster—a creature like nothing ever seen on earth, in hell or heaven.

The dying woman had gasped of robots on a mesa.

Bjornberg had accused him of murder.

Glines had sworn he was a Communist.

MacDougal had ordered him checked for mental aberration.

An unscheduled, other-worldish tower had risen atop the Project Building.

Reva had diagnosed him as an encephalitic, fully

capable of psychopathic conduct and suitable for confinement.

He himself had developed a sudden tension so nerve-shattering as to make him question his own sanity.

It all added up to just one thing: Something horribly dangerously wrong.

But not with him. No.

With the base!

But what? What could possibly account for such mad deviation?

He looked up sharply. Reva was still talking:

"—so after your description of Carl's behavior, Mr. MacDougal, my first thought was paranoia. The systematized delusions and hallucinations tied in with it, and so did his tendency to violence. But I've given him the Rorschach test, and the TAT, and neither of them show any indication of it. So tentatively, I'm forced to fall back on encephalitis. It manifests itself so many ways—it's more polymorphic than syphilis, even...."

Systematized delusions—? Hallucinations? Stone felt a sudden, quick twinge of excitement. The behavior of the people here on the base fitted that pattern.

Yet how could a whole organization turn paranoid?

Besides, Reva had just said that he himself didn't check out for it on the tests.

Thoughtfully, he studied her. She knew about these things, these mental twists, and she'd just come here.

Could the trouble be some strange infection she'd brought with her?

For that matter, why would a psychiatrist be assigned to a development base, anyhow?

It was an interesting question. Spontaneously, he cut in on the conversation: "Reva...."

She looked around. "Yes, Carl?"

"Just what is this research project of yours?"

Her face froze, lips half-parted. The grey eyes—it was as if shutters had suddenly slammed closed behind them.

Cold, hostile shutters.

MacDougal said quickly, "I'm afraid we'll have to bounce that one, Carl. *Verboten*. Doctor Adams' work is classified, highly confidential."

Ice hung on his words—the same kind of ice that glazed Reva's eyes.

And Glines'. And Bjornberg's.

Stone held his face immobile. "Sorry. I didn't know."

Reva had come here. Strange things had happened.

Reva was a psychiatrist. Base personnel showed something close to mental disorder.

Cause and effect?

It could bear some thought. Quite a bit of thought, in fact. Not to mention thorough investigation.

MacDougal's blue eyes had narrowed. Abruptly, he turned to Reva. "Doctor Adams, I'm afraid I've imposed on you. It's not fair to ask you to treat patients, in addition to your ... other work."

Reva's slim shoulders moved a fraction. "I admit the

facilities are hardly adequate, Mr. MacDougal."

"Then you recommend a mental hospital?"

"I'm afraid so."

"We'll have him flown out tonight in the helicopter, then. Right now." The base director surged to his feet. "Let's go, Carl."

Stone gripped the arms of his chair. One wrong question—and in seconds they'd arranged to put him out of circulation.

Which meant he'd been right: There *was* a relationship between Reva's coming, her work, and the changes on the base.

Only a lot of good knowing it would do him, locked away in a back ward of some asylum. Even if he was actually all right it would take months to convince the doctors.

So much for his plans.

Unless—

"Hurry it up, Carl. This is all for your own good, you know."

Wordless, Stone arose. Carefully casual, he glanced out the nearest window.

It was almost dark.

So much the better.

He moved on into the hall and shuffled towards the detention room where he'd spent the night. Reva and MacDougal followed.

The door was locked. Stone stood aside, waiting loose-muscled while Reva inserted the key and opened the door.

"I won't keep you waiting long, Carl," MacDougal said. "We'll pick you up just as soon as I locate a pilot."

Stone drew a deep breath, "Any time." He started forward.

The base director shifted aside to let him pass. Stone smashed down his foot with all his might on the other's instep.

MacDougal cried out ... tottered off-balance.

Twisting, Stone shoved him hard against Reva. Together, the pair sprawled on the floor of the detention room.

Stone slammed and locked the door behind them. It muffled their cries most satisfactorily.

Bleak-eyed, then, he strode down the corridor and the stairs and out into the night....

CHAPTER IV

Base Directory Service gave Stone both Reva's addresses—her prefab, and the building assigned her for her project.

Hanging up the phone, he pushed his way out of the crowded drugstore, then stood hesitating on the curb of the broad, bright-lighted parkway that ran round the parking center.

Home, or office? Which should it be?

He frowned.

The base alarm system blasted in the same instant.

The noisy crowd fell suddenly silent. People paused, fell back a step. Eyes shifted, searched.

The siren's shrill scream died away.

Ripples of apprehension rose on its echo. Little groups drew close together, milling aimlessly.

A tiny chill ran through Stone. He had no choice now. Distance was the vital factor, and the office address was the closest.

With an effort, he held his steps even and unhurried. Crossing the parkway, he headed south on the nearest street.

All about him, men and women were emptying from the prefabs—peering this way and that talking excitedly. Off to the right, out by the Project Building motor pool, a jeep's lights flashed on. A gunned motor roared. The lights swerved north as the

vehicle raced away.

Seconds later, another followed. Then another, and another.

Elsewhere, in all directions, other motors droned as the base security system came to life.

The chase was on.

Stone veered between the buildings, out of sight, then broke into a dogtrot.

A cross-street. Pausing in the shadows, he strained his eyes against the night, searching both ways for signs of the blockade the jeeps were setting up, according to plan.

It was a good plan, too; he'd helped devise it. Once the vehicles reached their stations, a rabbit couldn't move across the base undetected.

After that, there'd be a block-check, certain capture.

But until then—He strode across the street, not too fast till again he reached the welcoming shadows. There, once in the darkness, he broke into a pelting run.

More cross-streets; more speed. Then the last line of prefabs.

Beyond them spread the dim expanse of the Related Projects Area, with its high wire fence and guarded gates.

Stone halted, breathing hard, and smoothed his shirt and combed his hair. Then, boldly, he strode towards the nearest point of entry.

The guard on the gate watched through the mesh, cold-eyed and silent, as he approached. Stone said, "Message for Doctor Coughlin, Materials Research.

Here's my pass."

He extended his wallet as he spoke. Cradling his rifle, the guard unlatched the gate and reached out to take it.

Stone smashed the free-swinging gate violently against him.

The guard lurched back; tried to jerk up his rifle.

Side-stepping, Stone lunged in close. Savagely, he hammered an uppercut to the other's jaw.

The guard dropped.

Ripping the man's shirt into strips, Stone bound and gagged him in seconds. Then, snatching up the rifle, he ran for the shadows.

The small, one-story brick building that housed Reva's project stood apart from its fellows, far back in an isolated corner of the Related Projects Area. A steel framework like a miniature radio tower rose close beside it, perhaps fifty feet tall.

Smashing open the locked door with the rifle-butt, Stone snapped on the lights and surveyed the place.

The room in which he stood was a typical office. Filing cases banked one wall. A desk flanked by bookshelves stood against a second. There was a long table littered with papers and, incongruously, a small bowl of flowers. Three chairs, a water cooler, and a coatrack completed the furnishings.

Hurriedly, Stone crossed to the nearest of the two inside doors.

The first led to a washroom.

The second was locked.

Stone hesitated, a vague uneasiness upon him. It was as if the tension that rode him had been suddenly, sharply heightened. His muscles ached; his fingers showed a tendency to tremble.

The humming impinged on him, then.

It was as vague as his uneasiness—a sound that was not a sound, almost.

Stone turned slowly—straining his ears; trying to trace the murmur to its source.

Finally he placed it: It centered on the door beside which he stood.

He swung the rifle-butt. Once—twice—three times.

Lock and door stood fast. Once again Stone hesitated. Then, reversing the rifle and standing aside to avoid a ricochet, he triggered a shot at the lock.

Metal jangled through the echo. Another blow with the butt, and the door creaked open.

The windowless room beyond, from its cramped size, had probably been planned primarily for storage.

Now, though, it overflowed with electronic equipment, from floor to ceiling a buzzing maze of tubes and condensers and coils and complicated circuits such as Stone had never seen before.

Could this machine be responsible for his uneasiness and the strange behavior on the base?

There was one sure way to find out.

Narrow-eyed, nerves atingle, he pivoted, searching for the master switch ... located it at last, set at the far end of the narrow space between a transformer and the wall.

He reached out; gripped the shiny black handle.

Then, before he could throw it, a harsh voice from the office behind him snarled, “Move an inch and you’re dead!”

Stone went rigid.

“Now come out! On the double!”

Stone’s spine tingled. He let go the switch and slowly turned.

Colt in hand, hard-eyed and lethal, Sergeant Bjornberg stood hunched in a gunman’s crouch on the far side of the office.

Glines flanked him.

Stone’s lips felt stiff. Of a sudden he could feel death’s hand on his shoulder.

Bjornberg moved a quick step forward. “Come out, I said!”

The smirk on Glines’ fat face would have fitted a cat better. A well-fed cat, toying with a mouse.

Stone sucked in air.

“What’s the matter, Mr. Stone?” It was Glines talking now—sneering, mocking. “You took a gun away from me last night. Why don’t you take the sergeant’s?”

“Shut up!” rasped Bjornberg. And then, to Stone: “I said come out! Away from that equipment!”

‘*Away from that equipment....*’

Ever so slowly, Stone let out the deep breath he’d been holding. “No, thanks, Sergeant.”

“What—!” Bjornberg’s finger went white on the trigger.

Stone smiled stiffly. “I said no, Joe. I’d rather let you shoot—because whether you hit me or not, that forty-five’s going to tear up a lot of transistors.”

Bjornberg’s mouth worked. “Damn you, Stone!” And Glines came in high and shrill. “You should have hit him with the barrel from behind, Sergeant! You shouldn’t have warned him!”

Ever so casually, Stone leaned back against the framework of the machine.

“I’ll still take him!” Bjornberg snarled. “Here, cover me!”

He passed the Colt to Glines and started forward, hands raised in a judo fighter’s guard.

Stone lunged for the switch.

This time, there was no turning back, no hesitation. He slammed the black handle down even as Bjornberg crashed against him.

The humming died in a click of circuit breakers. The tubes began to dim.

Twisting, too cramped to strike a blow, Stone grappled with Bjornberg. Together, they rocked back to the far side of the doorway, fighting with knees and teeth and elbows.

Then the sergeant broke free; leaped back, out into the office.

Instead of trying to follow, Stone spun about and smashed his foot through a device that looked like an off-beat magnetron. Clutching whole handfuls of wiring, he tore one of the upper racks of equipment out bodily.

Then Bjornberg was upon him again. The man's weight hammered him down. He caught a wicked blow in the back of the neck that sent him sagging to his knees on the floor.

Now a fist jarred his head back. Desperately, he caught one of Bjornberg's ankles and wrenched it up and around, twisting with savage force.

It was the sergeant's turn to crash to the floor. Rolling clear of him, Stone scrambled to his feet.

His adversary did likewise.

Then, as they started to circle, each searching for an opening, a voice cut through: "Carl! Sergeant! Stop it!" It was Glines, almost shouting. "Stop it, I tell you! Stop it!" Wary, still gasping for breath, Stone drew back.

It was only then that it came to him, dazedly, that the strange tension he'd felt for the past twenty-four hours had left him. In spite of Bjornberg's blows, his head seemed clearer than it had been since the night before. His muscles no longer ached with strain. His hands had lost their tendency to tremble.

Instead of all such, now, an intense, overwhelming weariness hung upon him; nothing more.

Across from him, Bjornberg shook his head jerkily, as if to clear his brain. The hard lines had vanished from his face. Suspicion clouded his eyes no longer. They were open now, wide open, frank and friendly the way Stone had always known them.

Over by the desk, Glines shifted awkwardly, the Colt forgotten on the floor beside him. His mouth hung loose, and he looked stunned, incredulous—a fat, good-natured little man with just a bit of the old maid in him. "Carl," he mumbled, swabbing

perspiration from his forehead, “Carl, what have I been doing?”

Bjornberg broke in: “Did I really say you killed that woman, Carl? My God, I must have been crazy!”

Of a sudden Stone’s legs were weak as water. He stumbled to the nearest chair; slumped in it.

“This whole base has been crazy,” he grunted.

Glines’ pudgy hands moved nervously. He groped: “But how—I mean, what happened—?”

“It was driven crazy, that’s what happened,” Stone said tightly. He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “That machine in there did it.”

“The machine—?” This from Bjornberg. His broad brow wrinkled. “I thought it was a project—”

“And you thought it was important too, didn’t you? Important enough to kill me for?”

The sergeant’s face grew red. He shifted from one foot to the other. “I guess I did, Carl. Only now—well—damn it, I’m all mixed up!”

“Who isn’t?” Stone turned to Glines. “How’d you feel—last night, when you heard about me, I mean?”

The fat man squirmed. “It’s—Carl, I don’t know how to tell you....” He chewed his puffy lower lip. “As well as I can remember, I’d been feeling tight and jittery for a long time—a week or more. Then, when the sergeant woke me up and told me about you—and that dead woman—and your story about the monster—well, it was strange. All at once I was angry. I hated you, and I was afraid of you,

somehow. I kept remembering all kinds of little things, and by the time I got to the office I—I knew you were a Communist. I *knew* it." Nervously, again he swabbed his forehead, scarlet now as Bjornberg's. "I hope you understand, Carl; I just can't explain it."

"I understand, all right," Stone said grimly. "The trouble is, I can't explain it either. Not all of it. Not the important parts."

"But the machine, you said—"

"Sure, the machine did it. But why?" Stone leaned forward. "Look: First of all, somebody had to design it. Then somebody else had to approve it, order it built. Why?"

Glines shook his head helplessly. Bjornberg stared at the floor.

Stone pressed on: "Second, it didn't seem to cause any trouble—outside of making everybody jittery—till I came along. But when I did, everybody went haywire. Except me. Or maybe I did, too. Maybe I didn't really fight a monster.

"But I think I did, and I've got some scars to prove it. So that brings up a third point: Why didn't it throw me, like it did the rest of you? How is it I could figure out that something was wrong on the base, and that this project was responsible, when nobody else could?"

"It's crazy, just crazy, that's all," muttered Bjornberg.

"Maybe. But I doubt it." Stone rose stiffly. "There's somebody I want to ask some questions—" He stopped short. "Tell me this: How'd you happen to come here looking for me?"

Glines frowned. "That was my idea, Carl. Mr.

MacDougal sent for me after he and Doctor Adams finally got out of that room at the hospital and sounded the alarm for you. He asked me if I had any idea where you might go—after all, I'd worked with you for a long time. At first I said I didn't know. Only then Doctor Adams made some remark about your—your condition, and said she hoped you wouldn't twist your delusions of persecution around to where you'd try to do something to her, like you'd done to that dead woman. Mr. MacDougal said she didn't need to worry about it, that he'd see that she got home all right, and they left. But the more I thought about what she'd said, the more sense it made, and I began to wonder if you might not try to sneak out here and booby-trap the building. Finally, the thought of it got to worrying me so much that I called Sergeant Bjornberg and came out here with him." Glines paused, laughed self-consciously. "It sounds silly now, doesn't it? But at the time nothing in the world seemed so important as to make sure nothing happened to Doctor Adams or her project."

Reva. Always, it came back to Reva.

"Good enough," Stone said. Tight-lipped, he started for the door.

"Where you going?" Bjornberg demanded.

Stone held his voice flat and level. "To see Doctor Adams."

"That figures," the sergeant nodded. "We even got a jeep back by the next building to take you to her."

"Besides," Glines chimed in, opening the door, "you'll need us to pass you through the blockade."

He started down the outside steps.

The next instant, his wild scream of terror split the

night.

CHAPTER V

For Stone, that moment lasted a thousand years.

Then it was over, Glines' shriek dying.

The horrid spell broke. He lunged for the door, Bjornberg on his heels.

But something smooth and slippery brushed his face as he crossed the threshold. Instinctive panic flaring in him, he threw himself sidewise.

Before he could hit the ground, rubbery tentacles swept about him. In a black delirium of movement, he found himself caught up and lifted; crushed close to a gelid, barrel-like body.

Desperately, he tried to twist free, fight clear. But a dozen discs clung to him with vicious suction. Every move he made seemed to draw the tentacles tighter —crushing him; squeezing the very breath from his body.

Now one had looped about his throat, a living rope to cut the blood off from his brain. Glines' screams seemed dim and far away. The sky held too many stars.

Then thunder rocked the night—the thunder of a heavy Colt, fired at close range. For the fraction of a second, the tentacles' hold relaxed. Stone's feet touched the ground. Tearing his throat free, he gulped in a tremendous, sobbing breath.

"Joe!" he shouted. "Joe, shoot for the band, the belt —"

Nightmare-like, in the same instant the tentacles once again constricted. He had no more breath—not for shouting, nor for breathing either.

But the Colt roared like an echo, so close now that the powder-fumes stung Stone's nostrils. The monster's barrel-body rocked under hammer-blows of impact. Fluid spilled across Stone's legs in a chilling gush.

Then he was free, falling, slammed to the gravel. Tentacles writhed across him in a rush.

Rolling, Stone lurched up.

The monster that had held him now clutched Bjornberg. In a raging frenzy, its tentacles swung the sergeant high into the air wrenching at his body. His head lolled—loose, horribly disjointed.

Then, with cataclysmic violence, the thing hurled him from it. He crashed against the brick wall of the building; spilled down in a crumpled heap beside a sodden form that could only be Glines' body.

Stone turned and ran.

Ahead of him, a second monster swept out from behind the building. Stone kept to his course, straight at the thing. If asked, he could not have told why. Perhaps it was bravado, perhaps desperation.

Or perhaps pure madness.

The creature hesitated, its tentacles flickering in a way that was almost startled. Then, abruptly, it drew back, as if suddenly wary—not quite certain of Stone's potential.

Beyond it, the jeep loomed. Stone made it in a final rush; vaulted into the driver's seat. Kicking the motor to life, he wheeled the vehicle around in a screaming

curve, jammed the accelerator to the floor, and raced for the main gate.

In seconds, the entrance came into view. Stone started to apply the brakes.

But the gate stood open. No guards appeared to challenge his exit.

Beyond the fence, the street stretched bare and empty, with no sign of blockading troops.

Stone bore down on the gas once more. He still didn't dare to pause to think; not yet. The horror still clung too close. Too many things hung unexplained.

Things like why the firing back at Reva's project building hadn't drawn a half-track full of guards. Why the gate stood open. Why the streets were empty, the housing units dark.

But such were trivia; they could wait. He only knew his friends were dead, and what he had to do.

Number Ten Q Street, Northeast. Reva's prefab.

But no light in the windows.

Stone spun the jeep right at the next corner; headed back west towards the Central Project Building, with its bright lights and strange new tower.

Then, ahead, a white-striped barrier caught his lights. It blocked the street.

Stone braked the jeep.

Half-a-dozen soldiers stood grouped to one side of the crossbar. Before Stone could even speak, two of them hurriedly slung their rifles, moved the barrier

out of the way, and waved him on. They made no move to halt or check him.

The area beyond looked like a full-scale military operation—barricades, barbed wire, sandbagged strong points, machine guns.

Hands slick on the jeep's wheel, still not daring to ask questions, Stone maneuvered his vehicle through the narrow corridor left open.

He reached the fence that circled the Central Project Area ... passed through the gate.

On the other side, thronging civilians milled and muttered. A single word, rising from a thousand throats, pulsed at him wave-like:

"Monsters ... monsters ... monsters ... monsters ...."

Of a sudden, Stone understood it all—the barricades, the darkened houses; the open gates, the lack of questions.

New chills ran through him. He cursed the icy sweat that drenched his body.

Slowed by the crowd, the jeep was more hindrance now than help. Abandoning it, Stone pushed his way towards the square, squat block of the Central Project Building.

A private with rifle and fixed bayonet barred the entrance. A corporal sang out. "Hold it, Mister!"

Stone said tightly, "You hold it—if you want to take the responsibility. I've got information about this business."

A lieutenant moved up. "Talk ahead, Mister. I'll listen."

"I'll talk—to the base director. And he's the only

one."

The lieutenant's eyes narrowed. "What's your name, Mister?"

"Carl Stone."

"Carl Stone—!" Visibly, the officer stiffened. He shoved the private aside; elbowed back the corporal. "Come on, then! What are you waiting for?"

In seconds, they were at the door of MacDougal's second-floor office.

The base director sat hunched over his desk, snapping hard, clipped words into a phone. His broad face looked drawn and haggard, and the hand with which he pushed back his stiff, greying hair seemed not too steady.

Stone's gaze flicked to Reva Adams.

She occupied a chair in one corner. Only in the faint shadows beneath her eyes did she show any trace of the tension that radiated from the base director. For the rest, she was as always—sleek, lovely, all woman, her blonde hair swept smoothly back and falling to her shoulders, her firm body filling out the silken sheath of her dress.

Even the sight of her sent fury surging through Stone. Pushing past the lieutenant, he stalked into the room. "Hang up that phone, Mac. You've got company."

Reva jerked in her chair. Her hand flew to her throat.

The base director's massive head came around sharply. He started up from his seat. "Carl—!"

"Right. Alive and breathing." There was no good humor in the words, the way Stone said them. He heeled shut the door, closing out the lieutenant.

"Carl, we thought you were dead."

"I'm not blaming you, Mac. Not you." Stone jerked his head towards Reva. "Her, I'm not so sure of."

"Doctor Adams—?" MacDougal stared at him blankly. "What do you mean, Carl?"

"I mean I've found out the nature of her project." Grimly, Stone pivoted to face the woman. "How about it, Reva? What's the explanation for that electronic brain-trap I found out in your building?"

Her slim hands moved nervously in her lap. Her eyes dodged his. "I—I don't know what you mean."

"You don't?" Stone made an elaborate business of surprise. And then, slashing out, hard and savage: "I'll tell you, then. I'm talking about that transmitter you had locked in your storeroom—that humming, buzzing little devil-machine that kept this whole base half-crazy till I smashed it!"

MacDougal's heavy fist hammered on the desk. "Damn it, Carl! Talk sense!"

"I am talking sense—the only sense anybody's heard around here in the past two weeks!" Stone roared him down. "Has it occurred to you that you feel a little differently about me now than you did a couple of hours ago?"

The base director suddenly looked sheepish. "Oh, that—" He groped vaguely. "I—well, I don't know what got into me, Carl. Nervous strain, maybe. The pressure of sweating out the big project, here; all the worry, the being afraid it wouldn't work out right...."

“And then, awhile ago, all of a sudden you knew that it was foolish, didn’t you? That I wasn’t crazy, or a traitor, or a murderer, or anything else except what I’d always been?”

“Well—well, yes.” MacDougal brushed perspiration from his chin. “As soon as I got back here, and stopped to think it over—”

“You mean, as soon as I smashed that machine! Bjornberg, Glines—they both snapped out of the fog when I did it, right before my eyes.”

“Glines? Bjornberg?” MacDougal’s head came up. “I’ve had a call out for them. Where are they?”

Tight-lipped, Stone fought down the wave of sickness that rose in him. “They’re dead, Mac. Dead. Killed by the monsters that everybody claimed I didn’t see.”

“Dead....” Face sagging, the base director slumped into his chair.

“I’m as sorry as you are, Mac. But that’s not enough.” Stone pushed in, driving his words hard. “What’s important is now, the living. They’re the ones we’ve got to think about.”

“Yes. Of course.” MacDougal’s voice still echoed dull and empty.

“So the first point’s to get it across that I’m not crazy, that I’m telling the truth: Last night, that transmitter out at Reva’s building wouldn’t let you believe me. Then, when I smashed it, and everybody snapped back to normal, the monsters came—so many of them that you’ve had to clear the base, move all personnel into the Central Project Area for protection.”

“But how—?”

"How do the monsters tie in with the transmitter, you mean?" Stone shook his head curtly. "I wouldn't know. But I'm going to find out. Our good friend Doctor Adams is going to tell us all about it."

He turned towards her chair.

It was empty.

Stone went numb inside; spun about by reflex.

The office door stood an inch ajar. Reva was gone.

MacDougal cursed, surged up from his seat. "Come on!" Like a raging grizzly, he charged across the office and out into the hall.

Stone started to follow. Then, braking, he whirled and jumped to the window. Savagely, he jerked it open and thrust out his head.

Off to the right, below him, Reva was walking briskly out the building's main entrance, a picture of calm, cool poise.

Stone clutched the sill; looked down.

A soldier wearing an MP brassard stood directly beneath him. Stone shouted, "You, soldier! MP! Get that woman!"

The man looked up, startled; then to the right, following Stone's frantic gesture.

But the words had reached Reva, too. She swung round in mid-stride, her eyes wide with panic. The MP galloped towards her. Whirling, she fled right—away from her pursuer; off towards the corner of the building.

Stone ran for the hall, only to crash into MacDougal, returning.

The base director's face was flushed. He was panting.

“I couldn’t find her, Carl—”

“Forget it. She’s trapped. Just wait in your office.” Stone headed for the stairs at a dead run.

Outside at last, then, he spotted the MP. The man waved and gestured.

Stone went limp with relief. The soldier had Reva gripped firmly by the arm.

Stone started towards them.

Only then, suddenly, out in the open area in front of the building, a civilian gave a startled cry and pointed skyward.

Simultaneously, a high, shrill drone pulsed through the night, louder every second.

Stone looked up sharply.

Overhead, pinpoints of light were sweeping down in tight formation, converging on the Central Project Area. Lower they raced, and lower, wheeling in a spiral that would have been the envy of any jet.

Out in the crowd, a woman screamed hysterically. A man whirled, sprinting for cover.

In an instant, panic swept through the multitude like a living thing. Shrieking, bolting, clawing, civilians and soldiers alike fled in all directions.

Heart pounding, Stone pressed flat against the building.

Now one of the lights peeled off from the formation. Bullet-fast, it lanced towards the spot where Stone stood, so low that it almost seemed to skim the

ground.

He drew a quick, shallow breath, with the feeling that it must surely be his last.

Only then the thing spun into an arc, bare yards away from him. For an instant it hovered almost motionless, barely three feet in the air, before riding a beam of purple flame from its base down to the ground.

Stone could see it better now. A tripod of tall, thin metal legs supported a blocky central unit that vaguely resembled a cake ice-cream cup with a broad lip flaring at the top. Light glinted from three eye-like protuberances set close against the brim.

While Stone watched, the purple beam that speared down from the center of the body unit turned scarlet, then dazzling pink. At the same time, two funnel-shaped appendages detached themselves from the base and darted out, cobra-like, in either direction along the building's wall on slender tentacles of cable.

Off to Stone's right, a shout rang out. Then a shot.

He turned just in time to glimpse the tentacle flick out like a whiplash at the MP who'd captured Reva. Its funnel-shaped end struck him in the chest—a blow so violent that even Stone could hear it hit.

The man staggered back; sank to the ground.

Paying him no heed, the cable flipped high into the air, coiling as it rose.

Then, writhing like a living thing, it was descending ... slapping down at Reva Adams. Her scream rang wild and ragged. Like one possessed, she darted out from the building, blonde hair streaming.

Deftly, the cable-coil shifted, pulling tight even as it dropped its loop around her.

Tripping, she plunged to the ground.

In spite of himself, without volition, Stone lunged towards her. Unreasoning panic roweled him with razor spurs.

Almost as if timing itself to his charge, the cable-tentacle threw another loop around the struggling woman, then swept her high into the air above Stone's head just as he reached the spot where she had lain.

Desperately, he leaped straight up, clawing for the cable.

Snake-like, it writhed out of reach, leaving him to fall back cursing on the gravel.

Now he saw the other tentacle's destination.

And its victim.

It was MacDougal.

The funnel-like cable-end had suckered onto his great chest and dragged him bodily out his office window. Now, still at second-story level, heedless of his struggles, the line itself twisted and looped about him half-a-dozen times, binding him tight.

Simultaneously, the flame-jet from the strange robot's base deepened to its original purple.

As the color changed, the weird craft lifted, higher into the air, and higher. Already, it had begun to pick up its characteristic spiral motion.

In the same instant, the other robots swept down, still in their tight formation. The shrill drone of the sound they gave forth welled ear-splitting, deafening.

Smoothly, the unit that had landed resumed its place within the pattern, its sagging prisoners hugged against it.

As one, the robots soared away, out across the encircling desert till light and sound alike were swallowed in the night.

CHAPTER VI

The moment that followed the flying robots' departure stretched endlessly. Seconds ticked by with Stone barely aware that they were passing. He could only stand there in mute, helpless frustration, staring up at the sky where the cones had vanished.

Out of the night they had come; into that same night they had retreated.

Only there was more to it than that.

Because they'd taken Reva and MacDougal with them. That, obviously, had been the whole purpose of their raid.

Nor had their victims gone willingly. No one who had seen those blanched, fear-stricken faces could believe they had.

No. If there'd been a plot—if Reva had really helped the monsters by setting up the transmitter at her project building—then that plot had now reversed itself, gone sour.

It was a mad twist—shattering; mind-shaking.

And it forced a whole new orientation.

For Stone, it was suddenly more than he could take or grasp. He slumped against the wall; buried his face in his hands.

Then, from all directions, sound rose and swept in and impinged upon him—a hoarse babble of voices that echoed overtones of panic.

He let his hands fall; looked up and out.

The teeming mass of humanity crammed into Central Project Area seethed like churned water. Shouts of rage rang out ... roars of indignation, women's high-voice protests, the fear-straught cries of frightened children.

While Stone watched, the troops drew in to form a tight, bayonet-bristling cordon about the Project Building, thrusting the civilians back.

Numb, drained, Stone turned from the scene and made his way to the main entrance.

A half-track stood drawn up close by it, with a lieutenant colonel barking orders into a radiophone. Pausing, Stone listened long enough to ascertain that the man was talking to the commander of an armored unit on maneuver somewhere out in the desert—calling it in to reinforce the troops stationed at the base in case of further robot raids or incursions by the monsters.

Chaos, Unlimited.

Shaking his head wearily, Stone went on into the building and headed for the first-floor snack bar.

The place was deserted, save for a little knot of research men who sat talking animatedly at a table beside a blaring radio at the far end of the room.

In spite of himself, Stone's lips twisted wryly. Leave it to Research. Let Earth itself collapse, and its intellectual stalwarts would still forget panic in their eagerness to argue the dynamics of the breakup.

The girl at the coffee urn gave him a wan smile. "Coffee, Mr. Stone?"

"Jug of black," Stone grunted. "I need something to

help me do some thinking."

Still talking, two of the research men came up behind him while he waited.

"... that confounded tower, that's what gets me," the first was saying. "With MacDougal gone, what do we do about it?"

"Then what Crawford said's true? Nobody except MacDougal actually knows the purpose of it?"

"You're so right. I was there when he gave the orders on it, a week-and-a-half ago. He was so excited he could hardly keep his pants on; but when Grimorski asked him what the idea was, he just stuck out his eyebrows and told Grim to mind his own business."

The second man whistled. "It puts us on a spot, then, doesn't it?"

"Spot's hardly the name for it. That tower doesn't tie in with The Project at all, except maybe for using some of the big equipment."

The girl at the coffee urn handed Stone his cup and jug. Mechanically, he took them, paid her, and stepped back out of the way of the research men.

But his mind was racing, groping. He made no move to find a table.

"One with cream and one without," the second research man told the girl. And then, speaking again to his companion: "I was talking to Santos about it. He says the only thing he can figure it for is some kind of king-size electrolytic cracker. Only it's too big to make sense, and it'd have to work on some off-

beat principle that doesn't tie in with accepted theories on ionization."

"Even if it did, what would the monstrosity decompose? The atmosphere?" This from the first man. "No; I can't buy that, Dawes. If you ask me, it doesn't do anything at all."

"Oh, now, don't push those snap judgments of yours too far, Quinn." The second man looked half-worried, half-amused. "After all, why would MacDougal order the thing built, if it didn't have some function?"

"What's the obvious answer?" the man called Quinn snorted. "Our base director's cracked, that's all. The strain got too much for him. He saw how things were going on The Project—that it just wasn't going to work out, even if it was his idea and his baby. He simply couldn't take it. So, he compensated by coming up with a new super-secret brainstorm that's as nutty as a Rube Goldberg invention."

The other research man frowned. "You really think so?"

"What else is there to think? Can you come up with any other explanation?"

"But MacDougal—damn it, Quinn, he's outstanding, brilliant—"

"The smarter they are, the wider they split. It's happened before. A man stakes his career on a job; oversells an idea. Then it falls flat. He sees his whole scientific reputation flying out the window. Unless he's mighty stable, the next stop's Bellevue."

Cups in hand, the two research men started to move away, back to their table.

For the fraction of a second, Stone hesitated. Then, abruptly, he stepped forward. “Pardon me....”

The pair halted. The first man half-turned. “What —?”

Stone said, “I’m Carl Stone. Security. I couldn’t help overhearing—”

The second man flinched visibly, slopping his coffee. His thin face paled a trifle.

His companion stood steady. “Go ahead.” His voice was cool, not too friendly.

Stone made a placatory gesture. “Believe me, I’m not trying to give you trouble. There’ll be no nonsense about reporting anybody, no matter what. But some strange things have happened on this base lately. I need information—and maybe you two are the ones who can give it to me.” He nodded to the nearest table. “How about letting me have five minutes, over coffee?”

“I’ve got nothing to hide. What I said’s for the record.” The first man stepped to the table, dropped into a chair. The second followed, less enthusiastically.

Stone filled his cup from the jug and leaned back, hunting for the right words. “You think there’s a possibility that The Project’s a failure?” he asked finally.

“Possibility, my eye. It’s a thousand per cent certain.” The first man, the one called Quinn, stirred in sugar. “Has been, for nearly a month now. But MacDougal won’t give up. Because he doesn’t know

it? No; it's because he's scared to."

Stone frowned at Dawes. "You agree?"

The man stared down into his coffee. "I'm afraid so."

"Then why hasn't it been reported—to Washington, I mean?"

"That's—that's the base director's responsibility."

"And this other business? The tower?" Stone spoke to Quinn, this time.

"You've got me there, mister." The man made a business of shrugging. "I've screamed loud enough about it, but no one would listen. I guess they think griping's just a habit with me, on account of my encephalitis."

Stone stiffened. "*Encephalitis*—?"

"A brain disease. I picked it up in the flu epidemic of 1918, when I was a kid. Doesn't bother my thinking, but I'll admit it shortcircuits my disposition sometimes."

"So—"—with difficulty, Stone held his voice level —"so, you didn't think much of the tower?"

"That's right. I didn't. But everyone else was so hipped on it they wouldn't listen—even Dawes, here, had the bug. For better than a week, they all went around acting like it was the hottest thing since blondes were invented, and the most important, even when in the next breath they'd have to admit they didn't know what it was supposed to do or how it worked. I was the only one in the place who wouldn't join their club. I think they'd have fired me, if they'd had a replacement. As it was, the supervisor just swore I was crazy and let it go at that."

"I see." Stone gripped his cup between his palms,

trying to hide his hands' sudden trembling.

Slowly, slowly, the pieces were falling into place.

Two weeks ago, more or less, Reva Adams had been assigned to research a mysterious project at this base.

Shortly thereafter, the transmitter at her building had gone into action.

Immediately, the thinking of the entire body of personnel had grown distorted—as witness MacDougal's order to build an apparently useless tower in the face of The Project's alleged failure.

Then he, Carl Stone, had returned—and the transmitter hadn't affected him, save to make him abnormally tense and irritable and nervous.

Reva had diagnosed him as an encephalitis victim.

And now, in Quinn, he'd discovered another encephalitic—and apparently Quinn's thinking hadn't been distorted by the transmitter, either! He'd retained his judgment, his ability to analyze and reason, in spite of admitted irritability and tension.

In other words, whatever else the transmitter might have done, it hadn't been able to influence encephalitic intellects.

Why?

Staring at his cup, Stone pondered.

"*There's tissue damage*," Reva had said, "*and, later, of course, residual lesions. Ganglion cells and neurons degenerate or disappear*."

That meant that the functioning of the brain was changed, impaired.

The transmitter at Reva's project building pulsed out

waves that distorted the thinking of normal brains.

But encephalitics didn't have normal brains. The disease destroyed cells, burned out synapses.

So, in them, the transmitter merely heightened tension. Scar tissue slashed gaps its impulses couldn't bridge.

Of a sudden Stone felt better than he had in days. This discovery—it was a step forward; a long, long step.

The only trouble was, he still had so far to go.

For instance, where did the monsters fit into the picture?

The robots?

How did they link to the transmitter?

And—the thought came in spite of all his efforts to shut it out—to Reva?

Because there *was* a link. There had to be. The problem was only to establish the chain of logic.

He took another sip of coffee; spoke as much to himself as to his companions: "First, I smashed the transmitter. Then, the monsters came—"

"The monsters—?" The thinfaced Dawes hunched forward eagerly, seeming glad for the sudden change of subject. "I haven't heard anything about a transmitter. But these monsters—now there's something I can get my teeth in!"

"You can have 'em," Quinn grunted sourly. "Me, I wouldn't get my teeth in a monster if I was starving."

"No kidding, Quinn! I just wish I'd have seen one!" Dawes' brown eyes sparkled. "They're aliens, obviously—extraterrestrials from some other planet. Also, they've mastered space travel—which means they're superior to humans, no matter what they look like. Look how they handled the business with the robots—kidnapping our base director as a hostage, along with a psychiatrist to give 'em a hand at figuring out our mental mechanisms. Personally, I don't think there'd have been any trouble with them whatever, if people hadn't panicked. But when those women out in the prefabs saw 'em—all tentacles and whatnot—everybody stopped thinking. The troops didn't do any good, either. The aliens didn't have any choice but to fight back, once the lead started flying...."

The monsters. The tentacles.

The dead woman. Glines. Bjornberg.

Without avail, Stone tried to black out the picture. In spite of himself, he shuddered.

He knew, then, that for him there could never be any compromise with the strange creatures. No matter what he should learn, regardless of any answers the future might uncover, he could never hope to throw off his horror. His memories were too black, too bitter.

Dawes was still talking: "... and I wonder how many of us have ever stopped to consider the functional aspects of multiple tentacles. Just think how handy it'd be to have suction cups on the ends of your fingers! It's as great an evolutionary development as the thumb! And there's the business of having the tentacles on both ends of the body, too—your feet get tired, so you turn upside down and walk on the

other end. The stripe around the middle is probably a sensor band—a continuous nerve unit that sees, hears, tastes, smells; that is, assuming they have our senses. Or maybe they ingest their food from the air, by osmosis, the way a frog does water—"

The flow of words showed no signs of stopping. All at once, Stone could take no more. He had to be alone, to think.

Abruptly, he rose. "Quinn—Dawes—I want to thank you both," he interrupted. "You've been a big help—more than you know."

He started to turn.

As he did so, the blaring radio down by the other occupied table went into a sudden, crackling spasm, then fell silent.

A coffee-drinker rose, reached for the dials.

But before he could touch them, the radio blared again. A voice spoke—a strange, metallic voice like none that Stone had ever heard:

"Base! Development base called Las Crescentes! I speaking to you!"

Stone went rigid. Chairs scraped at the other table.

"Listen, Base! I speaking!"

The man who had risen from the far table twisted the volume dial.

"Listen, Base! Listen, Base! Listen, Base...." The level of the strange voice stayed constant.

The man moved the selector.

The voice came in on all bands.

The man stumbled back, white-faced and shaking.

An icy finger ran up and down Stone's spine.

The clanging, harsh, metallic voice went on: "Listen, Base! I here at World Earth from world you not know. I get element you call krypton. Must have. Take out you air. Not hurt."

Stone groped. "Krypton—?"

Quinn speaking: "Inert gas, one part in six or seven hundred thousand in normal atmosphere."

The voice again: "Must have! Take! You help, I not hurt."

"Aliens!" Dawes' nails scraped the table. "I was right! I was right!"

The voice: "Tower take. You run. Must have!"

"'Tower take'?" Quinn's eyes narrowed. "My God! You don't suppose—"

"Listen, Base—!"

A pause.

Then, a new voice on the speaker, deep and familiar. MacDougal's voice, thick with tension.

"John MacDougal speaking."

Stone gripped the back of his chair so hard his knuckles ached.

MacDougal: "As you've probably guessed, our visitors tonight are from—elsewhere. Another planet. Maybe even another solar system. I'm not quite sure. There's a problem in communication. They don't have anything like what we'd term normal speech apparatus. They'd tried to get around it with the

mechanical substitute you just heard, but it's pretty limited."

A pause, vibrant with nerve-shattering silence.

"Anyhow, they want krypton. Why, I don't know. They just keep saying 'Must have!'"

Another pause, longer this time.

Stone's muscles were knotting.

"This krypton—we're to get it for them." MacDougal sounded old and frightened now. "They've even equipped us to do the job. It seems they've—been around quite a while. A couple of weeks, anyhow. So they did a little mind control work on one of our people, Doctor Reva Adams. Again, I don't quite know how; probably they're telepaths—maybe that's how they communicate with each other. In any case, they maneuvered things so she set up a transmitter that induced what amounted to a mild paranoia in all base personnel." A short laugh, more panic than mirth. "Including me, the base director...."

With an effort, Stone twisted the chair about and sat down. Within him, the tension kept climbing. If it went on—wildly, he wondered if a man could feel his own sanity slipping away....

MacDougal again, sounding more like himself this time: "Sorry, friends. I'm all right, and so is Doctor Adams. Just chalk up any breaks I make to nerves...." He spoke less jerkily now. His voice came through the radio's amplifier strong and steady.

Stone's tension ebbed a fraction. He leaned forward, concentrating on the base director's every word:

"... I spoke of paranoia. As you may know, the disorder's marked by systematized delusions and hallucinations. In my own case, these centered on a conviction that I'd developed a new and revolutionary approach to The Project. Backing it up, I ordered construction of the equipment that now occupies the tower on top of the Central Project Building. In turn, the rest of you fell into a pattern that blocked off any questioning of my judgment, and built up resistance—extreme hostility, in fact—to any thought or suggestion that might threaten the work or the aliens.

"Actually, of course, my 'new development' had nothing whatever to do with The Project. On the contrary. The only function the device has is to extract krypton from the atmosphere as fast and efficiently as possible. How it works, I can't say; the design's so different from anything we know that I'm inclined to think it's based on scientific principles completely outside our experience.

"Some of you may wonder why these aliens picked our base as a place to set up their operation. Apparently there were two reasons: First, The Project involved materials and a good deal of hard-to-fabricate equipment that they needed for their krypton extraction process. Second, Las Crescentes is isolated. Their mind-control transmitter blanketed us without overlapping into any other inhabited areas, so they didn't have to worry about outside interference.

"That brings up another point: These creatures have a wave-shielding device that tops anything we know. That's how they cut in on your radios with this broadcast. It also blocks off your transmitters and telephone equipment, so don't waste time trying to

get outside help.

“Getting back to the other aspects of the situation, this is the way it stacks up: If everything had gone according to plan, we’d have finished the extraction unit in the tower, drained Earth’s atmosphere of krypton, and delivered it to these aliens. Probably we wouldn’t even have realized what we’d done till after they’d left the planet.

“Fortunately or unfortunately, though, something went wrong. One of our base security men, Carl Stone, was in Washington when these creatures moved in. Last night he got back. For some reason neither the aliens nor I can quite figure out, the paranoia transmitter didn’t affect him. He recognized that something was wrong on the base, and he wouldn’t be pressured into letting it slide. In less time than seems possible, he located the transmitter and smashed it.

“The moment the transmitter went off, the aliens knew something was wrong. They moved in on the base.

“Our troops stopped that, fast. The aliens saw they’d have to fight a pitched battle to take over. They drew back instead. Maybe they’re humanitarians. Or maybe they were afraid the tower might be wrecked if shooting started. I don’t know.

“Anyhow, they sent the flying robots for Doctor Adams and me. We’re hostage-interpreters, I gather.

“That brings up the reason I’m talking. I’m supposed to tell you what they want you to do.

“It’s simple enough: Just finish the krypton extractor according to plan just as fast as possible—they figure twenty-four hours ought to do the job.

“Then, put it into operation. They’ll supply cylinders to store the krypton.

“Once it’s aboard their ship, they’ll turn Doctor Adams and me loose and be on their way to wherever they’re going.

“They want me to hit it hard that this won’t cost us anything. To us, krypton’s just an inert gas with no practical value. To them, for some reason, it’s vital. They say they’ll even pay us off for it by giving us whatever scraps of scientific information they’ve got that we’re capable of absorbing.

“On the other hand—”—now MacDougal’s voice developed the faintest of tremors—“if we don’t go along a hundred per cent, they promise immediate, utter and complete destruction of the base, and extermination of all personnel—after which, they’ll pick another site for their plant and try again.”

The base director paused, then; hesitated, fumbled while the silence echoed.

In the snack bar, tension climbed and eddied like a thermal updraft. Stone could hear the harsh rasp of his companions’ breathing.

For his own part, he dared not even suck in air, for fear his self-control would crack.

“I guess that’s all,” MacDougal said at last. Again, as at the beginning, his voice suddenly sounded old and frightened. “I’m in no position to try to influence your decision. I don’t have the right to tell you what to do, or how to do it. Make up your own minds and —and good luck—”

He broke off. Once more, the silence echoed.

Then, like a thunder-clap, the alien’s clanging,

metallic voice cut in—harsh, savage: “Listen, Base! I speaking! Get krypton! Must have!

“Get krypton—or die!”

The radio went dead....

CHAPTER VII

Fear stalked the base. It hung in the air ... seeped through the hush ... showed in trembling hands and on strained faces.

Stone felt it, too. Fear and something else.

Something that crawled and gnawed and ached within him. Something that reached out spidery tendrils to the farthest cell of his very being.

It came out in a name, pulsing in his brain: Reva ... Reva ... Reva....

He paced the night, hour after hour. But nowhere, nohow, could he escape her. Misty and wraithlike, her face swayed before him. The soft curve of her cheek, the scent of her hair, the taste of her lips—they wouldn't leave him alone.

Her eyes were the worst: Gentle grey eyes, imploring....

He cursed aloud in the stillness.

Only there was nothing he could do. Nothing.

Seething, he sought out the headquarters.

A young captain looked up as he entered.

Stone said, "Well? What's the decision?"

"Decision?" The officer shrugged. "We're still waiting. That tank unit's coming. We got through to it before the bugs clamped down their wave-shield."

"But Doctor Adams—MacDougal—"

"The base comes first. We can't risk it—not just for two prisoners."

Stone choked harsh words off unspoken. Pivoting, he strode back out into the darkness.

A whole base, versus two prisoners.

Calculated risk, and the greatest good of the greatest number.

The commandant's attitude made sense. Of course it did.

Except for one thing:

One of the prisoners was Reva.

Only that was individual, personal, a pain deep inside him. The commandant didn't know about that. And even if he did, he couldn't afford to let it matter.

The answer? Stone scuffed at the gravel. That was the trouble: There just wasn't any answer.

Or was there?

Suppose you reversed the equation, turned the figures upside down.

The commandant saw two lives against thousands. That was his duty.

But for him, Carl Stone, it was different. He had one life; that was all.

One life, to gamble for two. His own neck to risk, on the off chance that he might save MacDougal and Reva.

It was a good thought. It made the odds look different.

Stone laughed abruptly. Who was he kidding? The odds didn't matter, nor even MacDougal. Reva was

the one who counted, and Reva only.

Because he loved her. In spite of everything, he loved her.

It was decision.

Stone's breathing quickened. All at once he felt alive again, no longer numb or bowed down. The years, the bitterness, the heartbreak—like shackles struck off, as one they fell away. Cool, purposeful, his stride firm, he struck out towards the Central Project Area's main gate.

The weary guards waved him by on the strength of his security pass. Beyond the last barrier, then, he broke into a dogtrot and stayed with it all the way to the administration building lot where his car was parked.

One brief detour, to his quarters to pick up a thirty-eight. Then out onto the highway, heading east towards the spot where he'd watched the woman die.

The sky was greying now, along the horizon far ahead; another day aborning, out of the chill shadows of a desert dawn.

Bleakly, Stone wondered if he'd live to see it end.

Then tire-churned gravel marked the turn-off point. Slowing to low gear, Stone wrenched the steering wheel around and bumped off the road, out across the shoulder into the open desert.

The trail the woman had left proved surprisingly easy to follow, still—a broken creosote bush here, kicked-over clumps of fishhook cactus there, ground

shoe-scraped in between.

The tracks pointed to a high, rocky tableland perhaps three miles back from the road.

What was it the dying woman had said—"robots beyond the mesa"—?

The back of Stone's neck prickled.

His car gave out less than three-quarters of a mile from the road, ambushed by rocks and a mesquite tree.

Stolidly, Stone abandoned it and set out on foot. The trail, at first so clear, had vanished now, so he set his course for the mesa and hoped for the best.

Slowly, the sun edged up. The day began to warm.

Stone plodded on, dodging cactus and keeping a sharp eye out for snakes.

He was nearly to the hill when he heard the helicopter. Before he could find a place to hide, it was hovering directly overhead ... settling slowly, rotor whishing.

Hastily, Stone slid his gun out of sight beneath his coat and stood waiting.

Landing on a nearby patch of open ground, the whirlybird's pilot threw open the door. "Hey, you!"

"Yes?" Stone picked his way toward the craft. "What is it?"

The pilot scowled. "You're out of bounds. I got orders to come out and pick you up. The CO's taking no chances of getting those bugs stirred up till he knows just where we stand."

"I might have known that gateguard would say something about me." Stone managed a rueful smile.

“Well, so goes it....”

He clambered into the helicopter not even protesting; closed the door. The pilot manipulated the controls. The engine roared. Slowly, the ’copter rose, straight up into the air.

Stone reached beneath his coat. Not even bothering to speak, he brought out the thirty-eight and leveled it at the other’s side.

“Hey!” The pilot stiffened. “Put that thing away. You want to get into trouble?”

“I’m already in it, friend,” Stone said gently. “I might as well go whole hog.” He gestured with the revolver’s muzzle. “Let’s have a look on the other side of that mesa.”

Muttering, the pilot sent the helicopter higher.

Only then, before they had more than reached the edge of the tableland, a sound bore in upon them ... a high, shrill, droning sound....

It was Stone’s turn to stiffen. Swiveling in his seat, he peered out, searching.

Beyond the mesa, a flight of the flying robots climbed into view in a swift, tight spiral, swirling up and around straight into the morning sun.

Simultaneously, the pilot exclaimed, “Look—! The tanks!”

Stone strained his eyes.

Far off in the eastern desert, tiny beetle-like vehicles ground slowly towards them, churning up long streamers of dust. A distant sound of firing, heavy guns, echoed on the morning breeze.

In the same instant, the first of the tanks lurched

from its path. The distance was too great for Stone to tell just what had happened. He only knew that the armored titan was veering, jerking, rolling over.

A fraction of a second later it disappeared in a spurting, concussive burst of flame.

Now beyond it, a second vehicle was in trouble. A third.

The fourth exploded like a gigantic exclamation point of fire.

From then on, the battle turned into a rout.

With no survivors.

Sickness twisted at Stone's belly. Fighting it down, he swung back to the pilot. "I won't risk your neck, lieutenant. Land me on the mesa, and be on your way."

Wordless, the pilot shifted the whirlybird's controls, setting the 'copter down on a rocky plateau.

"If your CO bawls you out, remind him I had a gun," Stone said. He opened the door; jumped to the ground.

The helicopter was rising again almost before he could turn.

But not for long.

Because suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, half-a-dozen flying robots swooped down.

Stone never could be sure that the pilot even saw them. They came that fast.

As they passed over the 'copter, the one in the lead

dipped slightly.

A tentacle speared out, whipped round; stabbed into the blur of spinning rotor blades.

Then it caught, with a jerk so violent that the robot spun from its course, too fast for the eye to follow.

But only for a moment. Then, bobber-like, it came into balance again, the rotor still dangling from the tentacle.

Like a crippled bird, the helicopter plunged earthward ... struck with a rending crash ... shattered into flames.

Shuddering, Stone crouched motionless in the shadow of a boulder.

Yet, incredibly, the robots gave no sign that they sensed his presence. A moment later they were gone.

Tight-lipped, Stone left his haven and trudged on across the mesa. A mile. Two.

Then, abruptly, the tableland fell away before him. Dropping flat on his belly by the rim, he stared down in grim fascination into the canyon below; for there, surely, lay one of the strangest things the eyes of man had ever seen.

It was a sphere—a shining gigantic metal ball, fully three hundred feet in diameter, if Stone could judge. No lines or ports or crevices marred its gleaming surface. Nowhere about it could he see any sign of life.

Quickly he drew back from the rim, well out of view of the sphere. Then, rising, he strode left, following the mesa's edge till he came to a spot where the eroded lip cut back enough to hide him from the globe-shaped craft.

Slipping and falling, bruising and tearing, he descended to the canyon's floor, then made his way back towards the sphere.

Here, studying it at a lower level from a hidden vantage-point amid the talus, he gained a better, clearer picture. Three stubby legs gave the globe balance on the uneven bedrock of the canyon floor. A broad, inclined ramp led to a slot-like belly hatch. Of monsters or robots he could see no trace.

Stone sucked in air—a long, deep breath. This was the thing he'd sought, the aliens' ship; and now he'd found it.

To what avail?

Somewhere in its maw, by all odds, lay Reva and MacDougal. Yet what could he do about it? How could he, alone and armed only with his Smith & Wesson, hope to invade it or to save them?

But he'd known the odds before he started—and he'd still come. Logic and hazard simply had no bearing.

Surging up, gun in hand, he moved warily forward, hugging the mesa wall.

Now he came abreast the sphere. The ramp to the belly hatch beckoned, smooth and inviting.

Inviting as madness.

A nervous spasm knotted Stone's belly. When it had passed, he stepped out from the wall, moved forward, cat-footed, towards the ramp.

Still nothing happened.

Going around the edge of the ramp, he peered up through the open hatch, into the sphere-ship.

The interior shone with a dim, greenish glow. Overhead loomed a bulwark. He could see nothing more. The stillness was deafening, unbroken save by the whisper of the desert breeze far above.

A new chill shook him.

He might have turned back, then. He almost did.

But in that same moment, as he started to draw away, a voice echoed thinly deep in the globe-craft. Reva's voice, ragged and strain-straught.

It caught Stone like a magnet. His doubts fell forgotten. Soundlessly, he swung up onto the ramp ... crept shadow-silent on into the hatchway.

A corridor yawned, dim in the ghostly green glow. Hardly daring to breathe, Stone sidled along it past doors, littered chambers.

It ended at a tube-like, vertical shaft set off by a guard-rail.

The ship's axis, probably.

Stone strained his ears, listening. Again Reva's voice came—louder, this time; vibrating down the shaft.

Swinging out over the guard-rail, Stone peered upward.

The shaft was smooth as glass—without hand-holds or bracing.

He dropped back to the corridor floor.

A closed double door to his left, next to the shaft, tempted him. He stepped towards it.

Like magic, it parted before him, silent as death. A steep ramp curved to the right, following the tube-shaft.

Finger tense on the thirty-eight's trigger, he moved up it, higher and higher.

Each ninety degrees arced brought a new door, a new level. When he approached them, they opened; when they opened he listened. And each time, Reva's voice sounded closer.

He could hear MacDougal, too, now, on occasion, speaking in rumbles. The very nearness brought sweat oozing. A dozen times he had to switch the gun from one hand to the other to scrub his palms dry of slickness.

Another level. Another. Another.

The level.

Tension drew a band tight over his chest—compressing, constricting. His neck ached. His blood pounded.

Jaws tight, gun-hand rigid, he moved down the passage.

A doorway. An open doorway, flooding out brighter, whiter light.

Back to the wall, Stone edged to it ... stared into the room it revealed.

Reva sat on a low, curving divan across from MacDougal. Her pale face showed deep strain-lines; her hands twisted, white-knuckled.

MacDougal's whole body sagged limp and exhausted. The shaggy brows stood out over eyes deep-sunk in dark hollows. His right arm hung in a sling.

Stone swayed for a moment, not daring to think, then slid forward—taut, noiseless.

MacDougal's head twitched. His eyes flicked towards

the doorway.

“Quiet—!” Stone shook as he whispered. “For God’s sake, be quiet!”

Reva, MacDougal—they both jerked like puppets.

Stone hissed, “This way—quick!”

MacDougal’s jowls quivered. His left hand gripped the divan as he heaved up from it.

Eyes distended, breasts rising and falling too fast, Reva followed.

Stone stepped back.

The tentacles folded round him, then.

He triggered his gun by sheer reflex.

The thirty-eight roared—wild, aimless. The bullet rang, bouncing off metal.

The tentacles only drew relentlessly tighter. One slapped at the gun, tore it loose from his fingers.

Another looped round his throat. It was like a nightmare—a mad repetition of that blood-curdling moment outside Reva’s building.

The tentacle drew tighter. Stone’s lungs exploded.

The blackness closed in....

CHAPTER VIII

The man beside Stone kept talking, talking:

“They let you get all the way in before they grabbed you, didn’t they? They like it like that—to lead you on, coax you, let you think you’re going to win before they kill you. That’s how they played it with me. And my wife. Did I tell you about her? They let her run and run, clear across the mesa. All the way down to the highway. Only then a car stopped, so they grabbed her and killed her. They told me about it. They thought it was the best joke ever....”

Stone tried to sit up, to focus on the speaker.

He fell instead, retching.

The man said, “Don’t worry. You’re not really hurt. It’s just those damn tentacles, those snake-things they use for arms. They choke you, and tear you, and scare you so you get sick just thinking about ’em. I know. I had it, that night on the mesa.”

“You—”—Stone half-choked—“—you ... saw robots?”

“Robots—?” A quavering laugh. “Sure, I saw robots. Robots on the mesa. That’s how it all started. Ellen and I—we didn’t know it was a government reservation. We were out for some fun. Some fun! Prospecting, believe it or not—prospecting for uranium with a home-made Geiger. Just a fool high-school science teacher and his wife, out on vacation. Only then we got up on the mesa, and I saw the robots. Ellen was scared, but I said, Let’s get closer.

So they saw us—the squids, here. Caught me. Killed Ellen. Poor Ellen....”

The man’s shoulders shook. Then jerked, harder and harder. Anguished sounds came from his throat in dry, racking spasms. “Poor Ellen—”

Stone fought his own stomach; won, lurched up, still panting. Slowly, his vision cleared.

Beside him, the stranger sobbed more wildly. He no longer seemed even aware of Stone’s presence. “Why’d they have to leave me, Ellen? Why didn’t they kill me, too? That’s what I wanted. But no, they had to have someone to go out in the sun. They can’t stand the sun, can they, Ellen? Oh—Ellen—!”

His voice rose to a shriek. His face came up into the light—cheeks and chin stubble-matted, eyes wild and staring.

With an effort, Stone reached out and caught one jerking shoulder. Savagely, he slapped the man’s face, palm and backhand.

The racking sobs slowed. Wonderingly, the man slumped to the floor, rubbing his cheek. “You—you hit me....” No anger rang in his words—only baffled incredulity, the puzzlement of a hurt child. His eyes stayed wide open, appallingly empty.

Pain under his breastbone, Stone said, “Sorry, friend. You were going to pieces. You’ve got to get steady or you won’t last long, here or elsewhere.”

“Last long? Last long?” The other fondled the words. “Who’s going to last long, once the squids get their krypton?” A wild giggle. “You know about krypton? Did they tell you?”

Stone felt himself stiffen.

"What about krypton?"

"Must have!" Again, the man giggled. "Can't run a spaceship without any krypton. Can't fly the robots. Can't even blast a little ole Earth city. 'Krypton! Must have!' They'll get it, too. From that base. It's already surrendered. The people were scared, just like we are. Especially after what happened to the tanks. So the whole base surrendered and started working on that extractor, the krypton extractor. They'll have it finished by tomorrow morning. Then the squids'll get their krypton. And they'll keep their promise too—not hurt anybody, leave right after they get it. They all say so. That'll be the best joke of all—a whole world doing a pratfall right into hell. The squids'll laugh and laugh and laugh, all the way back to Arcturus Four, or Betelgeuse, or wherever it is they come from. Except they can't go back. Not really. They're outlaws, you know, running away from their own species. That's how they happened to get this far from their source of krypton. 'Krypton! Must have!' Can't run a space ship without that vital krypton—"

The stiffness in Stone had turned to sudden chill. He caught the babbling man's shirtfront; shook him roughly. "Run that through again, ... the part about the joke, the world doing a pratfall!"

A vacuous smile. "You really don't know? You don't know about krypton? I thought only fool high-school science teachers didn't know. And Ellen. Poor Ellen —"

"The krypton! What about the krypton?"

"It's a gas, that's all. An inert gas. About two parts to a million of air. It's not worth anything. Nobody wants krypton. Nobody but the squids. Who cares about a little ole catalyst?"

"A catalyst—?"

"Sure. Doesn't do anything itself; just changes the rate of a reaction. Try to light dry phosphorus, what happens? Nothing. Dampen the air a little, it burns like a house afire. Water's the catalyst. Atmosphere's the same way. Mix oxygen and nitrogen and everything else but krypton—it just dissipates, leaks away into space. Shoot in two parts of krypton to a million, it holds together like a sack around ole Mother Earth. That's why there's no breathable atmosphere on so many planets. No krypton. Do we know that? No. But the squids know it. That's why they're laughing. Why should they waste time blasting us? Soon's they get our krypton, our atmosphere thins away—*poof!* like that—and we all drop dead. The squids don't care; they don't breathe air like we do. It's the best joke they've had since they blew up Vega Seven...."

Stone's legs were suddenly too weak to hold him. His companion's continuing compulsive word-flood echoed unheeded.

The whole world doing a pratfall into hell.

Stone's flesh crawled. The poor, tortured creature beside him had phrased it too well. It turned a man's mind off, froze his brain ... left him clutching in free fall without strength even to shudder.

Yet there was nothing he could do—nothing, nothing. Not here, sealed in this green-glowing, metal walled room with a madman for company.

A madman—? There'd be two of them soon. Two lunatics, giggling and babbling as the atmosphere thinned and they slowly strangled.

Or would you strangle? Maybe, with the pressure change, your lungs would burst first....

Stone surged to his feet in a spasm of frenzy. Savagely, he hurled himself at the door—beating it, tearing at the crack with his fingers till the nails broke and blood streamed, weird in the green glow.

His companion stared at him, wide-eyed. "You're hurting your hands. Is something the matter?"

"The matter—?" Stone shook with fury, frustration. "No, nothing's the matter. The base has surrendered. The monsters get our krypton. Our air leaks away. The whole planet dies. Everything's fine—fine...."

He broke off, unable to go on.

"Oh...." The other sounded hurt, plaintive. Then: "Well, why don't you stop it? Call the base. Have them blow up the extractor."

"Call—the—base—?" Stone stopped breathing.

"Yes. The machine's in a room right down the hall, here."

Stone choked back his tension ... spoke gently, soothingly: "Our door's locked."

"Oh, that." His companion giggled. "Leave that to me. I'll get us out of here."

Already, he was scrambling to his feet; stripping off his shirt.

"But if you can get out...." Stone groped.

"It takes two." Tearing the ragged shirt into broad strips, the man hummed a fragment of tune. "I

thought it all out. If I'd had Ellen with me—I can run the machine, too. I watched them do it. It's very clever. Sets up a force field, distorts radio waves. Using energy derived from krypton, of course. Always krypton. 'Must have!'" He broke off. "I'll need your shirt, too, please. And your jacket. Got to have cloth. Lots of cloth...."

Wordless, Stone turned over his garments.

Deftly, the man ripped them into more of the broad strips ... tied the strips together in a long, rope-like band perhaps six inches wide. He'd stopped talking now. An occasional mirthless chuckle replaced his giggling.

The job done, he handed Stone one end of the strip. "Now stand here, please. Right beside the door. That's all you need to do. Just stand there, and hold onto the cloth. I'll take care of everything else. Just you wait and see...."

He kicked off a shoe; hammered the edge of the sole on the door.

It made a dull, clanging noise. "They don't like this. It'll get our door open. Just you wait—"

Stone waited—sweating, staring numbly.

It was a fine way to end up—playing games with a madman.

Only he had no choice.

The next instant, the door burst open. Tentacles vibrating furiously, one of the aliens swept into the room.

The man with Stone stepped back lithely, dodging the creature. The wide, vacant eyes shone bright, now; teeth showed clenched behind the empty smile.

The alien surged towards him.

Again, the man leaped back, the cloth strip coiled loose between his hands.

The alien reached for him.

But instead of retreating, the man darted in close. Deftly, as a matador swirling his cape past a charging bull, he slapped the cloth strip over the monster's scarlet sensor band.

The rope snapped tight in Stone's hands as the alien lurched against it, then tried to draw back.

But the man would not let it. Racing round it, he whipped the fabric strip tight into place, completely covering the creature's narrow scarlet girdle.

Heedless of tentacles, Stone leaped to join him. The cloth reached three times around the monster's midriff. The alien reeled blindly—groping, uncertain. Its tentacles' movements seemed mostly directed at tearing free the fabric. When a disc caught Stone's shoulder, he jerked it loose with no skin loss.

"Come on!" This from the madman. "Quick! This way! Hurry!"

Stumbling through the doorway, Stone sprinted down the corridor after him.

Now another door loomed, close by the tube-shaft. "Here!"

Stone threw himself at it.

It burst open under his impact. He crashed to the floor of the chamber beyond, barely glimpsing a

mass of equipment as he fell.

Equipment—and another alien.

The thing flung itself on Stone, its tentacles twining.

Savagely, he twisted; drove his heels up with all his strength, straight at the monster's sensor band.

The alien rocked back.

Stone leaped up. Then, head low, he charged in, smashing the monster back into the doorway by sheer bull strength and violence.

Another charge-butting; fists slamming.

The alien hit the guard-rail encircling the tube-shaft.

Stone glimpsed blurring motion: His fellow-prisoner, diving in low and bear-hugging tentacles. Through his red haze of fury, it came to Stone dimly that the other's last shred of sanity must have departed.

Only then, of a sudden, the man was surging up, jerking.

The knee-leverage tore the alien's lower tentacles loose from the floor. With a heave, the man flipped the creature over the rail.

It plummeted down the tube-shaft.

"Two hundred feet!" Stone's companion cried shrilly. "Listen! It may spatter—!"

Nausea writhed in Stone. He caught the other about the waist; dragged him bodily back into the room—up to the equipment.

"Quick! How do I work this?"

“Don’t worry. It’s easy.” The man tugged at a smooth, round shaft of metal. A faint humming sound rose from a flat gridwork. “There. It’s on now. Just talk into the grill, there.”

Stone had trouble with breathing: “Base! Las Crescentes—”

Behind him, metal rang on metal. He spun round.

An alien stood poised in the doorway—an alien with shreds of cloth still clinging round its middle.

The words he’d planned stuck in his throat.

Only then, as from afar, another voice echoed. The voice of the madman.

“You know—”—it was almost conversational, the way he said it—“—you know, I think I’ll go see Ellen....”

He scooped a jagged strip of metal from a bench as he spoke. Traces of froth showed at the corners of his mouth.

Then, before Stone could move, he was lunging, straight at the monster. The metal strip slashed deep into the scarlet sensor band. Fluid spurted.

The alien hurled itself backward.

But like one possessed, the madman pursued it, hacking and gouging. Together, man and monster crashed into the guard-rail.

A wild shriek of mad laughter. “Here I come, Ellen—with company!”

Clutching a dozen tentacles, the man hurled himself over the guard-rail.

The monster went with him.

Stone clung to the transmitter, half-retching.

Only he couldn't afford to be sick. Not here; not now.

Time was too short for that. Any moment now, there'd be other aliens coming.

Hoarsely, he rasped, "Base! Las Crescentes! This is Carl Stone talking. I'm giving you an order: Destroy that tower! Blast it! Don't wait a minute! If it goes into operation, the whole earth will die...."

CHAPTER IX

Together, they stood at last in the free air of the desert—Stone, Reva, MacDougal.

Slowly, half a mile away, the great shining metal ball that was the alien sphere-ship lifted from the gathering shadows of the canyon floor. Soundless as nightfall it rose, drifting higher and higher. The three stub legs retracted.

Then, of a sudden, it had topped the mesa's rim. Faster it climbed, and faster, picking up speed with every passing second.

The blink of an eye later it was gone, up into the dusk and the boundless space that stretched from star to star.

For a long, long moment the silence held. Then MacDougal said quietly, "There aren't any words for what I want to say, Carl. But—the world can never repay you for what you've done."

And Reva: "You saved us. Carl—us, and all the unborn generations that will ever live on Earth."

It was strange, Stone thought. By all the rules, he should feel the same way they did. Happy. Relieved. At peace.

Grateful for the breaks he'd gotten, at least.

Instead, inside, he felt only aching emptiness and pain.

But however he felt, he had to find words. They were

expected. The other—the ugly, unfinished job he had yet to do—that could wait.

Shrugging, he said, “The boys at the base are the ones who rate the credit. They worked fast—two minutes flat from the time I passed the word till they shot an anti-tank grenade right into the middle of that damn’ tower, if our friends the monsters had it right.”

“You’re over-modest, Carl.” MacDougal gestured with his still sling-bound right arm. “You’re the one who did the job, and I’m going to see that people know it. The right people.”

“Thanks.” The word came out faintly caustic, even to Stone’s ears.

But maybe that was only the aftermath of strain.

If MacDougal caught it, he ignored it. His craggy face stayed tolerant, relaxed. The hedgerow eyebrows didn’t even bristle.

“The big point is, it’s over,” he reminded. “The aliens and their ship are gone. Our own world’s safe.”

Reva moved restlessly, drawing her torn dress closer about her, as if touched by a sudden chill. “I hope so. I still don’t feel quite as if I were awake. There’s so much I don’t understand—so many, many things....”

Stone’s voice was just above a whisper: “For instance —?”

“You mean—you haven’t thought about it?—About why those creatures didn’t harm the base, in spite of all their threats? Why they let us go, when it would have been so much easier to kill us?”

Stone didn’t answer.

MacDougal said, “I think it’s easy enough to

understand. The aliens' whole technology is based on krypton, and it's in short supply. Destroying the base would have cut down what little reserve they had left, with no return."

"And letting us go—?"

The base director's heavy shoulders shifted. "That's almost a rhetorical question, isn't it, Doctor Adams?" The slightest of edges barbed his words.

Deep in Stone's middle, the pain and emptiness seethed anew.

That was the trouble with unfinished jobs. They kept forcing themselves onto you, when you least wanted to have to think about them.

Only now this particular ugliness was coming out into the open in spite of him. He'd have to face it, grapple with it.

Even if it tore his soul apart.

Reva was staring at MacDougal. "Rhetorical—? I don't understand. What do you mean?"

"Then I'm afraid I'll have to be brutal, Doctor." The base director let out a gusty, sighing breath. "Perhaps you don't realize the nasty role you've played in this whole business. If so, I'm sorry. But the fact remains that in all likelihood Stone and I are alive and free only because of you."

His tone made Reva draw back just a little. Once more, she pulled her torn dress about her, with a movement strangely awkward for one so graceful.

"You'll have to speak more plainly, Mr. MacDougal,"

she said sharply. “I don’t understand you at all.”

“Very well, then.” MacDougal’s massive head came forward, jaw belligerently out-thrust. “I’m saying flat-out that you were the aliens’ contact. Your mind was the one they took over when they first landed. You were the one who set up the transmitter in your project building and turned the whole base mad. Is that plain enough for you to understand?”

The torn dress bunched under Reva’s fingers, an ugly, lumpy wad.

MacDougal again: “I’ll carry it even further, Doctor. The aliens don’t plan to drop that contact with you. And that’s the only reason why the three of us are free.”

Even through the gathering dusk, Stone could see the pallor that sprang to Reva’s face. Fear widened her eyes. She seemed to grow smaller, older.

It twisted like a knife inside him ... made him wonder bleakly how long he could go on.

“Did you think they’d really left for good, Doctor Adams?” The base director’s sarcasm rang open, bitter, now. “How far do you estimate they can go—with their krypton reserves already so drained that they didn’t even dare to blast our base? To Aldebaran? Antares? Alpha Centauri?” He laughed—curt, scornful. “No, Doctor! They’ll be back, somewhere close by, in hours, not lightyears. Then, when they get here, they’ll contact you. There’ll be another transmitter, another base gone mad. And this time, maybe, they’ll get their krypton—that is, if Stone and I are fools enough to let you live!”

There it was, out in the open. All of it.

Or almost all.

The blood rang in Stone's ears.

Reva's face was a twisted, distorted thing. Her face seemed to crack. Her lips peeled back. "No, no!" She was half-screaming. "You're wrong! You're wrong —!"

The base director swung his thick, sling-bound right arm—hammering, relentless. "Then why did they let us live? Why—except to keep you free and above suspicion, ready to serve them another day?"

Silence. Echoing eternities of silence.

Then, abruptly, Reva's shoulders slumped. Her chin sank to her chest. She didn't speak.

Slowly, MacDougal straightened. Grim-faced, he looked at Stone. "Well, Carl?"

More silence. A sickness, too ... gnawing through Stone, body and brain.

Why did it have to be like this? Why couldn't it have ended another way?

MacDougal said, "I'm sorry, Carl. I know how you feel. But this is just too big for us. We can't take chances. The world's at stake. We've got to act now, before the aliens come back."

Stone couldn't speak.

"She can't be allowed to leave this spot alive, Carl. You and I—we'll have to serve as judge and jury. Executioners too. Here. Now."

Stone looked at Reva.

Her eyes were upon him. Grey eyes, imploring. "Carl —!"

MacDougal: "I'm sorry, Carl...."

Tension. Surging billows of tension. Blood pulsing. Heart pounding.

Why couldn't it have ended another way?

Only this was the way it was. These were the cards he had to play.

So he'd play them—

Stone said, "You've figured it right, Mac. All but one point."

"One—? What—?"

"She isn't guilty. You are."

The base director stood like a graven image. Then his sling hand twitched, just a fraction. That was all.

Stone said, "It all rides on one thing, Mac: You keep talking about the aliens having some sort of mind control over Reva. But it's not true. Violence is the only weapon they know how to use."

MacDougal's lip twisted. "You forget the transmitter."

"The transmitter?" Stone shook his head slowly. "That came second, Mac. Not first. Because somebody had to help the aliens design it—somebody working of his own free will."

"She did it, then. She's the psychiatrist."

"No, Mac. She couldn't have. It took a scientist—a physical scientist, one who knew electronics." A pause, while Stone drew a deep breath. "That's why it has to be you, Mac. You're the man with the know-how. Even if Reva could have done it, you'd have

had to pass on it, o.k. the construction; that's part of your base director's job."

"I see."

"You had the motive, too, Mac. And I understand it: When you found The Project was failing, you blew up, clutched at straws. Then the aliens came along and contacted you, somehow. They offered you their own special straw with a hook in it. Probably they promised that if you'd help them get krypton, they'd figure you a new angle on The Project. And you were so afraid of failing, washing up your career, that you grabbed at the chance. The hook—you were too eager to see it. After all, nobody on Earth knew that krypton was a catalyst, holding our atmosphere together. How could you guess it?"

"Your logic's good, Carl." MacDougal nodded slowly. "You've done some straight thinking. But if what you say's true, then where does it leave us? I've made a mistake, but what have I done wrong?"

"You still don't see it?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Then I'll tell you." Stone sighed, just a little. "To you, Mac, your career's too important. If you think it's in danger, everything else has to get out of the way. Like here, now. You'd have had us kill Reva—to give you a goat, and keep me from talking. There'd be no black marks on your record. Maybe you even picked up a few tricks from the monsters that would make The Project go."

"So—?" The base director spoke very gently.

"So it won't wash, Mac. I'm security. It's my job to see straight, and to push out people whose careers mean more than duty."

“We’ve been friends a long time, Carl—”

It was Stone’s turn to nod. “That’s what makes it so hard, Mac. Maybe if the aliens come back, you’d have an H-bomb all waiting. Maybe. But maybe not, too. Maybe you’d bite on another hook—one that would really catch, give the monsters their chance to laugh and laugh and laugh, all the way back to Arcturus Four—” Stone broke off abruptly. “No, Mac. We can’t take that chance. I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry, too, Carl.” The heavy shoulders shifted. “Because—it means I have to kill you, as well as Doctor Adams.”

Stone frowned. “That might take some doing.”

“I doubt it.” Of a sudden there was ice in the base director’s voice—ice, and granite. His sling-suspended hand moved sharply. “You see, I’ve got a gun here, Carl. My arm isn’t really hurt, but the sling seemed like good cover.” He laughed, harsh and short. “Any last words—?”

A numbness came to Stone’s middle.

How far was he from MacDougal? Three steps? Four?

Too far. He looked over at Reva.

She stood as before, still clutching her torn dress. The bulkiness of the fabric lumped in her twisting fingers was like a deformity growing out of her side. Strain had stolen her face’s last traces of beauty. Her blonde hair hung limp and straggly.

Stone didn’t care. Of a sudden he could think only of all the words unspoken between them; of the long

years that should have been theirs, the feelings crumbling down into ashes.

Inside him, the emptiness swirled to a churning vortex. “Reva—!” he whispered. “Reva....”

“Time’s up!” MacDougal said. His sling-hand flickered out.

Stone lunged at him.

Only it was too far, too far. He knew it even as he charged. MacDougal’s bullet would cut him down in mid-stride.

And then Reva would die.

He sobbed a curse that came out as a prayer.

MacDougal’s gun leveled, rock-steady.

Stone braced for the slug.

Only then—suddenly; incredibly—another gun roared. A gun off to one side, from where Reva stood.

MacDougal jerked round, firing wildly.

With every ounce of his weight, Stone crashed his fist against the heavy, jutting jaw.

The base director’s head snapped back. Like a pole-axed ox, he toppled to the ground and lay there motionless.

Stone picked up the gun and stuck it into his belt. “Reva—”

She came to him, then—running, arms out, the torn dress forgotten.

For a long moment, Stone held her. “You ... saved my life.”

“With your own gun.” Of a sudden, she was shaking.

“It landed beside me, back there on the sphere-ship. I hid it under my dress—for myself. I didn’t want to die with tentacles around me....”

Her voice broke. She buried her face on Stone’s shoulder. He held her close.

“We’re not going to die,” he said gently. “Neither of us. Not now. We’ve got too much to live for.” Her face came up slowly. “To live for!” she echoed.

Never, Stone thought, had he seen her so beautiful.

Together, then, hand in hand, they walked out across the desert towards the distant highway.

THE END

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