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ANYTHING YOU CAN DO!

First of two parts. The Alien was *really* alien—and Earth was faced with a strange problem indeed. They *had* to have a superman. And there weren't any. So....

by Darrell T. Langart



ILLUSTRATED BY LEONE

I

Like some great silver-pink fish, the ship sang on through the eternal night. There was no impression of swimming; the fish shape had neither fins nor a tail. It was as though it were hovering in wait for a member of some smaller species to swoop suddenly down from nowhere, so that it, in turn, could pounce and kill.

But still it moved.

Only a being who was thoroughly familiar with the type could have told that this fish was dying.



In shape, the ship was rather like a narrow flounder—long, tapered, and oval in cross-section—but it showed none of the exterior markings one might expect of either a living thing or of a

spaceship. With one exception, the smooth, silver-pink exterior was featureless.

That one exception was a long, purplish-black, roughened discoloration that ran along one side for almost half of the ship's seventeen meters of length. It was the only external sign that the ship was dying.

Inside the ship, the Nipe neither knew nor cared about the discoloration. Had he thought about it, he would have deduced the presence of the burn, but it was the least of his worries. The internal damage that had been done to the ship was by far the more serious. It could, quite possibly, kill him.

The Nipe, of course, had no intention of dying. Not out here. Not so far, so very far, from his own people. Not out here, where his death would be so very improper.

He looked at the ball of the yellow-white sun ahead and wondered that such a relatively stable, inactive star could have produced such a tremendously energetic plasmoid that it could still do the damage it had done so far out. It had been a freak, of course. Such suns as this did not normally produce such energetic swirls of magnetic force.

But the thing had been there, nonetheless, and the ship had hit it at high velocity. Fortunately, the ship had only touched the edge of the swirling cloud, otherwise the entire ship would have vanished in a puff of incandescence. But it had done enough. The power plants that drove the ship at ultralight velocities through the depths of interstellar space had been so badly damaged that they could only be used in short bursts, and each burst brought them nearer to the fusion point. Most of the instruments were powerless; the Nipe was not even sure he could land the vessel. Any attempt to use the communicator to call home would have blown the ship to atoms.

The Nipe did not want to die, but, if die he must, he did not want to die foolishly.

It had taken a long time to drift in from the outer reaches of this sun's planetary system, but using the power plants any more than absolutely necessary would have been fool-hardy.

The Nipe missed the companionship his brother had given him for so long; his help would be invaluable now. But there had been no choice. There had not been enough supplies for two to survive the long fall inward toward the distant sun. The Nipe, having discovered the fact first, had, out of his mercy and compassion, killed his brother while the other was not looking. Then, having eaten his brother with all due ceremony, he had settled down to the long, lonely wait.

Beings of another race might have cursed the accident that had disabled the ship, or regretted the necessity that one of them should die, but the Nipe did neither, for, to him, the first notion would have been foolish, and the second incomprehensible.

But now, as the ship fell ever closer toward the yellow-white sun, he began to worry about his own fate. For a while, it had seemed almost certain that he would survive long enough to build a communicator—for the instruments had already told him and his brother that the system ahead was inhabited by creatures of reasoning power, if not true intelligence, and it would almost certainly be possible to get the equipment he needed for them. Now, though, it looked as if the ship would not survive a landing. He had had to steer it away from a great gas giant, which had seriously endangered the power plants.

He did not want to die in space—wasted, forever undevoured. At least, he must die on a planet, where there might be creatures with the compassion and wisdom to give his body the proper ingestion. The thought of feeding inferior creatures was repugnant, but it was better than rotting to feed monocells or ectogenes, and far superior to wasting away in space.

Even thoughts such as these did not occupy his mind often or for very long. Far, far better than any of them was the desire—and planning for survival.

The outer orbits of the gas giants had been passed at last, and the Nipe fell on through the asteroid belt without approaching any of the larger pieces of rock-and-metal. That he and his brother had originally elected to come into this system along its orbital plane had been a mixed blessing; to have come in at a different angle would have avoided all the debris—from planetary size on down—that is thickest in a star's equatorial plane, but it would also have meant a greater chance of missing a suitable planet unless too much reliance were placed on the already weakened power generators. As it was, the Nipe had been able to use the gravitational field of the gas giant to swing his ship toward the precise spot where the third planet would be when the ship arrived in the third orbit. Moreover, the third planet would be retreating from the Nipe's line of flight, which would make the velocity difference that much the less.

For a while, the Nipe had toyed with the idea of using the mining bases that the local life form had set up in the asteroid belt as bases for his own operations, but he had decided against it. Movement would be much freer and much more productive on a planet than it would be in the Belt.

He would have preferred using the fourth planet for his base. Although much smaller, it had the same reddish, arid look as his own home planet, while the third world was three-quarters drowned in water. But there were two factors that weighed so heavily against that choice that

they rendered it impossible. In the first place, by far the greater proportion of the local inhabitants' commerce was between the asteroids and the third planet. Second, and much more important, the fourth world was at such a point in her orbit that the energy required to land would destroy the ship beyond any doubt.

It would have to be the third world.

As the ship fell inward, the Nipe watched his pitifully inadequate instruments, doing his best to keep tabs on every one of the feebly-powered ships that the local life form used to move through space. He did not want to be spotted now, and even though the odds were against these beings having any instrument highly developed enough to spot his craft, there was always the possibility that he might be observed optically.

So he squatted there in the ship, a centipede-like thing about five feet in length and a little less than eighteen inches in diameter, with eight articulated limbs spaced in pairs along his body, any one of which could be used as hand or foot. His head, which was long and snouted, displayed two pairs of violet eyes which kept a constant watch on the indicators and screens of the few instruments that were still functioning aboard the ship.

And he waited as the ship fell towards its rendezvous with the third planet.

II

Wang Kulichenko pulled the collar of his uniform coat up closer around his ears and pulled the helmet and face-mask down a bit. It was only early October, but here in the tundra country the wind had a tendency to be chill and biting in the morning, even at this time of year. Within a week or so, he'd have to start using the power pack on his horse to electrically warm his protective clothing and the horse's wrappings, but there was no necessity of that yet. He smiled a little as he always did when he thought of his grandfather's remarks about such "new-fangled nonsense".

"Your ancestors, son of my son," he would say, "conquered the tundra and lived upon it for thousands of years without the need of such womanish things. Are there no men anymore? Are there none who can face nature alone and unafraid without the aid of artifices that bring softness?"

But Wang Kulichenko noticed—though, out of politeness, he never pointed it out—that the old man never failed to take advantage of the electric warmth of the house when the short days came and the snow blew across the country like fine white sand. And he never complained about the lights or the television or the hot water, except to grumble occasionally that they were a little old and out of date and that the mail-order catalog showed that better models were available in Vladivostok.

And Wang would remind the old man, very gently, that a paper-forest ranger made only so much money, and that there would have to be more saving before such things could be bought. He did not—*ever*—remind the old man that he, Wang, was stretching a point to keep his grandfather on the payroll as an assistant.

Wang Kulichenko patted his horse's rump and urged her softly to step up her pace just a bit. He had a certain amount of territory to cover, and, although he wanted to be careful in his checking, he also wanted to get home early.

Around him, the neatly-planted forest of paper-trees spread knotty, alien branches, trying to catch the rays of the winter-waning sun. Whenever Wang thought of his grandfather's remarks about his ancestors, he always wondered, as a corollary, what those same ancestors would have thought about a forest growing up here, where no forest like this one had ever grown before.

They were called paper-trees because the bulk of their pulp was used to make paper (they were of no use whatever as lumber), but they weren't trees, really, and the organic chemicals that were leached from them during the pulping process were of far more value than the paper pulp.

They were mutations of a smaller plant that had been found in the temperate regions of Mars and purposely changed genetically to grow on the Siberian tundra, where the conditions were similar to, but superior to, their natural habitat. They looked as though someone had managed to cross breed the Joshua tree with the cypress and then persuaded the result to grow grass instead of leaves.

In the distance, Wang heard the whining of the wind and he automatically pulled his coat a little tighter, even though he noticed no increase in the wind velocity around him.

Then, as the whine became louder, he realized that it was not the wind.

He turned his head toward the noise and looked up. For a long minute, he watched the sky as the sound gained volume, but he could see nothing at first. Then he caught a glimpse of motion. A dot that was hard to distinguish against the cloud-mottled gray sky.

What was it? An air transport in trouble? There were two trans-polar routes that passed within a few hundred miles of here, but no air transport he had ever seen had made a noise like that.

Normally, they were so high as to be both invisible and inaudible. Must be trouble of some sort.

He reached down to the saddle pack without taking his eyes off the moving speck and took out the radiophone. He held it to his ear and thumbed the call button insistently.

Grandfather, he thought with growing irritation as the seconds passed, *wake up! Come on, old dozer, rouse yourself from your dreams!*

At the same time, he checked his wrist compass and estimated the direction of flight of the dot and its direction from him. He'd at least be able to give the airline authorities some information if the ship fell. He wished there were some way to triangulate its height and so on, but he had no need for that kind of thing, so he hadn't the equipment.

"Yes? Yes?" came a testy, dry voice through the earphone.

Quickly, Wang gave his grandfather all the information he had on the flying thing. By now, the whine had become a shrill roar, and the thing in the air had become a silver-pink fish shape.

"I think it's coming down very close to here," Wang concluded. "You call the authorities and let them know that one of the aircraft is in trouble. I'll see if I can be of any help here. I'll call you back later."

"As you say," the old man said hurriedly. He cut off.

Wang was beginning to realize that the thing was a spaceship, not an airship. By this time, he could see the thing more clearly. He had never actually seen a spacecraft, but he'd seen enough of them on television to know what they looked like. This one didn't look like a standard type at all, and it didn't behave like one, but it looked even less like an airship, and he knew enough to know that he didn't necessarily know every type of spaceship ever built.

In shape, it resembled the old rocket-propelled jobs that had been first used for space exploration a century before, rather than looking like the fat ovoids that he was used to. But there were no signs of rocket exhausts, and yet the ship was very obviously slowing, so it must have an inertia drive.

It was coming in much lower now, on a line north of him, headed almost due east. He urged the mare forward, in order to try to keep up with the craft, although it was obviously going several hundred miles per hour—hardly a horse's pace.

Still, it was slowing rapidly—very rapidly. Maybe—

He kept the mare moving.

The strange ship skimmed along the treetops in the distance and disappeared from sight. Then there was a thunderous crash, a tearing of wood and foliage, and a grinding, plowing sound.

For a few seconds afterward, there was silence. Then there came a soft rumble, as of water beginning to boil in some huge, but distant, samovar. It seemed to go on and on and on.

And there was a bluish, fluctuating glow on the horizon.

Radioactivity? Wang wondered. Surely not an atomic-powered ship without safety cutoffs in this day and age.

He pulled out his radiophone and thumbed the call button again.

This time, there was no delay. "Yes?"

"How are the radiation detectors behaving there, Grandfather?"

"One moment. I shall see." There was a silence. Then: "No unusual activity, young Wang. Why?"

Wang told him, then asked: "Did you get hold of the air authorities?"

"Yes. They have no missing aircraft, but they're checking with the space fields. The way you describe it, the thing must be a spaceship of some kind."

"I think so, too. I wish I had a radiation detector here, though. I'd like to know whether that thing is hot or not. It's only a couple of miles or so away. I think I'd better stay away. Meanwhile, you'd better put in a call to Central Headquarters Fire Control. There's going to be a holocaust if I'm any judge unless they get here fast with plenty of equipment."

"I'll see to it," said his grandfather, cutting off.

The bluish glow in the sky had quite died away by now, and the distant rumbling was gone, too. And, oddly enough, there was not much smoke in the distance. There was a small cloud of gray that rose, streamerlike, from where the glow had been, but even that faded away fairly rapidly in the chill breeze. Quite obviously, there would be no fire. After several more minutes of watching, he was sure of it. There couldn't have been much heat produced in that explosion—if it could really be called an explosion.

Then he saw something moving in the trees between himself and the spot where the ship had come down. He couldn't quite see what it was, but it looked like someone crawling.

"Halloo, there!" he called out. "Are you hurt?"

There was no answer. Perhaps whoever it was didn't understand Russian. Wang's command of English wasn't too good, but he called out in that language.

Still there was no answer. Whoever it was had crawled out of sight.

Then he realized that it couldn't be anyone crawling. No one could even have run the distance between here and the ship in the time since it had hit, much less crawled.

He frowned. A wolf, then? Possibly. They weren't too common, but there were still plenty of them around.

He unholstered the heavy pistol at his side.

And, as he slid the barrel free, he became the first human being ever to see the Nipe.

For an instant, as the Nipe came out from behind a tree fifteen feet away, Wang Kulichenko froze as he saw those four baleful violet eyes glaring at him from the snouted head. He jerked up the pistol to fire.

He was much too late. His reflexes were too slow by far. The Nipe launched itself across the intervening space in a blur of speed that would have made a leopard seem slow. The alien's hands slapped aside the gun with a violence that broke the man's wrist, while other hands slammed at his skull.

Wang Kulichenko hardly had time to be surprised before he died.

The Nipe stood quietly for a moment, looking down at the thing he had killed. His stomach churned with disgust. He ignored the fading hoofbeats of the slave-animal from which he had knocked the thing that lay on the ground with a crushed skull. The slave-animal was unintelligent and unimportant.

This was the intelligent one.

But so slow! So incredibly slow! And so weak and soft!

It seemed impossible that such poorly-equipped beasts could have survived long enough on any world to evolve to become the dominant life form.

Perhaps it was not the dominant form. Perhaps it was merely a higher slave-animal. He would have to do more investigating.

He picked up the weapon the thing had drawn and examined it carefully. The mechanism was unfamiliar, but a glance at the muzzle told him that it was a projectile weapon of some sort. The twisted grooves in the barrel were obviously designed to impart a spin to the projectile, to give it gyroscopic stability while in flight.

The dead thing must have thought he was a wild animal, the Nipe decided. Surely no being would carry a weapon for use against members of its own or another intelligent species.

He examined the rest of the equipment on the thing. Not much information there. Too bad the slave-animal was gone; there had apparently been more equipment strapped to it.

The next question was, what should he do with the body?

Devour it properly, as one should with a validly slain foe?

It didn't seem that he could do anything else, and yet his stomachs wanted to rebel at the thought. After all, it wasn't as if the thing were really a proper being. It was astonishing to find another intelligent race; none had ever been found before. But he was determined to show them that he was civilized and intelligent, too.

On the other hand, they were obviously of a lower order than the Nipe, and that made the question even more puzzling.

In the end, he decided to leave the thing here, for others of its kind to find. They would doubtless consume it properly.

And—he glanced at the sky and listened—they would be here in time. There were aircraft coming.

He would have to leave quickly. He had to find one of their production or supply centers, and he would have to do it alone, with only the equipment he had on him. The utter destruction of his ship had left him seriously hampered.

He began moving, staying in the protection of the trees. His ethical sense still bothered him. It was not at all civilized to leave a body to the mercy of lesser animals or monocells like that. What

kind of monster would they think he was?

Still, there was no help for it. If they caught him while feeding, they might have thought him a lower animal and shot him. He couldn't put an onus like that upon them.

He moved on.

III

Two-fifths of a second. That was all the time Bart Stanton had from the first moment his supersensitive ears heard the faint whisper of metal against leather.

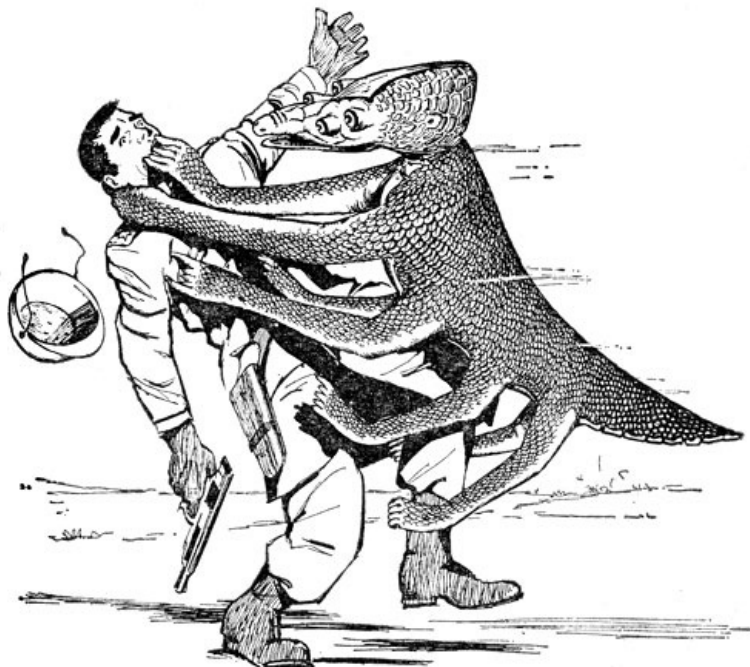
He made good use of it.

The noise had come from behind and slightly to the left of him, so he drew his own gun with his left hand and spun to his left as he dropped to a crouch. He had turned almost completely around, drawn his gun, and fired three shots before the other man had even leveled his own weapon.

The bullets from Stanton's gun made three round spots on the man's jacket, almost touching each other and directly over the heart. The man blinked stupidly for a moment, looking down at the round spots.

"My God," he said softly.

Then the man returned his weapon slowly to his holster.



The big room was noisy. The three shots had merely added to the noise of the gunfire that rattled intermittently around the two men. And even that gunfire was only a part of the cacophony. The tortured molecules of the air in the room were so besieged by the beat of drums, the blare of trumpets, the crackle of lightning, the rumble of heavy machinery, the squawks and shrieks of horns and whistles, the rustle of autumn leaves, the machine-gun snap of popping popcorn, the clink and jingle of falling coins, and the yelps, bellows, howls, roars, snarls, grunts, bleats, moos, purrs, cackles, quacks, chirps, buzzes, and hisses of a myriad of animals, that each molecule would have thought that it was being shoved in a hundred thousand different directions at once if it had had a mind to think with.

The noise wasn't deafening, but it was certainly all-pervasive.

Bart Stanton had reholstered his own weapon and half opened his lips to speak when he heard another sound behind him.

Again he whirled his guns in hand—both of them this time—and his forefingers only fractions of a millimeter from the point that would fire the hair triggers.

But he did not fire.

The second man had merely shifted the weapons in his holsters and then dropped his hands away.

The noise, which had been flooding into the room over the speaker system, died instantly.

Stanton shoved his guns back into place and rose from his crouch. "Real cute," he said, grinning. "I wasn't expecting that one."

The man he was facing smiled back. "Well, Bart, maybe we've proved our point. What do you think, Colonel?" The last was addressed to the third man, who was still standing quietly, looking worried and surprised about the three spots on his jacket that had come from the special harmless projectiles in Stanton's gun.

Colonel Mannheim was four inches shorter than Stanton's five-ten, and was fifteen years older. But, in spite of the differences, he would have laughed at anyone who had told him, five minutes before, that he couldn't outdraw a man who was standing with his back turned.

His bright blue eyes, set deep beneath craggy brows in a tanned face, looked speculatively at the younger man. "Incredible," he said gently. "Absolutely incredible." Then he looked at the other man, a lean civilian with mild blue eyes a shade lighter than his own. "All right, Dr. Farnsworth, I'm convinced. You and your staff have quite literally created a superman. Anyone who can stand in a noise-filled room and hear a man draw a gun twenty feet behind him is incredible enough. The fact that he could and did outdraw and outshoot me after I had started ... well, that's almost beyond comprehension."

He looked back at Bart Stanton. "What's your opinion, Mr. Stanton? Think you can handle the Nipe?"

Stanton paused imperceptibly before answering, while his ultrafast mind considered the problem and arrived at a decision. Just how much confidence should he show the colonel? Mannheim was a man with tremendous confidence in himself, but who was capable of recognizing that there were men who were his superiors, in one field or another.

"If I can't dispose of the Nipe," Stanton said, "no one can."

Colonel Mannheim nodded slowly. "I believe you're right," he said at last. His voice was firm with inner conviction. He shot a glance at Farnsworth. "How about the second man?"

Farnsworth shook his head. "He'll never make it. In another two years, we can put him into reasonable shape again, but his nervous system just couldn't stand the gaff."

"Can we get another man ready in time?"

"Hardly. We can't just pick a man up off the street and turn him into a superman. Even if we could find another subject with Bart's genetic possibilities, it would take more time than we have to spare."

"This isn't magic, Colonel. You don't change a nobody into a physical and mental giant by saying *abracadabra* or by teaching him how to pronounce *shazam* properly."

"I'm aware of that," said Colonel Mannheim without rancor. "Five years of work on Mr. Stanton must have taught you something, though. I should think you could repeat the process in less time."

Farnsworth repeated the headshaking. "Human beings aren't machines, Colonel. They require time to heal, time to learn, time to integrate themselves. Remember that, in spite of all our increased knowledge of anesthesia, antibiotics, viricides, and obstetrics, it still takes nine months to produce a baby. We're in the same position, only more so."

"I see," said Mannheim.

"Besides," Dr. Farnsworth continued, "Stanton's body and nervous system are now close to the theoretical limit for human tissue. I'm afraid you don't realize what kind of mental stability and organization are required to handle the equipment he now has."

"I'm sure I don't," the colonel agreed. "I doubt if anyone besides Stanton himself knows."

Dr. Farnsworth's manner softened a little. "You're probably quite right. Suffice it to say that Bartholomew Stanton is the only answer we've found so far, and the only answer visible in the foreseeable future to the problem posed by the Nipe."

The colonel's face darkened. "I keep hoping that our policy of handling the Nipe hasn't been a mistake. If it has, it's going to prove a fatal one—for the whole race."

"Let's go into the lounge," Farnsworth said. "Standing around in an empty chamber like this isn't the most comfortable way to discuss the fate of mankind." His voice brought hollow echoes from the walls.

Colonel Mannheim grinned at the touch of lightness the biophysicist had injected into the conversation. "Very well. I could do with some coffee, if you have some."

"All you want," said Dr. Farnsworth, leading the way toward the door of the chamber and opening it. "Or, if you'd prefer something with a little more power to it—?"

"Thanks, no. Coffee will do fine," said Mannheim. "How about you, Mr. Stanton?"

Bart Stanton shook his head. "I'd love to have some coffee, but I'll leave the alcohol alone. I'd just have the luck to be finishing a drink when our friend, the Nipe, popped in on us. And when I do meet him, I'm going to need every microsecond of reflex speed I can scrape up."

They walked down a soft-floored, warmly-lit corridor to an elevator which whisked them up to the main level of the Neurophysical Institute Building.

Another corridor led them to a room that might have been the common room of one of the more exclusive men's clubs. There were soft chairs and shelves of books and reading tables and smoking stands, all quietly luxurious. There was no one in the room when the three men entered.

"We can have some privacy here," Dr. Farnsworth said. "None of the rest of the staff will come in until we're through."

Colonel Mannheim looked at the biophysicist speculatively. "You seem to think secrecy's important all of a sudden."

Bart Stanton grinned and kept silent.

Dr. Farnsworth went over to a table, where an urn of coffee radiated soft warmth. "Cream and sugar over there on the tray," he said as he began to fill cups.

"Frankly," Colonel Mannheim said, "I was going to ask you to find us a place where we could talk privately. You seem to have anticipated me."

"I thought you might have something like that in mind," said Dr. Farnsworth without looking up.

The cups were filled and the three men sat down in a triangle of chairs before any of them spoke again. Colonel Mannheim took a sip from his cup and then looked up.

"All right, we'll begin this way. Mr. Stanton, granted that you've been through five years of hell—but how closely have you stayed in touch with the Nipe situation?"

"As best I could through news bulletins and information that your office has sent here."

"Could you give me an oral summary?"

Bart Stanton thought for a moment. It was true that he'd been out of touch with what had been going on outside the walls of the Neurophysical Institute for the past five years. In spite of the reading he'd done and the newscasts he'd watched and the TV tapes he'd seen, he still had no real feeling for the situation.

There were hazy periods during that five years. He had undergone extensive glandular and neural operations of great delicacy, many of which had resulted in what could have been agonizing pain without the use of suppressors. As a result, he possessed a biological engine that, for sheer driving power and nicety of control, surpassed any other known to exist or to have ever existed on Earth—with the possible exception of the Nipe. But those five years of rebuilding and retraining had left a gap in his life.

Several of the steps required to make the conversion from man to superman had resulted in temporary insanity; the wild, swinging imbalances of glandular secretions seeking a new balance, the erratic misfirings of neurons as they attempted to adjust to higher nerve-impulse velocities, and the sheer fatigue engendered by cells which were acting too rapidly for a lagging excretory system, all had contributed to periods of greater or lesser mental abnormality.

That he was sane now, there was no question. But there were holes in his memory that still had to be filled.

He began to talk, rapidly but carefully, telling the colonel all he knew about the situation up to the present.

It wasn't much. It was late October, 2091, and the Nipe, blithely evading capture for ten long years, was still going about his unknown and possibly incomprehensible business.

The Nipe had become a legend. He had replaced Satan, the Bogeyman, Frankenstein's monster, and Mumbo Jumbo, Lord of the Congo, in the public mind. He had taken on, in popular thought, the attributes of the djinn, the vampire, the ghoul, the werewolf, and every other horror and hobgoblin that the mind of Man had conjured up in the previous half-million years.

That he had been connected with the mysterious crash in Siberia ten years before was almost a certainty. How he had managed to get from there to Leningrad without being seen once was more of a mystery, but certainly not impossible in the light of what had been done since.

Eight months later, a non-vision phone call had been received by the Regent's Board of the Khrushchev Memorial Psychiatric Hospital in Leningrad. An odd, breathy voice offered (in very bad Russian!) a meeting. The Nipe had managed to explain, in spite of the language handicap, that he did not want to be mistaken for a wild animal, as had happened with the forest ranger.

The psychiatrists were divided in their opinions. Some thought that the call had been from a deranged person. When the Nipe actually showed up at the appointed place, those minds changed rapidly.

The Nipe's ability to use any human language was limited. He picked up vocabulary and

grammatical rules very rapidly, but he seemed completely unable to use a language beyond discussion of concrete actions and objects. His mind was simply too alien to enable him to do more than touch the edges of human communication.

In the discussion of mathematics, in particular, the Nipe seemed to be completely at a loss. He apparently thought of mathematics as a *spoken* language instead of a *written* one, and could not progress beyond simple diagrams.

He wasn't captured in any real sense of the word. He refused to allow any physical tests on his body, and, short of threatening him at gun-point, there didn't seem to be any practicable way to force him to accede to the human's wishes. And they couldn't do that.

The Nipe had to be treated as an emissary from his home world, wherever that was. He'd killed a man, yes. But that had to be allowed as justifiable homicide in self-defense, since the forester had drawn a gun and was ready to fire. Nobody could blame the late Wang Kulichenko for that, but nobody could blame the Nipe, either.

For six weeks, the humans and the Nipe had tried to arrive at a meeting of minds, and just when it would seem within grasp, it would fade away into mist. It was nearly a month before the Russian psychologists and psychiatrists realized that the reason the Nipe had come to them was because he had thought that they were the ruling body of that territory!

The UN observers stayed out of it at first. Before there was any kind of talk on a Government level, there must be some kind of understanding on a personal level. And that, of course, was never achieved.

Just what had set off the Nipe's anger hasn't been established yet, as far as Stanton knew. At a meeting one day, he had simply become more and more incomprehensible, and then, without any warning, he had leaped out, killed three of the men with his bare hands, and gone out the window.

And that had been the end of any diplomatic relations between humanity and the Nipe.

Since that time, he'd been on a rampage of robbery and murder. He was as callously indifferent to human life and property as a human being might be with the life and property of a cockroach.

There have been human criminals whose actions could be described in the same way, but the Nipe had a few touches that few human criminals would have thought of and almost none would have had the capacity to execute.

If, for instance, the Nipe had time to spare, his victims would be an annoying problem in identification when found, for there would be nothing left but well-gnawed bones. And "time to spare," in this case meant twenty or thirty minutes. The Nipe had, if nothing else, a very efficient digestive tract. He ate like a shrew.

And the Nipe never, under any circumstances, used any weapon but the weapons Nature had given him—hands-or-feet, or claws or teeth. Never did he use a knife or gun or even a club.

Almost as an afterthought, one realized that the loot which the Nipe stole was seemingly unpredictable. Money, as such, he apparently had no use for. He had taken gold, silver, and platinum, but one raid for each of these elements had evidently been enough, except for silver, which had required three raids over a period of four years. Since then, he hadn't touched silver again.

He hadn't tried yet for any of the radioactives except radium. He'd taken a full ounce of that in five raids, but hadn't attempted to get his hands on uranium, thorium, plutonium, or any of the other elements normally associated with atomic energy. Nor had he tried to steal any of the fusion materials; the heavy isotopes of hydrogen or any of the lithium isotopes. Beryllium had been taken, but whether there was any significance in the thefts or not, no one knew.

There was a pattern in the thefts, nonetheless. They had begun small and increased. Scientific and technical instruments—oscilloscopes, X-ray generators, radar equipment, maser sets, dynostatic crystals, thermolight resonators, and so on—were stolen complete or gutted for various parts. After awhile, he went on to bigger things—whole aircraft, with their crews, had vanished.

That he had not committed anywhere near all the crimes that had been attributed to him was certain; that he *had* committed a great many of them was equally certain.



There was no doubt at all that his loot was being used to make instruments and devices of unknown kinds. He had used several of them on his raids. The one that could apparently phase

out almost any electromagnetic frequency up to about a hundred thousand megacycles—including sixty-cycle power frequencies—was considered to be a particularly cute item. So was the gadget that reduced the tensile strength of concrete to about that of a good grade of marshmallow.

After he had been operating for a few years, there was no installation on the face of the earth that could be considered Nipe-proof for more than a few minutes. He struck when and where he wanted and took whatever he needed.

It was manifestly impossible to guard against the Nipe, since no one knew what sort of loot might strike his fancy next, and there was therefore no way of knowing where or how he would hit next.

Nor could he ever be found after one of his raids. They were plotted and followed out with diabolical accuracy and thoroughness. He struck, looted, and vanished. And wasn't seen again until his next strike.

Colonel Mannheim, who had carefully puffed a cigar alight and smoked it thoughtfully during Stanton's recitation, dropped the remains of the cigar into an ash receptacle. "Accurate but incomplete," he said quietly. "You must have made some guesses." He looked from Bart Stanton to Dr. Farnsworth. "I'd like to hear them."

Farnsworth finished off the last of his coffee. "We've talked about it," he admitted. "Although I must say the hypothesis Bart has come up with would never have occurred to me. I'm still not sure I credit it, but" ... he shrugged ... "I can't say that I disbelieve it, either."

Mannheim turned his eyes back to Stanton. His silence was a question.

"Logically, my theory mightn't hold much water," Stanton admitted. "But the evidence seems to be conclusive enough to me." He got up, went over to the coffee urn, and refilled his cup. "It seems incredible to me that the combined intelligence and organizational ability of the UN Government is incapable of finding anything out about one single alien, no matter how competent he may be," he said as he returned to his seat.

"Somehow, somewhere, someone must have gotten a line on the Nipe. He must have a base for his operations, and someone should have found it by this time.

"If there is such a base, then it must be possible to blast him out of it without resorting to the kind of work it took to produce—me.

"I may be faster and more sensitive and stronger than the average man, but that doesn't mean that I have superhuman abilities to the extent that I can do in two or three years what the combined forces of the Government couldn't do in ten. Certainly you wouldn't rely too heavily on it.

"And yet, apparently, you are.

"To me that can only mean that you've got another ace up your sleeve. You *know* we're going to get the Nipe before I die. You either have a sure way of tracing him or else you already know where he is.

"Which is it?"

Colonel Mannheim sighed. "We know where he is. We've known for six years."

IV

INTERLUDE

The woman's eyes were filled with tears, for which the doctor was privately thankful. At least the original shock had worn off.

"And there's nothing we can do? Nothing?" There was a slight catch in her voice.

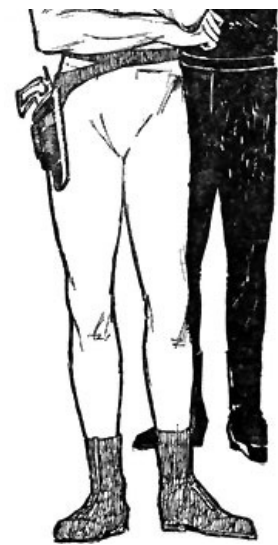
"I'm afraid not. Not yet. There are research teams working on the problem, and one day ... perhaps..." Then he shook his head. "But not yet." He paused. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Stanton."

The woman sat there on the comfortable chair and looked at the specialist's diploma that hung on the doctor's wall—and yet, she didn't really see the diploma at all. She was seeing something else—a kind of dream that had been shattered.

After a moment, she began to speak, her voice low and gentle, as though the dream were still going on and she were half afraid she might waken herself if she spoke too loudly.

"Jim and I were so glad they were twins. Identical twin boys. He said—I remember, he said, 'We ought to call 'em Ike and Mike.' And he laughed a little when he said it, to show he didn't mean it.

"I remember, I was propped up in the bed, the afternoon they were born, and Jim had brought me



a new bed jacket, and I said I didn't need a new one because I would be going home the next day, and he said: 'Hell, kid, you don't think I'd just buy a bed jacket just for hospital use, do you? This is for breakfasts in bed, too.'

"And that's when he said he'd seen the boys and said we ought to name them Ike and Mike."

The tears were coming down Mrs. Stanton's cheeks heavily now, and grief made her look older than her twenty-four years, but the doctor said nothing, letting her spill out her emotions in words.

"We'd talked about it before, you know—as soon as the obstetrician found out that I was going to have twins. And Jim ... Jim said that we shouldn't name them alike unless they were identical twins or mirror twins. If they were fraternal twins, we'd just name them as if they'd been ordinary brothers or sisters or whatever. You know?" She looked at the doctor, pleading for understanding.

"I know," he said.

"And Jim was always kidding. If they were girls, he said we ought to call them Flora and Dora, or Annie and Fanny, or maybe Susie and Floozie. He was always kidding about it. You know?"

"I know," said the doctor.

"And then, when they *were* identical boys, he was very sensible about it. 'We'll call them Martin and Bartholomew,' he said. 'Then if they want to call themselves Mart and Bart, they can, but they won't be stuck with rhyming names if they don't want them.' Jim was very thoughtful that way, Doctor. Very thoughtful."

She suddenly seemed to realize that she was crying, and took a handkerchief out of her sleeve to dab at her eyes and face.

"I'll have to quit crying," she said, trying to sound brave and strong. "After all, it could have been worse, couldn't it? I mean, the radiation could have killed my boys, too. Jim's dead, yes, and I've got to get used to that. But I still have two boys to take care of, and they'll need me."

"Yes, Mrs. Stanton, they will," said the doctor. "They'll both need you. And you'll have to be very gentle and very careful with both of them."

"How ... how do you mean that?" she asked.

The doctor settled back in his chair and chose his words carefully. "Identical twins tend to identify with each other, Mrs. Stanton. There is a great deal of empathy between people who are not only of the same age, but genetically identical. If they were both healthy, there would be very little trouble in their education at home or at school. Any of the standard texts on psychodynamics in education will show you the pitfalls to avoid when dealing with identical siblings.

"But these boys are no longer identical. One is normal, healthy, and lively. The other is ... well, as you have seen, he is slow, sluggish, and badly co-ordinated. That condition may improve with time, but, until we know more about such damage than we do now, he will be an invalid."

"That's the trouble with radiation damage, Mrs. Stanton. Even when we can save the victim's life, we cannot always save his health.

"You can see, I think, what sort of psychic disturbances this can bring about in such a pair. The ill boy tends to identify with the well one and, unfortunately, the reverse is true. If they are not properly handled during their formative years, Mrs. Stanton, both can be badly damaged emotionally."

"I ... I think I understand," the woman said. "But what sort of thing should I look out for?"

"I suggest that you get a good man in psychic development," the doctor said. "I'd hesitate to prescribe. It's out of my field. But, in general, most of your trouble will be caused by a tendency for the pair to swing into one of two extremes.

"Mutual antagonism can arise if one becomes jealous of the other's health, while the healthy one becomes jealous of the extra consideration shown his crippled brother.

"Or, on the other hand, the healthy boy may identify so closely with his brother that he feels every hurt or slight, real or imagined. He becomes over-solicitous, over-protective. At the same time, the other brother may come to depend completely on the healthy twin.

"In both these situations, there is a positive feedback which constantly worsens the situation. It requires a great deal of careful observation and careful application of the proper educational stimuli to keep the situation from developing toward either extreme. You'll need expert help, if you want both boys to display the full abilities of which they are potentially capable."

"I see. Could you give me the name of a good man, Doctor?"

The doctor nodded and picked up a book on his desk. "I'll give you several names. You can pick

the one you like. They're all good men. There are many good women in the field, too, but in this case, I think a man would be best. Of course, if one of them thinks a woman is indicated, that's up to him. As I said, that isn't my field."

He opened the small book and riffled through it to find the names he wanted.

V

The image of the Nipe on the glowing screen was clear and finely detailed. It was, Bart thought, as though one were looking through a window into the Nipe's nest itself. Only the tremendous depth of focus of the lens which caught the picture gave the illusion a sense of unreality. Everything—background and foreground alike—was sharply in focus.

The Nipe moved in slow motion, giving the watchers the eerie feeling that he was moving through a thicker, heavier medium than air, in a place where the gravity was much less than that of Earth.

"Speed the tape up to normal," said Colonel Mannheim to the man who was operating the machine. "If there's anything Mr. Stanton wants to look at more closely, we can run it through again."

As if in obedience to the colonel's command, the Nipe seemed to shake himself a little and go about his business more briskly, and the air and gravity seemed to revert to those of Earth.

"What's he doing?" Stanton asked. The Nipe was doing something with an odd-looking box that sat on the floor in front of him.

"He's got a screwdriver that he's modified to give it a head with an L-shaped cross-section, and he's wiggling it around inside that hole in the box. But what he's doing is a secret between God and the Nipe at this point," the colonel said glumly.

Stanton glanced away from the screen for a moment to look at the other men who were there. Some of them were watching the screen, but most of them seemed to be watching Stanton, although they looked away as soon as they saw his eyes on them.

Trying to see what kind of a bloke this touted superman is, Stanton thought. Well, I can't say I blame 'em.

He brought his attention back to the screen.

So this was the Nipe's hideaway. He wondered if it were furnished in the fashion that a Nipe's living quarters would be furnished on whatever planet the multilegged horror called home. Probably it had the same similarity as Robinson Crusoe's island home had to a middle-class Nineteenth Century English home.

There was no furniture at all, as such. Low-slung as he was, the Nipe needed no tables for his work, and sleeping was a form of metabolic rest that he evidently found unnecessary, although he would sometimes just remain quiet for periods of time ranging from a few minutes to a couple of hours.

"We had a hard time getting the first cameras in there," the colonel was saying. "That's why we missed some of the early stages of his work. There! Look at that!"

"That attachment he's making?"

"That's right. Now, it looks as though it's a meter of some kind, but we don't know whether it's a test instrument or an integral part of the machine he's making. The whole thing might be a test instrument. After all, he had to start out from the very beginning—making the tools to make the tools to make the tools, you know."

"It's not quite as bad as all that," said one of the other men, who had been briefly introduced to Stanton as Fred Meyer. "After all, he had our technology to draw upon. If he'd been wrecked on Earth two or three centuries ago, he wouldn't have been able to do a thing."

"Granted," the colonel said agreeably, "but it's quite obvious that there are parts of our technology that are just as alien to him as parts of his are to us. Remember how he went to all the trouble of building a pentode vacuum tube for a job that could have been done by transistors. His knowledge of solid-state physics seems to be about a century and a half behind ours."

"Not completely, Colonel," Meyer said. "That gimmick he built last year—the one that blinded those people in Bagdad—had five perfect emeralds in it, connected in series with silver wire."

"That's true. Our technologies seem to overlap in some areas, but in others there's total alienness."

"Which one would you say was ahead of the other?" Stanton asked.

"Hard to say," said Colonel Mannheim, "but I'd put my money on his technology as encompassing more than ours—at least insofar as the physical sciences are concerned."

"I agree," said Meyer, "he's got things in that little nest of his that—" He stopped and shook his head slowly, as though he couldn't find words.

"I'll say this," Bart Stanton said musingly, "our friend, the Nipe, has plenty of guts. And patience." He smiled a little and then amended his statement. "From our own point of view, that is."

Colonel Mannheim's face took on a quizzical expression. "How do you mean? I was about to agree with you until you tacked that last phrase on. What does point of view have to do with it?"

"Everything, I should say," Stanton said. "It all depends on the equipment an individual has. A man who rushes into a burning building to save a life, wearing nothing but street clothes, has courage. A man who does the same thing when he's wearing a nullotherm suit is an unknown quantity. There is no way of knowing, from that action alone, whether he has courage or not."

Meyer looked a little dazed. "Pardon me if I seem thick, Mr. Stanton, but.... Are you saying that the Nipe's technological equipment is better than ours?"

"Not at all. I'm talking about his personal equipment." He turned again to the colonel. "Colonel Mannheim, do you think it would require any personal courage on my part to stand up against you in a face-to-face gunfight?"

The colonel grinned tightly. "I see what you mean. No, it wouldn't."

"On the other hand, if *you* were to challenge *me*," Bart Stanton continued, "would *that* show courage?"

"Not really. Foolhardiness, stupidity, or insanity—not courage."

"Then neither of us can prove we have guts enough to fight the other. Can we?"

Colonel Mannheim smiled grimly and said nothing, but Meyer, who evidently had a great deal of respect for the colonel, said: "Now, wait a second! That depends on the circumstances! If Colonel Mannheim, say, knew that forcing you to shoot him would save someone else's life—someone more important, say, or maybe a *lot* of people, then—"

Colonel Mannheim laughed. "Meyer, you've just proved Mr. Stanton's point!"

Meyer gaped for a half second, then burst into laughter himself. "Pardon my point of view, Mr. Stanton! I guess I *am* a little slow!"

Mannheim said: "Precisely! Whether the Nipe has courage or patience or any other human feeling depends on his own abilities and on how much information he has. A man can perform any action without fear if he knows that it will not hurt him—or if he does *not* know that it *will*." He glanced at the screen. The Nipe had settled down into his "sleeping position"—unmoving, although his baleful violet eyes were still open. "Cut that off, Meyer," the colonel said. "There's not much to learn from the rest of that tape."

"Have you actually managed to build any of the devices he's constructed?" Stanton asked.

"Some," said Colonel Mannheim. "We have specialists all over the world studying the tapes. We have the advantage of being able to watch every step the Nipe makes, and we know the materials he's using to work with. But, even so, the scientists are baffled by many of them. Can you imagine the time James Clerk Maxwell would have had trying to build a modern television set from tapes like this?"

"I know exactly how he'd feel," Meyer said glumly.

"You can see, then, why we're depending on you," Mannheim told Stanton.

Stanton merely nodded. The knowledge that he was actually a focal point in human history, that the whole future of the human race depended to a tremendous extent on him, was a realization that weighed heavily, and, at the same time, was immensely bracing.



"And now," the colonel said, "I'll turn you over to the psychology department. They'll be able to give you a great deal more information on the Nipe than I can."

VI

The Nipe squatted, brooding, in his underground nest, waiting for the special crystallization process to take place in the sodium-gold alloy that was forming in the reactor.

How long? he wondered. He was not thinking of the crystallization reaction; he knew the timing of that to the fraction of a second. His dark thoughts were focused inwardly, upon himself.

How long would it be before he would be able to construct the communicator that would put him in touch with his own race again? How long before he could discourse again with reasonable beings? For how much longer would he be stranded on an insane planet, surrounded by degraded, insane beings?

The work was going incredibly slowly. He had known at the beginning that his knowledge of the basic arts required to build a communicator was incomplete, but he had not realized just how painfully inadequate it was. Time after time, his instruments had simply refused to function because of some basic flaw in their manufacture—some flaw that an expert in that field could have pointed out at once. Time after time, equipment had had to be rebuilt almost from the beginning. And, time after time, only cut-and-try methods were available for correcting his errors.

Not even his prodigious and accurate memory could hold all the information that was necessary for the work, and there were no reference tapes available, of course.

He had long since given up any attempt to understand the functioning of the mad pseudo-civilization that surrounded him. He was quite certain that the beings he had seen could not possibly be the real rulers of this society, but he had, as yet, no inkling as to who the real rulers were.

As to *where* they were, that question seemed a little easier to answer. It was highly probable that they were out in space, on the asteriods that his instruments had detected as he had dropped in toward this planet so many years before. He had made an error back then in not landing in the Belt, but at no time since had he experienced the emotion of regret or wished he had done differently; both thoughts would have been incomprehensible to the Nipe. He had made an error; the circumstances had been checked and noted; he would not make that error again.

What further action could be taken by a logical mind?

None. The past was unchangeable. It existed only as a memory in his own mind, and there was no way to change that indelible record, even had he wished to do such an insane thing.

Surely, he thought, the real rulers must know of his existence. He had tried, by his every action, to show that he was a reasoning, intelligent, and civilized being. Why had they taken no action?

His hypotheses, he realized, were weak because of lack of data. He could only wait for more information.

That—and continue to work.

VII

INTERLUDE

Mrs. Frobisher touched the control button that depolarized the window in the breakfast room, letting the morning sun stream in. Then she said, in a low voice, "Larry, come here."

Larry Frobisher looked up from his morning coffee. "What is it, hon?"

"The Stanton boys. Come look."

Frobisher sighed. "Who are the Stanton boys, and why should I come look?" But he got up and came over to the window.

"See—over there on the walkway toward the play area," she said.

"I see three girls and a boy pushing a wheeled contraption," Frobisher said. "Or do you mean that the Stanford boys are dressed up as girls?"

"*Stanton*," she corrected him. "They just moved into the apartment on the first floor."

"Who? The three girls?"

"No, silly! The two Stanton boys and their mother. One of them is in that 'wheeled contraption'. It's called a therapeutic chair."

"Oh? So the poor kid's been hurt. What's so interesting about that, aside from morbid curiosity?"

The boy pushing the chair went around a bend in the walkway, out of sight, and Frobisher went back to his coffee while his wife spoke.

"Their names are Mart and Bart. They're twins."

"I should think," Frobisher said, applying himself to his breakfast, "that the mother would get a self-powered chair for the boy instead of making the other boy push it."

"The poor boy can't control the chair, dear. Something wrong with his nervous system. I understand that he was exposed to some kind of radiation when he was only two years old. That's why the chair has all the instruments built into it. Even his heartbeat has to be controlled electronically."

"Shame." Frobisher speared a bit of sausage. "Kind of rough on both of 'em, I'd guess."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, I mean, like.... Well, for instance, why are they going over to the play area? Play games, right? The one that's well has to push his brother over there—can't just get out and go; has to take the brother along. Kind of a burden, see?"

"And then, the kid in the chair has to sit there and watch his brother play basketball or jai alai, while he can't do anything himself. Like I say, kind of rough on both of them."

"Yes, I suppose it must be. More coffee?"

"Thanks, honey. And another slice of toast, hunh?"

VIII

The two objects floating in space both looked like pitted pieces of rock. The larger one, roughly pear-shaped and about a quarter of a mile in its greatest dimension, was actually that—a hunk of rock. The smaller—*much* smaller—of the two was a camouflaged spaceboat. The smaller was on a near-collision course with reference to the larger, although their relative velocities were not great.

At precisely the right time, the smaller drifted by the larger, only a few hundred yards away. The weakness of the gravitational fields generated between the two caused only a slight change of orbit on the part of both bodies. Then they began to separate.

But, during the few seconds of their closest approach, a third body had detached itself from the camouflaged spaceboat and shot rapidly across the intervening distance to land on the surface of the floating mountain.

The third body was a man in a spacesuit. As soon as he landed, he sat down, stock-still, and checked the instrument case he held in his hands.

No response. Thus far, then, he had succeeded.

He had had to pick his time precisely. The people who were already on this small planetoid could not use their detection equipment while the planetoid itself was within detection range of Beacon 971, only two hundred and eighty miles away. Not if they wanted to keep from being found. Radar pulses emanating from a presumably lifeless planetoid would be a dead giveaway.

Other than that, they were mathematically safe—if they depended on the laws of chance. No ship moving through the Asteroid Belt would dare to move at any decent velocity without using radar, so the people on this particular lump of planetary flotsam would be able to spot a ship's approach easily, long before their own weak detection system would register on the pick-ups of the approaching ship.

The power and range needed by a given detector depends on the relative velocity—the greater that velocity, the more power, the greater range needed. At one mile per second, a ship needs a range of only thirty miles to spot an obstacle thirty seconds away; at ten miles per second, it needs a range of three hundred miles.

The man who called himself Stanley Martin had carefully plotted the orbit of this particular planetoid and then let his spaceboat coast in without using any detection equipment except the visual. It had been necessary, but very risky.

Had the people here seen his boat? If so, had they recognized it, in spite of the heavy camouflage? And, even if they only suspected, what would be their reaction?

He waited.

It takes nerve and patience to wait for thirteen solid hours without moving more than an occasional flexure of muscles, but he managed that long before the instrument case waggled a meter needle at him. The one relieving factor was the low gravity; on an asteroid, the problem of sleeping on a bed of nails is caused by the likelihood of accidentally throwing oneself off the bed. The probability of puncture or discomfort from the points is almost negligible.

When the needle on the instrument panel flickered, he got to his feet and began moving. He was almost certain that he had not been detected.

Walking was out of the question. This was a silicate-alumina rock, not a nickel-iron one. The group that occupied it had deliberately chosen it that way, so that there would be no chance of its being picked out for slicing by one of the mining teams in the Asteroid Belt. Granted, the chance of any given metallic planetoid's being selected was very small, they had not even wanted to take that chance. Therefore, without any magnetic field to hold him down, and only a very tiny gravitic field, the man had to use different tactics.

It was more like mountain climbing than anything else, except that there was no danger of falling. He crawled over the surface in the same way that an Alpine climber might crawl up the side of a steep slope—seeking handholds and toeholds and using them to propel himself onward. The only difference was that he covered distance a great deal more rapidly than a mountain climber could.

When he reached the spot he wanted, he carefully concealed himself beneath a craggy overhang. It took a little searching to find exactly the right spot, but when he did, he settled himself into place in a small pit and began more elaborate preparations.

Self-hypnosis required nearly ten minutes. The first five or six minutes were taken up in relaxing from his exertion. Gravity notwithstanding, he had had to push his hundred and eighty pounds of mass over a considerable distance. When he was completely relaxed and completely hypnotized, he reached up and cut down the valve that fed oxygen into his suit.

Then, of his own will, he went cataleptic.

A single note, sounded by the instruments in the case by his side, woke him instantly. He came fully awake, as he had commanded himself to do.

Immediately, he turned up his oxygen intake, at the same time glancing at the clock dial in his helmet. He smiled. Nineteen days and seven hours. He had calculated it almost precisely. He wasn't more than an hour off, which was pretty good, all things considered.

He consulted his instruments again. The supply ship was ten minutes away. The smile stayed on his face as he prepared for further action.

The first two minutes were conscientiously spent in inhaling oxygen. Even under the best cataleptic conditions, the body tended to slow down too much. He had to get himself prepared for violent movement.

Eight minutes left. He climbed out of the little grotto where he had concealed himself and moved toward the spot where he knew the air lock to the caverns underneath the planetoid's surface was hidden. Then again, he concealed himself and waited, while he continued to breathe deeply of the highly oxygenated air in his suit. Five minutes before the ship landed, he swallowed eight ounces of the nutrient solution from the tank in the back of his helmet. The solution of amino acids, vitamins, and honey sugar also contained a small amount of stimulant of the dexedrine type and one per cent ethanol. Then he unholstered his gun.

It wasn't a big ship. He had known it wouldn't be. It was only a little larger than the one he had used to come here. It dropped down to the surface of the small planetoid only ten meters from the hidden trapdoor that led to the air lock beneath the surface.

He could suddenly hear voices in the earphones of his helmet.

Lasser?

It's me, Fritz. I got your supplies and good news.

The air lock trapdoor opened, and a spacesuited figure came out. *How about the deal?*

That's the good news, said the second suited figure as it came from the air lock of the grounded spaceboat. Another five million.

The man who was hidden behind the nearby crag of rock listened and watched for a minute or so more while the two men began unloading cases of foodstuffs from the spaceboat. Then, satisfied that it was perfectly safe, he aimed his gun and shot twice in rapid succession. The range was almost point-blank, and there was, of course, no need to take either gravity or air resistance into account.

The pellets of the shotgun-like charge that blasted out from the gun were small, needle-shaped, and heavy. They were oriented point-forward by the magnetic field along the barrel of the weapon. Of the hundreds in each charge fired, only a few penetrated the spacesuits of the targets, but those few were enough. The powerful drug in the needle-pointed head of each went into the bloodstream of the target.

Each man felt an itching sensation. He had less than two seconds to think about it before unconsciousness overtook him and he slumped nervelessly.

The man with the gun ran across the intervening space quickly, his body only a few degrees from the horizontal, and his toes paddling rapidly to propel him over the rough rock.

He braked himself to a halt and slapped air patches over the area where his charges had struck the men's suits, sealing the tiny air leaks, and, at the same time, driving more of the tiny needles into their skins. They would be out for a long time.

Neither of them had yet fallen to the ground; that would take several minutes under this low gravity. He left them to drop and headed toward the open air lock.

This was what he had been waiting for all those nineteen days in cataleptic hypnosis. He couldn't have cut his way in from the outside; he had had to wait until it was opened, and that time would come only when the supply ship came.

Once in the air lock, he touched the control stud that would close the outer door, pump air into the waiting room, and open the inner door. Here was his greatest point of danger—greater, even, than the danger of coming to the planetoid, or the danger of waiting nineteen days for the coming of the supply ship. If the ones who remained within suspected anything—anything at all!—then his chances of coming out of this alive were practically nil.

But there was no reason why they should suspect. They should think that the man coming in was one of their own. The radio contact between the men outside had been limited to a few millimicrowatts of power—necessarily, since radio waves of very small wattage can be decoded at tremendous distances in open space. The men inside the planetoid certainly should not have been able to pick up any more than the beginning of the conversation, before it had been cut off by solid rock.

It was a high-speed air lock. Unlike the soundless discharge of his special gun in the outer airlessness, the blast of air that came into the waiting chamber was like a hurricane in noise and force, as the room filled in a few seconds.

He held onto the handholds tightly while the brief but violent winds buffeted him. He turned as the inner door opened.

His eyes took in the picture in a fraction of a second. In an even smaller fraction, his mind assimilated the picture.

The woman was dark-haired, dark-eyed, and muscular. Her mouth was wide and thick-lipped beneath a large nose.

The man was leaner and lighter, bony-faced and beady-eyed.

The woman said: "Fritz, what—"

And then he shot them both with gun number two.

No needle charges this time; such shots would have blown them both in two, unprotected as they were by spacesuits. The small handgun merely jangled their nerves with a high-powered blast of accurately beamed supersonics. While they were still twitching, he went over and jabbed them with a drug needle.

Then he went on into the hideout.

He had to knock out one more man, whom he found sound asleep in a room off the short corridor.

It took a gas bomb to get the two women who were guarding the kid.

He made sure that the BenChaim boy was all right, then he went to the little communications room and called for help.

IX

Colonel Walther Mannheim tapped the map that glowed on the wall before him. "He's right there, where those tunnels come together."

Bart Stanton looked at the map of Manhattan Island and at the gleaming colored tracteries that threaded their various ways across it. "Just what was the purpose of those tunnels?" he asked curiously.

"They were for rail transportation," said the colonel. "The island was hit by a sun bomb during the Holocaust, and almost completely leveled and slagged down. When the city was rebuilt, there was naturally no need for such things, so they were simply sealed off and forgotten."

"Right under Government City," Stanton said. "Incredible."

"It used to be one of the largest seaports in the world," Colonel Mannheim said, "and it probably still would be if the inertia drive hadn't made air travel cheaper and easier than seagoing."

"How did he find out about the tunnels?" Stanton asked.

The colonel pointed at the north end of the island. "After the Holocaust, the first returnees to the

island were wild animals which crossed from the mainland from the north. The Harlem River isn't very wide at this point. Also, because of the rocky hills at this end of the island, there were places which were spared the direct effects of the bomb, and grasses and trees began growing there. That's why it was decided to leave that section as a game preserve when the Government built the capital on the southern part of the island." His finger moved down the map. "The upper three miles of the island, down to here, where it begins to widen, are all game preserve. There's a high wall here which separates it from the city, and the ruins of the bridges which connected with the mainland have been removed, so the animals can't get back across any more.

"Two years after he arrived, the Nipe was almost caught. He had managed, somehow—we're not sure yet exactly how—to get here from Asia. According to the psychologists who have been studying him, he apparently does not believe that human beings are any more than trained animals; he was looking then—as he is apparently still looking—for the 'real' rulers of Earth. He expected to find them, of course, in Government City. Needless to say," said the colonel with a touch of irony, "he failed."

"But he was seen?" asked Stanton.

"He was seen. And pursued. But he got away easily, heading north. The island was searched, and the police were ready to start an inch-by-inch going over of the island two days later. But the Nipe hit and robbed a chemical supply house in northern Pennsylvania, killing two men, so the search was called off.



"It wasn't until two years later, after exhaustive analysis of the pattern of his raids had given us something to work with, that we decided that he must have found an opening into one of the tunnels up here in the game preserve." He gestured again at the map. "It wouldn't take him long to see that no human being had been down there in a long time. It was a perfect place for his base."

"How does he move in and out?" Stanton asked.

"This way." The colonel traced a finger down one of the red lines on the map, southward, until he came to a spot only a little over two miles from the southernmost tip of the island. The line turned abruptly toward the western edge of the island, where it stopped. "This tunnel goes underneath the Hudson River at this point, and emerges on the other side. It's only one of several that do so. They're all flooded now; the sun bomb caved them in when the primary shock wave hit the surface of the river.

"In spite of his high rate of metabolism, the Nipe can store a tremendous amount of oxygen in his body, and can stay underwater for as long as half an hour without breathing apparatus—if he conserves his energy. When he's wearing his scuba apparatus, he's practically a self-contained submarine. The pressure doesn't seem to bother him much. He's a tough cookie."

Stanton nodded silently and slowly. Could he beat the Nipe in hand-to-hand combat? There would

be no way of knowing until the final moment of success or failure.

"At that time," the colonel went on, "we hadn't formulated any definite policy on the Nipe. We didn't know what he was up to; we weren't even sure he was actually down in those tunnels. We had to find out."

He walked over to the nearby table and opened a box some twelve inches long and five-by-five inches in cross section.

"See this?" he said as he took something out.

It looked like a large dead rat.

"Our spy," said Colonel Mannheim.

The rat moved along the rusted steel rail that ran the length of the huge tunnel. To a human being, the tunnel would have seemed to be in utter darkness, but the little eyes of the rat saw its surroundings as faintly luminescent, glowing from the infra-red radiations given out by the internal warmth of cement and steel. The main source came from above, where the heat of the sun and of the energy sources in the buildings on the surface seeped through the roof of the tunnel.

On and on it moved, its little pinkish feet pattering almost silently on the oxidized metal surface of the rail. Its sensitive ears picked up the movements and the squeals of other rats, but it paid them no heed. Several times, it met other rats on the rail, but most of them sensed the alienness of *this* rat and scuttled out of its way.

Once, it met a rat who did not give way. Hungry, perhaps, or perhaps merely yielding to the paranoid fury that was a normal component of the rattish mind, it squealed its defiance to the rat that was not a rat. It advanced, baring its teeth.

The rat that was not a rat became suddenly motionless, its sharp rodent's nose pointed directly at the enemy. There came a noise, a tiny popping hiss, like that of a very small drop of water striking hot metal. From the left nostril of the not-rat, a tiny glasslike needle snapped out at bullet speed. It struck the advancing rat in the center of the pink tongue that was visible in the open mouth. Then the not-rat scuttled backwards faster than any rat could have moved.

For a second, the real rat hesitated, and it may be that the realization penetrated into its dim brain that rats did not fight this way. Then, as the tiny needle dissolved in its bloodstream, it closed its eyes and collapsed, rolling limply off the rail.

The rat might come to before it was found and devoured by its fellows—or it might not. The not-rat moved on, not caring either way. The human intelligence that looked out from the eyes of the not-rat was only concerned with getting to the Nipe.

"That's how we found the Nipe," Colonel Mannheim said, "and that's how we keep tabs on him now. We have over seven hundred of these remote-controlled robots hidden in strategic spots in those tunnels now, but it took time to get everything set up this way. Now, we can follow the Nipe wherever he goes, so long as he stays in the tunnels. If he went out through an open air exit, we could have him followed by bird-robots but—" He shrugged wryly. "I'm afraid the underwater problem still has us stumped. We can't get the carrier wave for the remote-control impulses to go far underwater."

"How do you get your carrier wave underground to those tunnels?" Stanton asked.

The colonel grinned widely. "One of the boys dreamed up a real cute gimmick. The rails themselves act as antenna for the broadcaster, and the rat's tail is the pickup antenna. As long as the rat is crawling right on the rail, only a microscopic amount of power is needed for control, not enough for the Nipe to pick up with his instruments. Each rat carries its own battery for motive power, and there are old copper power cables down there that we can send direct current through to recharge the batteries. And, when we need them, the copper cables can be used as antennas. It took us quite a while to work the system out."

Stanton rubbed his head thoughtfully. *Damn these gaps in my memory!* he thought. It was sometimes embarrassing to ask questions that any schoolboy should know.

"Aren't there ways of detecting objects underwater?" he asked after a moment.

"Yes," said the colonel, "But they all require beamed energy of some kind to be reflected from the object, and we don't dare use anything like that." He sat down on one corner of the table, his bright blue eyes looking up at Stanton.

"That's been our problem all along," he said seriously. "Keeping the Nipe from knowing that he's being watched. In the tunnels, we've used only equipment that was already there, adding only what we absolutely had to—small things, a few strands of wire, a tiny relay, things that can be hidden in out of the way places. After all, he has his own alarm system in the maze of tunnels,

and we've deliberately kept away from his detecting devices. He knows about the rats and ignores them; they're part of the environment. But we don't dare use anything that would tip him off to our knowledge of his whereabouts. One slip like that, and hundreds of human beings will have died in vain."

"And if he stays there too long," Stanton said levelly, "millions more may die."

The colonel's face was grim as he looked directly into Stanton's eyes. "That's why you have to know your job down to the most minute detail when the time comes to act. The whole success of the plan will depend on you and you alone."

Stanton's eyes didn't avoid the colonel's. *That's not true*, he thought. *I'll only be one man on a team, and you know it, Colonel Mannheim. But you'd like to shove all the responsibility off onto someone else—someone stronger. You've finally met someone that you consider superior in that way, and you want to unload. I wish I felt as confident as you do, but I don't.*

Aloud, he said: "Sure. Nothing to it. All I have to do is take into account everything that's known about the Nipe and make allowances for everything that's not known." Then he smiled. "Not," he added, "that I can think of any other way to go about it."

X

St. Louis hadn't been hit during the Holocaust; it still retained much of the old-fashioned flavor of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, especially in the residential districts. Bart Stanton liked to walk along those quiet streets of an evening, just to let the peacefulness seep into him. And, knowing it was rather childish, he still enjoyed the small pleasure of playing hookey from the Neurophysics Institute. Technically, he supposed, he was still a patient there. More, now that he had accepted Colonel Mannheim's assignment, he was presumably under military discipline. But he assumed that, if he had asked permission to leave the Institute's grounds, he would have been given that permission without question.

But, like playing hookey, or stealing watermelon, it was more fun if it was done on the sly. The boy who comes home feeling deliciously wicked and delightfully sinful after staying away from school all day can have his whole day ruined by being told that it was a holiday and that the school had been closed. Bart Stanton didn't want to spoil his own fun by asking for permission to leave the grounds when it was so easy for a man with his special abilities to get out without asking.

Besides, there *was* a chance—a small one, he thought—that permission might be refused for one reason or another, and Bart was fully aware that he would not disobey a direct request—to say nothing of a direct order—that he stay within the walls of the Institute. He didn't want to run any risk of losing his freedom, small though it was. After five years of mental and physical hell, he felt a need to get out into the world of normal, everyday people.

His legs moved smoothly, surely, and unhurriedly, carrying him aimlessly along the resilient walkway, under the warm glow of the street lights. The people around him walked as casually and with seemingly as little purpose as he did. There was none of the brisk sense of urgency that he felt inside the walls of the Institute.

He knew he could never get away from that sense of urgency completely, even out here. There were times when it seemed that all he had ever done, all his life, was to train himself for the single purpose of besting the Nipe.

If he wasn't training physically, he was listening to lectures from the psychologists or from Colonel Mannheim—laying plans and considering possibilities for the one great goal that seemed to be the focal point of his whole life.

What would happen if he failed? He would die, of course, and Mannheim's Plan Beta would immediately go into effect. The Nipe would be killed eventually.

But what if he, Stanton, won? Then what?

The people around him were not a part of his world, really. Their thoughts, their motions, their reactions, were slow and clumsy in comparison with his own. Once the Nipe had been conquered, what purpose would there be in the life of Bartholomew Stanton? He was surrounded by people, but he was not one of them. He was immersed in a society that was not his own because it was not, could not be, geared to his abilities and potentials. But there was no other society to turn to, either.

He was not a man "alone, afraid" in a world he had never made; he was a man who had been made for a world, a society, that did not exist.

Women? A wife? A family life?

Where? With whom?

He pushed the thoughts from his mind, the questions, unanswered and perhaps unanswerable. In spite of the apparent bleakness of the future, he had no desire to die, and there was the possibility that too much brooding of that kind would evoke a subconscious reaction that could

slow him down or cause a wrong decision at a vital moment. A feeling of futility could operate to bring on his death in spite of his conscious determination to win the coming battle with the Nipe.

The Nipe was his first duty. When that job was finished, he would consider the problem of himself. Just because he could not now see the answer to that problem did not mean that no answer existed.

He suddenly realized that he was hungry. He had been walking through Memorial Park, past the museum, an old, worn edifice that was still called the Missouri Pacific Building. There was a small restaurant only a block away. He reached into his pocket and took out the few coins that were there. Not much, but enough to buy a sandwich and a glass of milk. Because of the trust fund that had been set up when he had started the treatment at the Neurophysics Institute, he was already well off, but he didn't have much cash. What good was cash in the Institute, where everything was provided?

He stopped at a news-vendor, dropped in a coin, and waited for the reproducing mechanism to turn out a fresh paper. Then he took the folded sheets and went on to the restaurant.

He rarely read a news-sheet. Mostly, his information about the world that existed outside the walls of the Institute came from the televised newscasts. But, occasionally, he liked to read the small, relatively unimportant little stories about people who had done small, relatively unimportant things—stories that didn't appear in the headlines or on the newscasts.

The last important news story had come two nights before, when the Nipe had robbed an optical products company in Miami. The camera had shown the shop on the screen. Whatever had been used to blow open the door of the vault had been more effective than necessary. It had taken the whole front door of the shop and both windows, too. The bent and twisted paraglass that had lain on the pavement showed how much force had been applied from within.

And yet, the results were not that of an explosion. It was more as though some tremendous force had *pushed* outward from within. It had not been the shattering shock of high explosive, but some great thrust that had unhurriedly, but irresistibly, moved everything out of its way.

Nothing had been moved very far, as it would have been by a blast. It appeared that everything had simply fallen aside, as though scattered by a giant hand. The main braces of the store front were still there, bent outward a little, but not broken.

The vault door had lain on the floor of the shop, only a few feet from the front door. The vault itself had been farther back, and the camera had showed it, standing wide open, gaping. Inside, there had been pieces of fragile glass standing on the shelves, unmoved, unharmed.

The force, whatever it had been, had moved in one direction only, from a point within the vault, just a few feet from the door, pushing outward to tear out the heavy door as though it had been made of paraffin or modeling clay.

Stanton had recognized the vault construction type: the Voisier construction, which, by test, could withstand almost everything known, outside of the actual application of atomic energy itself. In a widely-publicized demonstration several years before, a Voisier vault had been cut open by a team of well-trained, well-equipped technicians. It had taken twenty-one hours for them to breach the wall, and they had no fear of interruption, or of making a noise, or of setting off the intricate alarms that were built into the safe itself. Not even a borazon drill could make much of an impression on a metal which had been formed under millions of atmospheres of pressure.

And yet the Nipe had taken that door out in a second, without much effort at all.

The crowd that had gathered at the scene of the crime had not been large. The very thought of the Nipe kept people away from places where he was known to have been. The specter of the Nipe evoked a fear, a primitive fear—fear of the dark and fear of the unknown, combined with the rational fear of a very real, very tangible danger.

And yet, there *had* been a crowd of onlookers. In spite of their fear, it is hard to keep human beings from being curious. It was known that the Nipe didn't stay around after he had struck; and, besides, the area was now full of armed men. So the curious came to look and to stare in revulsion at the neat pile of gnawed and bloody bones that had been the night watchman, carefully killed and eaten by the Nipe before he had opened the vault.

Thus curiosity does make fools of us all, and the native hue of caution is crimsoned o'er by the bright red of morbid fascination.

Stanton went through the door of the automat restaurant and walked over to the vending wall. The dining room was only about three-quarters full of people; there were plenty of seats available. He fed coins into the proper slots, took his sandwich and milk over to a seat in one corner and made himself comfortable.

He flipped open the newspaper and looked at the front page.

And, for a moment, his brain seemed to freeze.

The story itself was straightforward enough:

BENCHAIM KIDNAPERS

NABBED!

STAN MARTIN DOES IT

AGAIN!

Ceres, June 3 (Interplanetary News Service)—The three men and three women who allegedly kidnapped ten-year-old Shmuel BenChaim were brought to justice today through the single-handed efforts of Stanley Martin, famed investigator for Lloyd's of London. The boy, held prisoner for more than ten months on a small asteroid, was reported in very good health.

According to Lt. John Vale, of the Planetoid Police, the kidnap gang could not have been taken by direct assault on their hideout because of fear that the boy might be killed. "The operation required a carefully-planned, one-man infiltration of their hideout," he said. "Mr. Martin was the man for the job."

Labeled "the most outrageous kidnapping in history", the affair was conceived as a long-term method of gaining control of Heavy Metals Incorporated, controlled by Moishe BenChaim, the boy's father. The details....

But Bart Stanton wasn't interested in the details. After only a glance through the first part of the article, his eyes returned to the picture alongside the article. The line of print beneath it identified the man in the picture as Stanley Martin.

But a voice in Bart Stanton's brain said: *Not Stan Martin! The name is Mart Stanton!*

And Bartholomew felt a roar of confusion in his mind, because he didn't know who Mart Stanton was, and because the face in the picture was his own.

XI

He was walking again.

He didn't quite remember how he had left the automat, and he didn't even try to remember.

He was trying to remember other things—farther back—before he had—

Before he had what?

Before the Institute; before the beginning of the operations.

The memories were there, just beyond the grasp of his conscious mind, like the memories of a dream after one has awakened. Each time he tried to reach into the darkness to grasp one of the pieces, it would break up into smaller bits. The patterns were too fragile to withstand the direct probing of his conscious mind. Only the resulting fragments held together long enough to be analyzed.

And, while part of his mind probed frantically after the elusive particles of memory, another part of it watched the process with semi-detached amusement.

He had always known there were holes in his memory (*Always? Don't be silly, pal!*), but it was disconcerting to find an area that was as riddled as a used machine-gun target. The whole fabric had been punched to bits.

No man's memory is completely available at any given time. However it is recorded, however completely every bit of data may be recorded during a lifetime, much of it is unavailable because it is incompletely cross-indexed or, in some cases, labeled *Do Not Scan*. Or, metaphorically, the file drawer may be locked. It may be that, in many cases, if a given bit of data remains unscanned long enough it fades into illegibility, never reinforced by the scanning process. Sensory data, coming in from the outside world as it does, is probably permanent. But the thought patterns originating within the mind itself, the processes that correlate and cross-index and speculate on and hypothesize about the sensory data, those are much more fragile. A man might glance once through a Latin primer and have every page imprinted indelibly on his recording mechanism and

still be unable to make sense of the *Nauta in cubito cum puella est*.

Sometimes a man is aware of the holes in his memory. ("What was the name of that fellow I met at Eddie's party? Can't remember it for the life of me.") At other times, a memory may lay dormant and unremembered, leaving no apparent gap, until a tag of some kind brings it up. ("That girl with the long hair reminds me of Suzie Blugerhugle. My gosh! I haven't thought of her for years!") Both factors seemed to be operating in Bart Stanton's mind at this time.

Incredibly, he had never, in the past year at least, had occasion to try to remember much about his past life. He had known who he was without thinking about it particularly, and the rest of his knowledge—language, history, politics, geography, and so on—had been readily available for the most part. Ask any educated man to give the product of the primes 2, 13, and 41, or ask him to give the date of the Norman Conquest, and he can give the answer without having to think of where he learned it or who taught it to him or when he got the information.

But now the picture and the name in the paper had brought forth a reaction in Stanton's mind, and he was trying desperately to bring the information out of oblivion.

Did he have a mother? Surely—but could he remember her? *Yes!* Certainly. A pretty, gentle, rather sad woman. He could remember when she had died, although he couldn't remember ever having attended the funeral.

What about his father?

He could find no memory of his father, and, at first, that bothered him. He could remember his mother—could almost see her moving around in the apartment where they had lived ... in ... in ... in Denver! Sure! And he could remember the building itself, and the block, and even Mrs. Frobisher, who lived upstairs! And the school! A great many memories came crowding back, but there was no trace of his father.

And yet....

Oh, of *course!* His father had been killed in an accident when Martinbart were very young.

Martinbart!



The name flitted through his mind like a scrap of paper in a high wind, but he reached out and grasped it.

Martinbart. Martin-Bart. Mart 'n' Bart. Mart *and* Bart.

The Stanton Twins.

It was curious, he thought, that he should have forgotten his brother. And even more curious that the name in the paper had not brought him instantly to mind.

Martin, the cripple. Martin, the boy with the radiation-shattered nervous system. The boy who had had to stay in a therapy chair all his life because his efferent nerves could not control his body. The boy who couldn't speak. Or, rather, *wouldn't* speak because he was ashamed of the gibberish that resulted.

Martin. The nonentity. The nothing. The nobody.

The one who watched and listened and thought, but could do nothing.

Bart Stanton stopped suddenly and unfolded the newspaper again under the glow of the street lamp. His memories certainly didn't gibe with *this!*

His eyes ran down the column of type.

"... Mr. Martin has, in the eighteen months since he came to the Belt, run up an enviable record, both as an insurance investigator and as a police detective, although his connection with the Planetoid Police is, necessarily, an unofficial one. Probably not since Sherlock Holmes has there been such mutual respect and co-operation between the official police and a private investigator."

There was only one explanation, Stanton thought. Martin, too, had been treated by the Institute. His memory was still blurry and incomplete, but he did suddenly remember that a decision had been made for Martin to take the treatment.

He chuckled a little at the irony of it. They hadn't been able to make a superman of Martin, but they *had* been able to make a normal and extraordinarily capable man of him. Now it was Bart who was the freak, the odd one.

Turn about is fair play, he thought. But somehow it didn't seem quite fair.

He crumpled the newspaper, dropped it into a nearby waste chute, and walked on through the night toward the Neurophysical Institute.

XII

INTERLUDE

You understand, Mrs. Stanton," said the psychiatrist, "that a great part of Martin's trouble is mental as much as physical. Because of the nature of his ailment, he has withdrawn, pulled himself away from communication with others. If these symptoms had been brought to my attention earlier, the mental disturbance might have been more easily analyzed and treated."

"I'm sorry, Doctor," said Mrs. Stanton. Her manner betrayed weariness and pain. "It was so—so difficult. Martin could never talk very well, you know, and he just talked less and less as the years went by. It was so gradual that I never really noticed it."

Poor woman, the doctor thought. *She's not well, herself. She should have married again, rather than carry the whole burden alone. Her role as a doting mother hasn't helped either of the boys to overcome the handicaps that were already present.*

"I've tried to do my best for Martin," Mrs. Stanton went on unhappily. "And so has Bart. When they were younger, Bart used to take him out all the time. They went everywhere together. Of course, I don't expect Bart to do that so much any more; he has his own life to live. He can't take Martin out on dates or things like that. But when he's home, Bart helps me with Martin all the time."

"I understand," said the doctor. *This is no time to tell her that Bartholomew's tests indicate that he has subconsciously resented Martin's presence for a long time. She has enough to worry about.*

"I don't understand," said Mrs. Stanton, breaking into sudden tears. "I don't understand why Martin should behave this way! Why should he just sit there with his eyes closed and ignore us both?"

The doctor comforted her in a warmly professional manner, then, as her tears subsided, he said: "We don't understand all of the factors ourselves, Mrs. Stanton. Martin's reactions are, I admit, unusual. His behavior doesn't quite follow the pattern that we usually expect from such cases as this. His physical disability has drastically modified the course of his mental development, and, at the same time, makes it difficult for us to make any analysis of his mental state."

"Is there *anything* you can do, Doctor?"

"We don't know yet," he said gently. He considered for a moment, then said: "Mrs. Stanton, I'd like for you to leave both the boys here for a few days, so that we can perform further tests. That will help us a great deal in getting at the root of Martin's trouble."

She looked at him with a little surprise. "Why, yes, of course. But ... why should Bart stay?"

The doctor weighed his words carefully before he spoke.

"Bart is our control, Mrs. Stanton. Since the boys are genetically identical, they should have been a great deal alike in personality if it hadn't been for Martin's accident. In other words, our tests of Bart will tell us what Martin *should* be like. That way we can tell just how much and in what way Martin deviates from what he should ideally be. Do you understand?"

"Yes. Yes, I see. All right, Doctor—whatever you say."

After Mrs. Stanton had left, the psychiatrist sat quietly in his chair and stared thoughtfully at his desk top for several minutes. Then, making his decision, he picked up a small book that lay on his desk and looked up a number in Arlington, Virginia. He punched out the number on his phone, and when the face appeared on his screen, he said: "Hello, Sidney. Look, I have a very interesting

case out here that I'd like to talk to you about. Do you happen to have a telepath who's strong enough to take a meshing with an insane mind? If my suspicions are correct, I'll need a man with an impregnable sense of identity, because he's going to get into the weirdest situation I've ever come across."

XIII

Pok! Pok! Ping!

Pok! Pok! Ping!

Pok! Pok! Ping!

The action in the handball court was beautiful to watch. The robot mechanism behind Bart Stanton would fire out a ball at random intervals ranging from a tenth to a quarter of a second, bouncing them off the wall in a random pattern. Stanton would retrieve the ball before it hit the ground, bounce it off the wall again to strike the target on the moving robot. Stanton had to work against a machine; no ordinary human being could have given him any competition.

Pok! Pok! Ping!

Pok! Pok! Ping!

Pok! Pok! PLUNK.

"One miss," Stanton said to himself. But he fielded the next one nicely and slammed it home.

Pok! Pok! Ping!

The physical therapist who was standing by glanced at his watch. It was almost time.

Pok! Pok! Ping!

The machine, having delivered its last ball, shut itself off with a smug click. Stanton turned away from the handball court and walked toward the physical therapist, who held out a robe for him.

"That was good, Bart," he said, "real good."

"One miss," Stanton said as he shrugged into the robe.

"Yeah. Your timing was a shade off there, I guess. But you ran a full minute over your previous record."

Stanton looked at him. "You re-set the timer again," he said accusingly. But there was a grin on his face.

The P.T. man grinned back. "Yup. Come on, step into the mummy case." He waved toward the narrow niche in the wall of the court, a niche just big enough to hold a standing man. Stanton stepped in, and various instrument pick-ups came out of the walls and touched his body. Hidden machines recorded his heartbeat, blood pressure, brain activity, muscular tension, and several other factors.

After a minute, the P.T. man said, "O.K., Bart; let's hit the steam box."

Stanton stepped out of the niche and accompanied the therapist to another room, where he took off the robe again and sat down on the small stool inside an ordinary steam box. The box closed, leaving his head free, and the box began to fill with steam.

"Did I ever tell you what I don't like about that machine?" Bart asked as the therapist draped a heavy towel around his head.

"Nope. Didn't know you had any gripe. What is it?"

"You can't gloat after you beat it. You can't walk over and pat it on the shoulder and say, 'Well, better luck next time, old man.' It isn't a good loser, and it isn't a bad loser. The damn thing doesn't even know it lost, and if it did, it wouldn't care."

"I see what you mean," said the P.T. man, chuckling. "You beat the pants off it and what d'you get? Not even a case of the sulks out of it."

"Exactly. And what's worse, I know perfectly good and well that it's only half trying. The damned thing could beat me easily if you just turned that knob over a little more."

"You're not competing against the machine, anyway," the therapist said. "You're competing against yourself, trying to beat your own record."

"I know. And what happens when I can't do *that* any more, either?" Stanton asked. "I can't just go on getting better and better forever. I've got limits, you know."

"Sure," said the therapist easily. "So does a golf player. But every golfer goes out and practices by himself to try to beat his own record."

"Bunk! The real fun in *any* game is beating someone else! The big kick in golf is in winning over the other guy in a twosome."

"How about crossword puzzles or solitaire?"

"Solve a crossword puzzle, and you've beaten the guy who made it up. In solitaire, you're playing against the laws of chance, and even that can become pretty boring. What I'd like to do is get out on the golf course with someone else and do my best and then lose. Honestly."

"With a handicap..." the therapist began. Then he grinned weakly and stopped. On the golf course, Stanton was impossibly good. One long drive to the green, one putt to the cup. An easy thirty-six strokes for eighteen holes; an occasional hole-in-one sometimes brought him below that, an occasional worm-cast or stray wind sometimes raised his score.

"Sure," Stanton said. "A handicap. What kind of handicap do you want on a handball game with me?"

The P.T. man could imagine himself trying to get under one of Stanton's lightning-like returns. The thought of what would happen to his hand if he were to accidentally catch one made him wince.

"We wouldn't even be playing the same game," Stanton said.

The therapist stepped back and looked at Stanton. "You know," he said puzzledly, "you sound bitter."

"Sure I'm bitter," Stanton said. "All I get is exercise. All the fun has gone out of it." He sighed and grinned. There was no point in worrying the P.T. man. "I'll just have to stick to cards and chess if I want competition. Speed and strength don't help anything if I'm holding two pair against three of a kind."

Before the therapist could say anything, the door opened and a tall, lean man stepped into the fog-filled room. "You are broiling a lobster?" he asked the P.T. blandly.

"Steaming a clam," came the correction. "When he's done, I'll pound him to chowder."

"Excellent. I came for a clam-bake," the tall man said.

"You're early then, George," Stanton said. He didn't feel in the mood for light humor, and the appearance of Dr. Yoritomo did nothing to improve his humor.

George Yoritomo beamed, crinkling up his heavy-lidded eyes. "Ah! A talking clam! Excellent! How much longer does he have to cook?"

"Twenty-three minutes, why?"

"Would you be so good as to return at the end of that time?"

The therapist opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again, and said: "Sure, Doc. I can get some other stuff done. I'll see you then. I'll be back, Bart." He went out through the far door.

After the door closed, Dr. Yoritomo pulled up a chair and sat down. "New developments," he said, "as you may have surmised."

"I guessed," Stanton said. "What is it?" He flexed his muscles under the caress of the hot, moist currents in the box.

He wondered why it was so important that the psychologist interrupt him while he was relaxing after strenuous exercise. Yoritomo looked excited, in spite of his calm. And yet Stanton knew that there couldn't be anything urgent or Yoritomo would have acted differently.

It was relatively unimportant now, anyway, Stanton thought. Having made his decision to act on his own had changed his reaction to the decisions of others.

Yoritomo leaned forward in his chair, his thin lips in an excited smile, his black-irised eyes sparkling. "I had to come tell you. The sheer, utter beauty of it is too much to contain. Three times in a row was almost absolute, Bart; the probability that our hypothesis is correct was computed as straight nines to seven decimals. But now! The fourth time! Straight nines to *twelve* decimals!"

Stanton lifted an eyebrow. "Your Oriental calm is deserting you, George. I'm not reading you."

Yoritomo's smile became broader. "Ah! Sorry. I refer to the theory we have been discussing—about the memory of the Nipe. You know?"

Stanton knew. Dr. Yoritomo was, in effect, one of his training instructors. *Advanced Alien Psychology*, Stanton thought; *Seminar Course. The Mental Whys & Wherefores of the Nipe, or How to Outthink the Enemy in Twelve Easy Lessons. Instructor: Dr. George Yoritomo.*

After six years of watching the recorded actions of the Nipe, Yoritomo had evolved a theory about the kind of mentality that lay behind the four baleful violet eyes in that alien head. Now he evidently had proof of that theory. He was smiling and rubbing his long, bony hands together. For George Yoritomo, that was the equivalent of hysterical excitement.

"We have been able to predict the behavior of the Nipe!" he said. "For the fourth time in succession!"

"Great. But how does that fit in with that rule you once told me about? You know, the one about experimental animals."

"Ah, yes. The Harvard Law. 'A genetically standardized strain, under precisely controlled laboratory conditions, when subjected to carefully calibrated stimuli, will behave as it damned well pleases.' Yes. Very true.

"But an animal could not do otherwise, could it? Only as it pleases. And it could not please to behave as something it is not, could it?"

"Draw me a picture," Stanton said.

"I mean that any organism is limited in its choice of behavior. A hamster, for instance, cannot choose to behave in the manner of a Rhesus monkey. A dog cannot choose to react as a mouse would. If I prick a rat with a needle, it may squeal, or bite, or jump—but it will not bark. Never. Nor will it leap up to a trapeze, hang by its tail, and chatter curses at me. Never.

"By observing an organism's reactions, one can begin to see a pattern. If you tell me that you put an armful of hay into a certain animal's enclosure, and that the animal trotted over, ate the hay, and brayed, I can tell you with reasonable certainty that the animal has long ears. Do you see?"

"You haven't been able to pinpoint the Nipe that easily, have you?" Stanton asked.

"Ah, no. The more intelligent a creature is, the greater its scope of action. The Nipe is far from being so simple as a monkey or a hamster. On the other hand—" He smiled widely, showing bright, white teeth. "—he is not so bright as a human being."

"*What!?* I wouldn't say he was exactly stupid, George. What about all those prize gadgets of his?" He blinked. "Wipe the sweat off my forehead, will you? It's running into my eyes."

Dr. Yoritomo wiped with the towel as he continued. "Ah, yes. He is quite capable in that respect, my friend. It is his great memory—at once his finest asset and his greatest curse."

He draped the towel around Stanton's head again and stepped back, his face unsmiling. "Imagine having a near-perfect memory."

Stanton's jaw muscles tightened. "I think I'd like it."

Yoritomo shrugged slightly. "Perhaps you would. But it would not be the asset you think. Look at it soberly, my friend.

"The most difficult teaching job in the universe is the attempt to teach an organism something it already knows. True? Yes. If a man already knows the shape of the Earth, it will do you no good to attempt to teach him. If he *knows* that the Earth is flat, your contention that it is round will make no impression whatever. He *knows*, you see. He *knows*.

"Now. Imagine a race with a perfect memory—one which does not fade. A memory in which each bit of data is as bright and fresh as the moment it was imprinted, and as readily available as the data stored in a robot's mind. It is, in effect, a robotic memory.

"If you put false data into the memory bank of a computer—such as telling it that the square of two is five—you cannot correct the error simply by telling it that the square of two is four. You must first remove the erroneous data, not so?"

"Very good. Then let us look at the Nipe race, wherever it was spawned in this universe. Let us look at their race a long time back—when they first became *Nipe sapiens*. Back when they first developed a true language. Each child, as it is born or hatched or budded—whatever it is they do—is taught as rapidly as possible all the things it must know to survive. And once it is taught a thing, it *knows*. And if it is taught a falsehood, then it cannot be taught the truth."

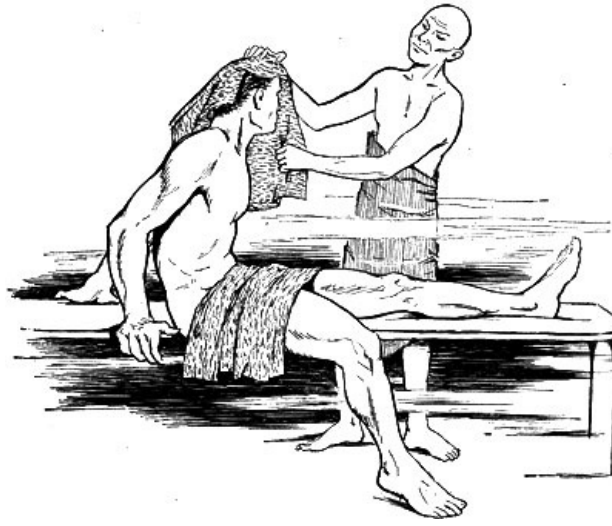
"Wouldn't cold reality force a change?" Stanton asked.

"Ah. In some cases, yes. In most, no. Look: Suppose a primordial Nipe runs across a tiger—or whatever passes for a tiger on their planet. He has never seen a tiger before, so he does not see that this particular tiger is old, ill, and weak. He hits it on the head, and it drops dead. He takes it home for the family to feed on.

"How did you kill it, Papa?"

"I walked up to it, bashed it on the noggin, and it died. That is the way to kill tigers."

Yoritomo smiled. "It is also a good way to kill Nipes. Eh?" He took the towel and wiped Stanton's brow again.



"The error," he continued, "was made when Papa Nipe generalized from *one* tiger to *all* tigers. If tigers were rare, this bit of lore might be passed on for many generations. Those who learned that most tigers are *not* conquered by walking up to them and hitting them on the noggin undoubtedly died before they could pass this bit of information on. Then, one day, a Nipe survived the ordeal. His mind now contained conflicting information, which must be resolved. He *knows* that tigers are killed in this way. He also *knows* that this one did not die. Plainly, then, *this* one is not a tiger. Ha! He has the solution!

"What does he tell his children? Why, first he tells them how tigers are killed. Then he warns them that there is an animal that looks *just like* a tiger, but is *not* a tiger. One should not make the mistake of thinking it *is* a tiger or one will get badly hurt. Since the only way to tell the true tiger from the false is to hit it, and since that test may prove fatal to the Nipe who tries it, it follows that one is better off if one avoids all animals that look like tigers. You see?"

"Yeah," said Stanton. "Some snarks are boojums."

"Exactly! Thank you for that allusion. I must remember to use it in my report."

"It seems to me to follow," Stanton said musingly, "that there would be some things that they'd never learn the truth about, once they'd gotten a wrong idea in their heads."

"Ah! Indeed. It is precisely that which led me to formulate my theory in the first place. How else to explain the fact that the Nipe, for all his technical knowledge, is still in the ancient ritual-taboo stage of development?"

"A savage?"

Yoritomo smiled. "As to his savagery, I think no one on Earth would disagree. But they are not the same thing. What I do mean is that the Nipe is undoubtedly the most superstitious and bigoted being on the face of this planet."

XIV

There was a knock at the door, and the physical therapist put his head in. "Sorry to interrupt, but the clam is done. I'll give him a rubdown, Doc, and you can have him back."

"Excellent. Would you come up to my office, Bart, as soon as you've had your mauling?"

"Sure. I'll be right up."

Yoritomo left, and the P.T. man opened the steam box. "Feel O.K., Bart?"

"Yeah, sure," he said abstractedly as he got up on the rubdown table and lay prone. The therapist saw that Stanton was in no mood for conversation, so he proceeded with the massage in silence.

For the first time, Stanton was seeing the Nipe as an individual, as a person, as a thinking, feeling being.

We have a great deal in common, you and I, he thought. Except that you're a lot worse off than I am.

I'm actually feeling sorry for the poor guy, Stanton thought. Which, I suppose, is better than feeling sorry for myself. The only difference between us freaks is that you're a bigger freak than I am. "Molly O'Grady and the Colonel's lady are sisters under the skin."

Where'd that come from? Something I learned in school, I guess—like the snarks and boojums.

"He would answer to Hi! or to any loud cry,
Such as Fry me! or Fritter my wig!"

Who was that? The snark? No.

Damn this memory of mine!

Or can I even call it mine when I can't even use it?

"For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to
face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as
also I am known."

Another jack-in-the-box thought popping up from nowhere.

The only way I'll ever get all this stuff straightened out is to get more information. And it doesn't look as though anyone is going to give it to me on a platter. The Institute seems to be awfully chary about giving information away. George even had to chase away old rub-and-pound, here (That feels good!) before he would talk about the Nipe. Can't blame 'em for that, I guess. There'd be hell to pay if the public ever found out that the Nipe has been kept as a pet for six years.

How many people has he killed in that time? Twenty? Thirty? How much blood does Colonel Mannheim have on his hands?

"Though they know not why,
Or for what they give,
Still, the few must die,
That the many may live."

I wonder whether I read all that stuff complete or just browsed through a copy of Bartlett's Quotations. Fragments.

We've got to get organized here, brother. Colonel Mannheim's little puppet is going to cut his strings and do a Pinocchio.

"O.K., Bart," the P.T. said, giving Stanton a final slap, "you're all set. See you tomorrow."

"Right. Gimme my clothes."

Stanton dressed and took the elevator up to Yoritomo's office. This section of the building was off-limits to the other patients in the Institute, but Stanton, the star border, had free rein.

Not that it mattered, one way or another. There wasn't any way they could have stopped him. Aside from the fact that he was physically capable of going through or around almost any guards they wanted to put up, there was also the little matter of gentle blackmail. When a man is genuinely indispensable, he can work wonders by threatening to drop the whole business.

He felt as though he had been slowly awakening from a long sleep. At first, he had accepted as natural that he should obey orders and do as he was told without question, as though he had been drugged or hypnotized.

And it's very likely they subjected me to both at one time or another, he told himself.

But now his brain was beginning to function again, and the need to know was strong in his mind.

Dr. Yoritomo was sitting in one of the big, soft chairs, puffing at his pipe, but he leaped to his feet when Stanton came in.

"Ah! About the ritual-taboo culture of the Nipe! Yes. Sit down. Yes. So. Do you find it impossible that a high technology could be present in such a system?"

"No. I've been thinking about it."

"Ah, so." He sat down again. "Then *you* will please tell *me*."

"Well, let's see. In the first place, let's take religion. In tribal cultures, religion is—uh—animistic, I think the word is."

Yoritomo nodded silently.

"There are spirits everywhere," Scanton went on. "That sort of belief, it seems to me, would grow up in any race that had imagination, and the Nipes must have plenty of that, or they wouldn't have the technology they do have."

"Very good. *Very* good. But what evidence have you that this technology was not given them by some other race?"

"I hadn't thought of that." Stanton stared into space for a moment, then nodded his head. "Of course. It would take too long for another race to teach it to them; it wouldn't be worth the trouble unless this hypothetical other race killed off all the adult Nipes and started the little ones off fresh. And if that had happened, their ritual-taboo system would have disappeared, too."

"That argument is imperfect," Yoritomo said, "but it will do for the moment. Go on with the religion."

"O.K.; religious beliefs are not subject to pragmatic tests. That is, the spiritual beliefs aren't. Any belief that *could* be disproven would eventually die out. But beliefs in ghosts or demons or angels or life after death aren't disprovable. So, as a race increases its knowledge of the physical world, its religion tends to become more and more spiritual."

"Agreed. Yes. But how do you link this with ritual-taboo?"

"Well, once a belief gains a foothold, it's hard to wipe it out, even among humans. Among Nipes, it would be well-nigh impossible. Once a code of ritual and social behavior was set up, it became permanent."

"For example?" Yoritomo urged.

"Well, shaking hands, for example. We still do that, even if we don't have it fixed solidly in our heads that we *must* do it. I suppose it would never occur to a Nipe not to perform such a ritual."

"Just so," Yoritomo agreed vigorously. "Such things, once established, would tend to remain. But it is a characteristic of a ritual-taboo system that it resists change. How, then, do you account for their high technological achievements?"

"The pragmatic engineering approach, I imagine. If a thing works, it is usable. If not, it isn't."

"Very good. Now it is my turn to lecture." He put his pipe in an ash tray and held up a long, bony finger. "Firstly, we must remember that the Nipe is equipped with an imagination. Secondly, he has in his memory a tremendous amount of data, all ready at hand. He is capable of working out theories in his head, you see. Like the ancient Greeks, he finds no need to test such theories — *unless* his thinking indicates that such an experiment would yield something useful. Unlike the Greeks, he has no aversion to experiment. But he sees no need for useless experiment, either."

"Oh, he would learn, yes. But, once a given theory proved workable, how resistant he would be to a new theory. How long—how *incredibly* long—it would take such a race to achieve the technology the Nipe now has!"

"Hundreds of thousands of years," said Stanton.

Yoritomo shook his head briskly. "Puh! Longer! Much longer!" He smiled with satisfaction. "I estimate that the Nipe race first invented the steam engine not less than ten million years ago." He kept smiling into the dead silence that followed.

After a long minute, Stanton said: "What about atomic energy?"

"At least two million years ago. I do not think they have had the interstellar drive more than fifty thousand years."

"No wonder our pet Nipe is so patient," Stanton said wonderingly. "I wonder what their individual life span is."

"Not long, in comparison," said Yoritomo. "Perhaps no longer than our own, perhaps five hundred years. Considering their handicaps, they have done quite well. Quite well, indeed, for a race of illiterate cannibals."

"How's that again?" Stanton realized that the scientist was quite serious.

"Hadn't it occurred to you, my friend, that they must be cannibals? And that they are very nearly illiterate?"

"No," Stanton admitted, "it hadn't."

"The Nipe, like Man, is omnivorous. Specialization tends to lead any race up a blind alley, and dietary restrictions are a particularly pernicious form of specialization. A lion would starve to death in a wheat field. A horse would perish in a butcher shop full of steaks. A man will survive as long as there's something around to eat—even if it's another man."

"Also, Man, early in his career as top dog on Earth, began using a method of increasing the viability of the race by removing the unfit. It survives today in some societies. Before and immediately after the Holocaust, there were still primitive societies on Earth which made a rather hard ordeal out of the Rite of Passage—the ceremony that enabled a boy to become a Man, if he passed the tests."

"A few millennia ago, a boy was killed outright if failed. And eaten."

"The Nipe race must, of necessity, have had some similar ritualistic tests or they would not have become what they are. And we have already agreed that, once the Nipes adopted something of that kind, it remained with them, not so? Yes.

"Also, it is extremely unlikely that the Nipe civilisation—if such it can be called—has any geriatric problem. No old age pensions, no old folks' homes, no senility. When a Nipe becomes a burden because of age, he is ritually murdered and eaten with due solemnity.

"Ah. You frown, my friend. Have I made them sound heartless, without the finer feelings that we humans are so proud of? Not so. When Junior Nipe fails his puberty tests, when Mama and Papa Nipe are sent to their final reward, I have no doubt that there is sadness in the hearts of their loved ones as the honored T-bones are passed around the table.

"My own ancestors, not too far back, performed a ritual suicide by disemboweling themselves with a sharp knife. Across the abdomen—so!—and up into the heart—so! It was considered very bad form to die or faint before the job was done. Nearby, a relative or close friend stood with a sharp sword, to administer the *coup de grace* by decapitation. It was all very sad and very honorable. Their loved ones bore the sorrow with pride."

His voice, which had been low and tender, suddenly became very brisk. "Thank goodness it's gone out of fashion!"

"But how can you be *sure* they're cannibals?" Stanton asked. "Your argument sounds logical enough, but logic alone isn't enough."

"True! True!" Yoritomo jabbed the air twice with his finger. "Evidence would be most welcome, would it not? Very well, I give you the evidence. He eats human beings, our Nipe."

"That doesn't make him a cannibal."

"Not *strictly*, perhaps. But consider. The Nipe is not a monster. He is not a criminal. No. He is a gentleman. He behaves as a gentleman. He is shipwrecked on an alien planet. Around him, he sees evidence that ours is a technological society. But that is a contradiction! A paradox!

"For *we* are not civilized! No! We are not rational! We are not sane! We do not obey the Laws, we do not perform the Rituals. We are animals. Apparently intelligent animals, but animals never the less. How can this be?

"Ha! Says the Nipe to himself. These animals must be ruled over by Real People. It is the only explanation. Not so?"

"Colonel Mannheim mentioned that. Are you implying that the Nipe thinks that there are other Nipes around, running the world from secret hideouts, like the Fu Manchu novel?"



"Not quite. The Nipe is not incapable of learning something new; in fact, he is quite good at it, as witness the fact that he has learned many Earth languages. He picked up Russian in less than eight months simply by listening and observing. Like our own race, his undoubtedly evolved many languages during the beginnings of its progress—when there were many tribes, separated and out of communication. It would not surprise me to find that most of those languages have survived and that our distressed astronaut knows them all. A new language would not distress

him.

"Nor would strangely-shaped intelligent beings distress him. His race should be aware, by now, that such things exist. But it is very likely that he equates *true* intelligence with technology, and I do not think he has ever met a race higher than the barbarian level before. Such races were not, of course, human—by his definition. They showed possibilities, perhaps, but they had not evolved far enough. Considering the time span involved, it is not at all unlikely that the Nipe thinks of technology as something that evolves with a race in the same way intelligence does—or the body itself.

"So it would not surprise him to find that the Real People of this system were humanoid in shape. That is something new, and he can absorb it. It does not contradict anything he *knows*.

"*But—!* Any truly intelligent being which did not obey the Law and follow the Ritual *would* be a contradiction in terms. For he has no notion of a Real Person without those characteristics. Without those characteristics, technology is impossible. Since he sees technology all around him, it follows that there must be Real People with those characteristics. Anything else is unthinkable."

"It seems to me that you're building an awfully involved theory out of pretty flimsy stuff," Stanton said.

Yoritomo shook his head. "Not at all. All evidence points to it. Why, do you suppose, does the Nipe conscientiously devour his victims, often risking his own safety to do so? Why do you suppose he never uses any weapons but his own hands to kill with?

"Why? To tell the Real People that he is a gentleman!"

It made perfect sense, Stanton thought. It fitted every known fact, as far as he knew. Still—

"I would think," he said, "that the Nipe would have realized, after ten years, that there is no such race of Real People. He's had access to all our records, and such things. Or does he reject them as lies?"

"Possibly he would, if he could read them. Did I not say he was illiterate?"

"You mean he's learned to speak our languages, but not to read them?"

The scientist smiled broadly. "Your statement is accurate, my friend, but incomplete. It is my opinion that the Nipe is incapable of reading any written language whatever. The concept does not exist in his mind, except vaguely."

"A technological race without a written language? That's impossible!"

"Ah, no. Ask yourself: What need has a race with a perfect memory for written records—at least, in the sense we know them. Certainly not to remember things. All their history and all their technology exists in the collective mind of the race—or, at least, most of it. I dare say that the less important parts of their history has been glossed over and forgotten. One important event in every ten centuries would still give a historian ten thousand events to remember—and history is only a late development in our own society."

"How about communications?" Stanton said, "What did they use before they invented radio?"

"Ah. That is why I hedged when I said he was *almost* illiterate. There is a possibility that a written symbology did at one time exist, for just that purpose. If so, it has probably survived as a ritualistic form—when an officer is appointed to a post, let's say, he may get a formal paper that says so. They may use symbols to signify rank and so on. They certainly must have a symbology for the calibration of scientific instruments.

"But none of these requires the complexity of a written language. I dare say our use of it is quite baffling to him. And if he thinks of symbols as being unable to convey much information, then he might not be able to learn to read at all. You see?"

"Where's your evidence for that?"

"It is sketchy, I will admit," said Yoritomo. "It is not as solidly based as our other reconstructions of his background. The pattern of his raids indicates, however, that his knowledge of the materials he wants and their locations comes from vocal sources—television advertising, eavesdropping, and so on. In other words, he cases the joint by ear. If he could understand written information, his job would have been much easier. He could have found the materials more quickly and easily. From this evidence, we are fairly certain that he can't read any Terrestrial writing.

"Add to that the fact that he has never been observed writing down anything himself, and the suspicion dawns that perhaps he *knows* that symbols can only convey a very small amount of specialized information. Eh?

"As I said, it is not proof."

"No. But the whole thing makes for some very interesting speculation, doesn't it?"

"Very interesting indeed." Yoritomo folded his hands in his lap, smiled seraphically, and looked at the ceiling. "In fact, my friend, we are now so positive of our knowledge of the Nipe's mind that we are prepared to enter into the next phase of our program. Within a very short while, if we are correct, we shall, with your help, arrest the most feared arch-criminal that Earth has ever known." He chuckled, but there was little mirth in it. "I dare say that the public will be extremely happy to hear of his death, and I know that Colonel Mannheim and the rest of us will be glad to know that he will never kill again."

Stanton saw that the fateful day was looming suddenly large in the future. "How soon?"

"Within days." He lowered his eyes from the ceiling and looked into Stanton's face with a mildly bland expression.

"By the way," he said, "did you know that your brother is returning to Earth tomorrow?"

XV

INTERLUDE

Is this our young man, Dr. Farnsworth?" asked the man in uniform.

"Yes, it is. Colonel Mannheim, I'd like you to meet Mr. Bartholomew Stanton."

"How are you, Mr. Stanton?"

"Fine, Colonel. A little nervous."

The colonel chuckled softly. "I can't say that I blame you. It's not an easy decision to make." He looked at Dr. Farnsworth. "Has Dr. Yoritomo any more information for us?"

Farnsworth shook his head. "No. He admits that his idea is nothing more than a wild hunch. He seems to think that five years of observing the Nipe won't be too much time at all. We may have to act before then."

"I hope not. It would be a terrible waste," said Mannheim. "Mr. Stanton, I know that Dr. Farnsworth has outlined the entire plan to you, and I'm sure you're aware that many things can change in five years. We may have to play by ear long before that. Do you understand what we are doing, and why it must be done this way?"

"Yes, sir."

"You know that you're not to say anything."

"Yes, sir. Don't worry; I can keep my mouth shut."

"We're pretty sure of that," the colonel said with a smile. "Your psychometric tests showed that we were right in picking you. Otherwise, we couldn't have told you. You understand your part in this, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Any questions?"

"Yes, sir. What about my brother, Martin? I mean, well, I know what's the matter with him. Aside from the radiation, I mean. Do you think he'll be able to handle his part of the job after—after the operations?"

"If the operations turn out as well as Dr. Farnsworth thinks they will, yes. And, with the therapy we'll give him afterwards, he'll be in fine shape."

"Well." He looked thoughtful. "Five more years. And then I'll have the twin brother that I never really had at all. Somehow, it doesn't really register, I guess."

"Don't worry about it, Mr. Stanton," said Dr. Farnsworth. "We've got a complex enough job ahead of us without your worrying in the bargain. By the way, we'll need your signature here." He handed him a pen and spread the paper on the desk. "In triplicate."

The young man read quickly through the release form. "All nice and legal, huh? Well...." He hesitated for a moment, then bent over and wrote: *Bartholomew Stanton* in a firm, clear hand.

XVI

The tunnel was long and black and the air was stale and thick with the stench of rodents. Stanton stood still, trying to probe the luminescent gloom that the goggles he wore brought to his eyes. The tunnel stretched out before him—on and on. Around him was the smell of viciousness and death. Ahead ...

It goes on to infinity, Stanton thought, ending at last at zero.

"Barbell," said a voice near his ear, "Barhop here. Do you read?" It was the barest whisper, picked up by the antennae in his shoes from the steel rail that ran along the tunnel.

"Read you, Barhop."

"Move out, then. You've got a long stroll to go."

Stanton started walking, keeping his feet near the rail, in case Barhop wanted to call again. As he walked, he could feel the slight motion of the skin-tight, woven elastic suit that he wore rubbing against his skin.

And he could hear the scratching patter of the rats.

Mostly, they stayed away from him, but he could see them hiding in corners and scurrying along the sides of the tunnel. Around him, six rat-like remote-control robots moved with him, shifting their pattern constantly as they patrolled his moving figure.

Far ahead, he knew, other rat robots were stationed, watching and waiting, ready to deactivate the Nipe's detection devices at just the right moment. Behind him, another horde moved forward to turn the devices on again.

It had taken a long time to learn how to shut off those detectors without giving the alarm to the Nipe's instruments.

There were nearly a hundred men in on the operation, operating the robot rats or watching the hidden cameras that spied upon the Nipe. Nearly a hundred. And all of them were safe.

They were outside the tunnel. They were with Stanton only in proxy. They could not die here in this stinking hole, but Stanton could.

There was no help for it. Stanton had to go in person. A full-sized robot proxy would be stronger, although not faster unless Stanton controlled it, than the Nipe. But the Nipe would be able to tell that it was a robot, and he would simply destroy it with one of his weapons. A remote-controlled robot would never get close enough to the Nipe to do any good.

"We do not know," Dr. Yoritomo had said, "whether he would recognize it as a robot or not, but his instruments would show the metal easily enough, and his eyes might be able to see that it was not covered with human skin. The rats are covered with real rat hides; they are small, and he is used to seeing them around. But a human-sized robot? Ah, no. Never."

So Stanton had to go in in person, walking southward, along the miles of blackness that led to the nest of the Nipe.

Overhead was Government City.

He had walked those streets only the night before, and he knew that only a short distance above him was an entirely different world.

Somewhere up there, his brother was waiting after having run the gamut of televised interviews, dinner at one of the best restaurants, and a party afterward. A celebrity. "The greatest detective in the Solar System," they'd called him. Fine stuff, that. Stanton wondered what the asteroids were like. Maybe that would be the place to go after this job was done. Maybe they'd have a place in the asteroids for a hopped-up superman.

Or maybe there'd only be a place here, beneath the streets of Government City for a dead superman.

Not if I can help it, Stanton thought with a grim smile.

The walking seemed to take forever, but, somehow, Stanton didn't mind it. He had a lot to think over. Seeing his brother had been unnerving yesterday, but today he felt as though everything had been all right all along.

His memory still was a long way from being complete, and it probably always would be. He could still scarcely recall any real memories of a boy named Martin Stanton, but—and he smiled at the thought—he knew more about him than his brother did, at that.

It didn't matter. That Martin Stanton was gone. In effect, he had been demolished—what little there had been of him—and a new structure had been built on the old foundation.

And yet, in another way, the new structure was very like what would have developed naturally if the accident so early in life had not occurred.

Stanton skirted a pile of rubble on his right. There had been a station here, once; the street above had caved in and filled in with brick, concrete, cobblestones, and steel scrap, and then it had been sealed over when Government City was built.

A part of one wall was still unbroken, though. A sign built of tile said *86th Street*, he knew, although it wasn't visible in the dim glow. He kept walking, ignoring the rats that scampered over

the rubble.

"Barhop to Barbell," said the soft voice near his ear. "No sign of activity from the Nipe. So far, you haven't triggered any of his alarms."

"Barbell to Barhop," Stanton whispered. "What's he doing?"

"Still sitting motionless. Thinking, I guess. Or sleeping. It's hard to tell."

"Let me know if he starts moving around."

"Will do."

Poor, unsuspecting beastie, Stanton thought. *Ten years of hard work, ten years of feeling secure, and within a very short time he's going to get the shock of his life.*

Or maybe not. There was no way of knowing what kind of shocks the Nipe had taken in his life, Stanton thought. Not even of knowing whether the Nipe was capable of feeling anything like security.

It was odd, he thought, that he should feel a kinship toward both the Nipe and his brother in such similar ways. He had never met the Nipe, and his brother was a dim picture in his old memories, but they were both very well known to him. Certainly better known to him than he was to them.

And yet, seeing his brother's face on the TV screen, hearing him talk, watching the way he moved about, watching the expressions on his face, had been a tremendously moving thing. Not until that moment had he really known himself.

Meeting him face to face would be easier now, but it would still be a scene highly charged with emotional tension.

He kicked something that rattled and rolled away from him. He stopped, freezing in his tracks, trying to pierce the dully glowing gloom. It was a human skull.

He relaxed and began walking again.



There were plenty of bones down here. Mannheim had said that the tunnels had been used as air-raid shelters when the sun bomb had hit the island during the Holocaust. Thousands had crowded underground after the warning had come, and they had died when the bright, hot, deadly gas had roared down through ventilators and open stairwells.

There were even caches of canned goods down here, some of them still sealed after all this time. But the rats, wiser than they knew, had chewed at them, exposing the steel beneath the tin plate. After a while, oxidation would weaken a can to the point where some lucky rat could bite through it and find himself a meal. Then he could move the empty can aside and gnaw the next one in the pile, and the cycle would begin again. It kept the rats fed almost as well as an automatic machine might have.

The tunnel was an endless monochromatic world that was both artificial and natural. Here, there was a neatly squared-off mosaic of ceramic tile; over there, on a little hillock of earth, squatted a colony of fat mushrooms. In one place, he had to skirt a pool of water; in another, climb over a heap of rust and debris that had once been a subway car.

One man, alone, walking through the dark towards a superhuman monster that had terrorized

Earth for a decade.

A drug that would knock out the Nipe would have been useful, but that would have required a greater knowledge of the Nipe's biochemistry than anyone had. The same applied to anesthetic gases, or electric shock, or supersonics.

The only answer was a man called Stanton.

And the voice near his ear said: "A hundred yards to go, Barbell."

"I know," he whispered. "He hasn't moved?"

"No."

Wouldn't it be funny if he were dead? Stanton thought. If his heart had stopped, or something. Wouldn't that be a big joke on everybody? Especially me.

Ahead the tunnel made a curving turn, and there was a large area that had once been a major junction of two tunnels, one below the other. The Nipe had taken over a part of that area to build his home-away-from-home.

Stanton approached the turn and took off the infra-red goggles. Enough light spilled over from the Nipe's lair to illuminate the tunnel. He put the goggles on the trackway. He wouldn't need them again.

He went on around the curve, slowly and quietly. He didn't want to fight down here in the tracks, and he didn't want to be caught just yet.

Cautiously, he lifted himself up to the platform, where long-gone passengers had once waited for long-gone trains. Now that he was out of the trench that the tracks lay in, he could move more easily. He moved away from the tracks.

"Barbell! He's heard you! Watch it!"

But Stanton had already heard the movement of the Nipe. He jerked off the communicator and threw it away. He didn't want any encumbrances now.

And then, as fast as any express train that had ever moved in these underground ways, the Nipe came around a corner thirty feet away, his four violet eyes gleaming, his limbs rippling beneath his centipede-like body.

From fifteen feet away, he launched himself through the air, his outstretched hands ready to kill.

But Stanton's marvelous neuro-muscular system was already in action.

At this stage of the game, it would be suicide to let the Nipe get close. He couldn't fend off eight grasping hands with his own two. He leaped to one side, and the Nipe got his first surprise in ten years when Stanton's fist slammed against the side of his snouted head, knocking him in the opposite direction from that in which Stanton had moved.

The Nipe landed, turned, and charged back toward the man. This time, he reared up, using his two rear pairs of limbs for locomotion, while the two forward pair were held out, ready to kill.

He got surprise number two when Stanton's fist landed on his snout, rocking his head back. His own hands met nothing but air, and by the time he had recovered from the blow, Stanton was well back, out of the way.

He's so small! Stanton thought wonderingly. Even when he reared up, the Nipe's head was only three feet above the concrete floor.

The Nipe came in again—more cautiously, this time.

Stanton punched again with a straight right. The Nipe moved his head aside, and Stanton's knuckles merely grazed the side of his head, below the lower right eye. One of the Nipe's hands came in in a chopping right hook that took Stanton just below the ribs. Stanton leaped back with a gasp of pain.

The Nipe didn't use fists. He used his open hand, fingers together, like a judo fighter.

The Nipe came forward once more, and as Stanton danced back, the Nipe made a grab for his ankle, almost catching it.

There were too many hands to watch! Stanton had two advantages: weight and reach. His arms were almost half again as long as the Nipe's.

Against that, the Nipe had all those hands; and with his low center of gravity and four-footed stance, it would be hard to knock him down. If Stanton lost his footing, the fight would be over fast.

Stanton lunged suddenly forward and planted a left in the Nipe's right upper eye, then followed it with a right uppercut to the Nipe's jaw as his head snapped back. The Nipe's four hands cut inward from the sides like sword blades, but they found no target.

Backing away, Stanton suddenly realized that he had another advantage. The Nipe couldn't throw a straight jab! His shoulder—if that's what they should be called—were narrow and the upper

armbones weren't articulated properly for such a blow. He could throw a mean hook, but he had to get in close to deliver it.

On the other side of the coin was the fact that the Nipe knew plenty about human anatomy—from the bones out. Stanton's knowledge of Nipe anatomy was almost totally superficial.

He wished he knew if and where the Nipe had a solar plexus. He would like to punch something soft for a change.

Instead, he tried for another eye. He danced in, jabbed and danced out again. The Nipe had ducked again, taking it on the side of his head.

Then the Nipe came in low, at an angle, trying for the groin. For his troubles, he got a knee in the jaw that staggered him badly. One grasping hand clutched at Stanton's right thigh and grasped hard. Stanton swung his fist down like a pendulum and knocked the arm aside.

But there was a slight limp in his movement as he back-pedaled away from the Nipe. That full-handed pinch had hurt!

Stanton was angry now, with the hot, controlled anger of a fighting man. He stepped in and slammed two fast, hard jabs into the point of the Nipe's snout, jarring the monster backwards. This time, it was the Nipe who scuttled backwards.

Stanton moved in to press his advantage and landed a beaut on the Nipe's lower left eye. Then he tried a body blow. It wasn't too successful. The alien had an endoskeleton, but he also had a hide that was like somewhat leathery chitin.

He pulled back, out of the way of the Nipe's judo cuts.

His fists were beginning to hurt, and his leg was paining him badly where the Nipe had clamped on to it. And his ribs—

And then he realized that, so far, the Nipe had only landed one blow!

One punch and one pinch, he thought with a touch of awe. *The only other damage he's inflicted has been to my knuckles!*

The Nipe charged in again, then he leaped suddenly and clawed for Stanton's face with his first pair of hands. The second and third pairs chopped in toward the man's body. The last pair propelled him off the floor.

Stanton stepped back and let him have a right just below the jaw, where his throat would have been if he'd been human.

The Nipe arced backwards in a half-somersault and landed flat on his back.

Stanton backed up a little more, waiting, while the Nipe wriggled feebly for a moment. *The Marquis of Queensbury should have lived to see this*, he thought.

The Nipe rolled over and crouched on all eight limbs. His violet eyes watched Stanton, but the man could read no expression on that inhuman face.

"*You did not kill.*"

For a moment, Stanton found it hard to believe that the hissing, guttural voice had come from the crouching monster.

"*You did not even try to kill.*"

"I have no wish to kill you," Stanton said evenly.

"*I can see that. Do you ... Are you....*" He stopped, as if baffled. "*There are not the proper words. Do you follow the Customs?*"

Stanton felt a surge of triumph. This was what George Yoritomo had guessed might happen!

"If I must kill you," he said carefully, "I, myself, will do the honors. You will not go uneaten."

The Nipe sagged a little, relaxing all over. "*I had hoped it was so. It was the only thinkable thing. I saw you on the television, and it was only thinkable that you came for me.*"

Stanton blinked, stunned. What was the Nipe thinking? But, of course, he knew. And he saw that even his brother's return had been a part of the plan.

"*I knew you were out in the asteroids,*" the Nipe went on. "*But I had decided you had come to kill. Since you did not, what are your thoughts, Stanley Martin?*"

"That we should help each other," Stanton said.

It was as simple as that.

S Stanton sat in his hotel room, smoking a cigarette, staring at the wall, and thinking.

He was alone again. All the fuss, feathers, and fooferaw were over. Farnsworth was in another room of the suite, making his plans for a complete physical examination of the Nipe. Yoritomo was having the time of his life, holding a conversation with the Nipe, drawing the alien out and getting him to talk about his own race and their history. And Mannheim was plotting the next phase of the capture—the cover-up.

Stanton smiled a little. Colonel Mannheim was a great one for planning, all right. Every little detail was taken care of. It sometimes made his plans more complex than necessary, Stanton suspected. Mannheim tended to try to account for every eventuality, and, after he had done that, he would set aside reserves here and there, just in case they might be useful if something unforeseen happened.

Stanton got up, walked over to the window, and looked down at the streets of Government City, eight floors below.

All things considered, the Government had done the right thing. And, in picking Mannheim, they had picked the right man. What would the average citizen think if he knew the true story of the Nipe? If he discovered that, at this very moment, the Nipe was being treated almost as an honored guest of the Government? If he suspected that the Nipe could have been killed easily at any time during the past six years?

Would it be possible to explain that, in the long run, the knowledge possessed by the Nipe was tremendously more valuable to the Race of Man than the lives of a few individuals?

Could those people down there, and the others like them all over the world, be made to understand that, by his own lights, the Nipe had been acting in a most civilized and gentlemanly way he knew? Would they see that, because of the priceless information stored in that alien brain, the Nipe's life had to be preserved at any cost?

Dr. Yoritomo assumed that Mannheim would spread a story about the Nipe's death—perhaps even display a carefully-made "corpse". But Stanton had the feeling that the colonel had something else up his sleeve.

The phone rang. Stanton walked over, thumbed the answer stud, and watched Dr. Farnsworth's face take shape on the screen.

"Bart, I just saw the tapes of your fight with the Nipe, Incredible! I'm going to have them run over again, slowed down, so that I can see what went on, and I'd like to have you tell as best you can, what went on in your mind at each stage of the fight."

"You mean right now? I have an appointment—"

Farnsworth waved a hand. "No, no. Later. Take your time. But I am honestly amazed that you won so easily. I knew you were good, and I knew you'd win, but I honestly expected you to be injured."

Stanton looked down at his bandaged hands, and felt the ache of his broken rib and the blue bruise on his thigh. In spite of the way it looked, he had actually been hurt worse than the Nipe had. That boy was *tough!*

"The trouble was that he couldn't adapt himself to fighting in a new way," he told Farnsworth. "He fought me as he would have fought another Nipe, and that didn't work. I had the reach on him, and I could maneuver faster."

"It looked to me as though you were fighting him as you would fight another human being," Farnsworth said.

Stanton grinned. "I was, in a modified way. But *I* won—the Nipe didn't."

Farnsworth grinned back. "I see. Well, I'll let you know when I'm ready for your impressions. Probably tomorrow some time."

"Fine."

He walked back over to the window, but this time he looked at the horizon, not at the street.

Farnsworth had called him "Bart". It's funny, Stanton thought, how habit can get the best of a man. Farnsworth had known the truth all along, and now he knew that his patient—*former* patient—was aware of the truth. And still, he had called him "Bart".

And I still think of myself as Bart, he thought. I probably always will.

And why not? Martin Stanton no longer existed—in fact he had never had much of a real existence. He was only a bad dream; only "Bart" was real.

Take two people, genetically identical. Damage one of them so badly that he is helpless and

useless—and always only a step away from death. It is inevitable that the weaker will identify himself with the stronger.

The vague telepathic bond that always links identical twins (they "think alike", they say) becomes unbalanced under such conditions. Normally, there is a give-and-take, and each preserves the sense of his own identity, since the two different sets of sense receptors give different viewpoints. But if one of the twins is damaged badly enough something must happen to the telepathic link. Usually, it is broken.

But the link between Mart and Bart Stanton had not been broken. It had become a one-way channel. Martin, in order to escape the prison of his own body, had become a receptor for Bart's thoughts. He felt as Bart felt—the thrill of running after a baseball, the pride of doing something clever with his hands.

In effect, Martin ceased to think. The thoughts in his mind were Bart's. The feeling of identity was almost complete.

To an outside observer, it appeared that Martin had become a cataleptic schizophrenic, completely cut off from reality. The "Bart" part of him did not want to be disturbed by the sensory impressions that "Mart's" body provided. Like the schizophrenic, Martin was living in a little world that was cut off from the actual physical world around his body.

The difference between Martin's condition and that of the ordinary schizophrenic was that *his* little world actually existed. It was an almost exact counterpart of the world that existed in the perfectly sane, rational mind of his brother, Bart. It grew and developed as Bart did, fed by the telepathic flow from the stronger mind to the weaker.

There were two Barts, and no Mart at all.

And then the Neurophysical Institute had come into the picture. A new process had been developed, by which a human being could be reconstructed—made, literally, into a superman. The drawback was that a normal human body resisted the process—to the death, if necessary, just as a normal human body will resist a skin graft from an alien donor.

But the radiation-damaged body of Martin Stanton had no resistance of that kind. With him—perhaps—the process might work.

So Bartholomew Stanton, Martin's legal guardian after the death of their mother, had given permission for the series of operations that would rebuild his brother.

The telepathic link, of course, had to be shut off—for a time, at least. Part of that could be done in the treatment of Martin, but Bart, too, had to do his part. By submitting to hypnosis, he had allowed himself to be convinced that his name was Stanley Martin. He had taken a job on Luna, and then had gone to the asteriods. The simple change of name and environment had been just enough to snap the link during a time when Martin's brain had been inactivated by therapy and anesthetics.

Only the sense of identity remained. The patient was still Bart.

Mannheim had used them both, naturally. Colonel Mannheim had the ability to use anyone at hand, including himself, to get a job done.

Stanton looked at his watch. It was almost time.

Mannheim had sent for "Stanley Martin" when the time had come for him to return in order to give the Nipe data that he would be sure to misinterpret. A special code phrase in the message had released "Stanley Martin" from the posthypnotic suggestion that had held him for so long. He knew that he was Bartholomew Stanton again.

And so do I, thought the man by the window. *We have a lot to straighten out, we two.*

There was a knock at the door.

Stanton walked over and opened it, trying to think.

It was like looking into a mirror.

"Hello, Bart," he said.

"Hello, Bart," said the other.

In that instant, the complete telepathic linkage was restored, and they both knew what only one of them had known before—that, for a time, the flow had been one-way again—that "Stanley Martin" had experienced the entire battle with the Nipe. His release from the posthypnotic suggestion had made it possible.

E duobus unum.

There was unity without loss of identity.

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