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*The Faceless Men*  
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*Title:* The Faceless Men

*Date of first publication:* 1948

*Author:* Arthur Leo Zagat (1896-1949)

*Illustrator:* Virgil Finlay

*Date first posted:* Aug. 16, 2022

*Date last updated:* Aug. 16, 2022

Faded Page eBook #20220832

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Brad heard Joan's voice and swung to the window (CHAP. IX)

# THE FACELESS MEN

By

ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT

Illustrations by Virgil Finlay.

First published *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, April 1948.

*Hunted by the authorities as well as by those who conspire against them, Scientist  
Brad Lilling alone can save Earth's cities from entombment and death!*

## CHAPTER I: *Mighty Blue*

Brad Lilling pretended to be engrossed in the illuminated logtape that flowed across his desk top under translucent plastic. Actually he was acutely conscious of the footfalls coming toward him across the wide leadstone floor from the gauge bank.

“No,” he groaned inwardly. “Not again.” And then, “If he doesn’t lay off me I swear I’ll turn him in to the Espee.”

But Brad knew he would not report Starl Kozmer to the Security Police. He knew the strength of the tie that binds all atomicians in a brotherhood rooted in the unremitting peril of their craft.

Kozmer wore the badge of the brotherhood where all could see—the purple ray burn that blanked out the right side of his face, which left only a lashless slit where an eye should be and cut a lavender swath through his white mane. Brad himself was thus far unmarked as were most of the younger men on the Station.

Protective devices had been vastly improved since Starl Kozmer began his long service but even yet, now and then, workers vanished from among them—to a lead-lined grave or, which was worse, to the Custodial Colonies that were spoken of only in whispers.

Brad saw the aged atomician’s burn reflected in the milky-white plastic of his desk top, saw the other side of Kozmer’s face reflected—hollow-cheeked, netted with wrinkles. A profoundly disquieting face, but unwavering graph lines gave the younger man no excuse not to look up and ask tonelessly, “Well, what is it?”

“I’d like to suggest, Mr. Lilling, that Pile Two be shut down for overhaul. Yes”—the old gaugeman answered the lift of Brad’s eyebrows—“Yes, I know it sounds off beam, sir. Temperature and radiation remain constant, power output steady.”

He was talking for the sonowire that recorded for Espee ears all they said but his gnarled fingers were flashing a different message. *How about it* they demanded in the code all ’prentice atomicians learn serving their time in the thundering pits. *Make up your mind to throw in with us?*

“Still,” he said aloud, “I’ve a hunch she’s getting ready to spit,” while his fingers warned, *Time’s getting short.*

*Time be blasted.* Brad’s own fingers answered and the irritation was in his spoken reply.

“You’ve a hunch, have you? If you’d only get it into your head that we stopped running the piles by hunch years ago you might rate something better than third grade tech.”

*I’m not saying yes or no till I know a lot more about what you plan than you’ve told me.*

*I’ve told you all I dare.* “Yes, sir. I guess you’re right, sir. I keep forgetting things are different from when I was in my twenties like you.” *There’s some think you already know too much.*

Brad Lilling knew only that, for months, the old man had been urging him to join some shadowy revolt that shaped darkly beneath the placid-seeming surface of routine.

It seemed incredible that anyone should wish to return to conditions as they were before Decade Crossroads. The world in those days, Brad had been taught, was a chaos of artificial national boundaries.

Continual tribal bickerings flared every so often into mass slaughter and between these “wars” life was hag-ridden by suspicion and fear. Many of the world’s peoples teetered

eternally on the brink of starvation, all lived in constant apprehension of recurrent and, so it seemed to them, inevitable famine and pestilence.

In four generations under the rule of the Scientists there no longer was any war, any want, any disease, any fear.

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Today the race was a single Earth-encompassing economic machine of which every individual was a cog matching perfectly with every other, serving and being served by the whole. Every child at birth was assayed for his innate aptitudes, then was trained toward its optimum development.

When finally fabricated he was fitted into the precise sub-part of the exact sub-assembly for which he was designed. Thereafter he performed his assigned function for the requisite few hours in each twenty-four, was free to spend the rest as he pleased so long, naturally, as he did not spend them in such a way as to impair his efficiency.

He was housed, clothed, fed and provided with every facility for the recreations of his choice. When, because of age, or accident not his fault, he no longer was capable of serving the machine, he was retired but his way of life remained otherwise unchanged.

If unavoidable accident terminated his usefulness he was given tender care and every luxury of which he could avail himself in a Custodial Colony graded to his special case. What more could any reasonable being desire?

Yet there were those who, like Kozmer, chafed at what they called “regimentation” and prattled glibly of such discredited concepts as ‘the inherent dignity of man.’ More incomprehensible were those who grumbled at ‘the special privileges the Scientist class have arrogated to themselves.’

Was it not the Scientists who had created the cheap, limitless and inexhaustible power-source on which this whole new civilization was based? Faced with the alternative of self-annihilation, had not the people themselves voluntarily entrusted them with the sole control of Atomic Energy, its productions and all its uses?

It had not been by the Scientists’ desire that, as these uses penetrated more and more aspects of human life, they were compelled to assume wider and wider authority until, inevitably, there had been forced upon them the absolute autocracy with which they now were burdened.

To argue that they held this dominion only because they controlled the weapon against which there was no defense was to beg the issue. The point was that their very monopoly of this weapon had laid upon them the awful load of responsibility for the welfare of all mankind.

Thus had run for months Brad’s debate with the aged atomician whose single eye was fixed now so balefully upon him. Kozmer had been able to offer no logical rebuttal and yet—

And yet something, some doubt beyond logic, had kept Brad from returning an unequivocal no to the proposal that he join the plotters. *Better decide fast, Brad Lilling*, the old man’s fingers warned. *It’s later than you guess.*

“I’m sorry I bothered you, Mr. Lilling,” he said aloud. “I guess I’m just an old fool.”

“Very well, return to your post.”

Because the right half of his mouth did not move, its nerves obliterated by the ancient ray burn, Starl Kozmer’s smile was twisted and horrible. A vein throbbed in Brad’s temple as he watched it turn away from him, then his eyes dropped to the logtape. His hand leaped to a stud

at the desk's edge! A red graph line had jagged suddenly to indicate a jump in Pile Five's radiation. If it wasn't checked. . . .

The graph-line smoothed. Lilling's hand fell away from the button that would have shunted in all the pile's blockbars to shut it down and he nodded approval at the gaugeman whose shifting levers had quenched the flare before that had become necessary.

An automatic control had failed but the first of the two man-checks had not. No atomician ever permitted himself to contemplate what would happen if some day, on some one of the piles, all three safeguards should fail together.

The crisis over, it was very quiet in the high-ceiled, spacious control room. Except for the barely perceptible tremor of the floor beneath Brad's feet there was no sign that, in this remote place, Man precariously harnessed the fires of creation itself to power his ultimate civilization. He glanced at the clock dial above the gauge banks. It still lacked thirty-four minutes of shift-change.

Then why was the wall at the room's other end slitting?

The panel slid open, slid noiselessly shut again. The two who had entered wore the lead-cloth protective suits required everywhere on the Station. Here, so far above the piles, the hoods were lumped clumsily behind their heads.

One was Jon Porsen, the heavy-jowled Station Director. The other's back was turned to Brad as they paused down there, chatting. Not very tall, the stranger was so slender that his suit hung shapelessly about him but there was about him a quality of vibrant grace unusual in these precincts.

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Unusual too and vaguely disturbing was the deference evident in the Director's gestures, in his very stance. His rating the highest to which a Technist could aspire, Porsen was arrogant with his inferiors, pompous with his equals, obsequious only to Scientists. For a Scientist to be visiting the Station implied something momentous in the wind.

The visitor laughed. It was a tinkling, silvery sound. It brought from Brad an exclamation of surprise, quickly stifled but not quickly enough. The stranger heard it, glanced around, then turned and looked straight at him, the heart-shaped outline of her small face framed by carelessly tossed, honey-hued ringlets.

Hot with embarrassment, Brad stared down at his logtape. What was a girl, Scientist or not, doing on the Station? They were coming toward him. Footfalls neared and a pulse-stirring perfume drifted across his nostrils.

"Technician Lirting," Jon Porsen snapped. Brad jumped up to attention, stared into a pair of incredibly blue eyes in which tiny stars danced.

"Miss Arlen," the Director was saying, "is inspecting the Station and has asked that you act as her guide."

"Mr. Porsen has been very kind." The girl's throaty voice did unexpected things to Brad. "But I don't think I ought to keep him from his important duties." The corners of her mouth quirked with some covert amusement. "I'm sure you can explain things almost as well."

"Yes, Miss Arlen." Brad gasped as the name penetrated his daze. *Arlen*. No wonder Porsen was overawed. Gar Arlen was the all-powerful Administrator of Region Three, the globe's northwest quadrant, and this must be his daughter, Joan. "I'll try, miss."

"You may start now," Porsen said. "I shall myself take over your post here until Personnel can send down a relief Controlmaster."

“Yes, sir. Very good, sir.” Somehow Brad was out from behind his desk and stumbling toward the opposite end of the room with the girl beside him. They reached the wall. It opened, closed again to shut them into a small square space, low-ceilinged and seemingly without other exit. The girl was laughing again.

“Oh, dear,” she bubbled. “Porsen did look so funny when I said I’d rather have you show me around. He looked just utterly deflated.”

“Yes, Miss Arlen.”

“He’d been working so hard trying to impress me with how wonderful he is—so I’d tell father, naturally. And I kept wondering how he’d feel if he knew I won’t dare tell Dad I was ever within a hundred miles of this place.”

“Huh!” Brad exclaimed, staring. “You won’t dare—” He remembered who he was and what she was. “Yes, miss,” he tried to cover up his faux pas. “Of course, Miss Arlen.”

“Of course what?” she demanded.

“Of course you—your father— Oh, Jehoshaphat!” he groaned. “I give up. Why won’t you dare tell your father you’ve been on the Station?”

“Because my bodyguard said it was too dangerous and so I had to slip away from him. He won’t tell Dad because he’d be in trouble if he finds out he lost track of me but he would find out if I told him, so I can’t tell him because I don’t want to get him in trouble. Now do you understand?”

“I—I guess so.” What she’d said sounded as if it made sense. Maybe it did if you could get it disentangled. “Do you Scientists always go around with bodyguards?”

“Oh, no.” Those wonderfully blue eyes of hers rounded. “Only the last three or four months. It’s an awful nuisance too,” she confided. “Would you like to have an Espee agent, even one who worships, you, tagging around after you all the time?”

“I don’t think I would.”

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At the back of Brad’s mind there was the thought—it’s just about three months since Kozmer started plaguing me. And then his scalp was tightening with the thought—He knows she’s on the Station without her bodyguard.

“Look,” he ventured. “Maybe the guy had something at that. This certainly isn’t the safest place to be wandering around. Don’t you think you ought to give it up?”

“I do not.” Her eyes suddenly were the pale blue of ice, her voice cold and curt. “You’re wasting time, Technician Lilling. Please follow your instructions or turn me over to someone who can.”

“As you wish, Miss Arlen.” Wooden-faced, Brad gestured to the aperture opening behind her. “Do you mind stepping out?”

“I do mind,” she clipped, her lips white with cold fury. “That’s the way we came. I do not wish to return to the control room.”

“I understand that, Miss Arlen.” A muted roar flooded in as the door widened. “We are five hundred feet below it, at the base of the piles and at the level of the pits where the water that cools them is deradiated.

“The flow-fall,” Brad droned on, “is converted by turbo-generators into electromotive force sufficient to operate all auxiliary services of the Station itself. The generators have a full-load capacity of better than three hundred fifty thousand kilowatts but this is trifling in comparison to the energy produced by nuclear fission and powercast from here. That amounts annually to one trillion, four hundred fifty-nine billion—”



“Stop it!” Joan Arlen stamped her foot. “Stop throwing those fool figures at me!” She still sounded irate but the corners of her mouth were twitching. “You know darn well they don’t mean a thing to me.” Abruptly the little lights were dancing in her eyes again.

“You know, Technician Lilling, you’re rather nice-looking when you’re angry. You pull yourself up straight and tall and your orange hair sort of bristles and your eyes aren’t brown any more but so dark they’re almost black. Shall we start all over again, Tech— Or, bother! What’s your first name?”

“Brad. And my hair isn’t orange.”

“All right, it’s auburn.” Her sudden smile was like sunlight, bright and warming. “What do you say, Brad? Friends?”

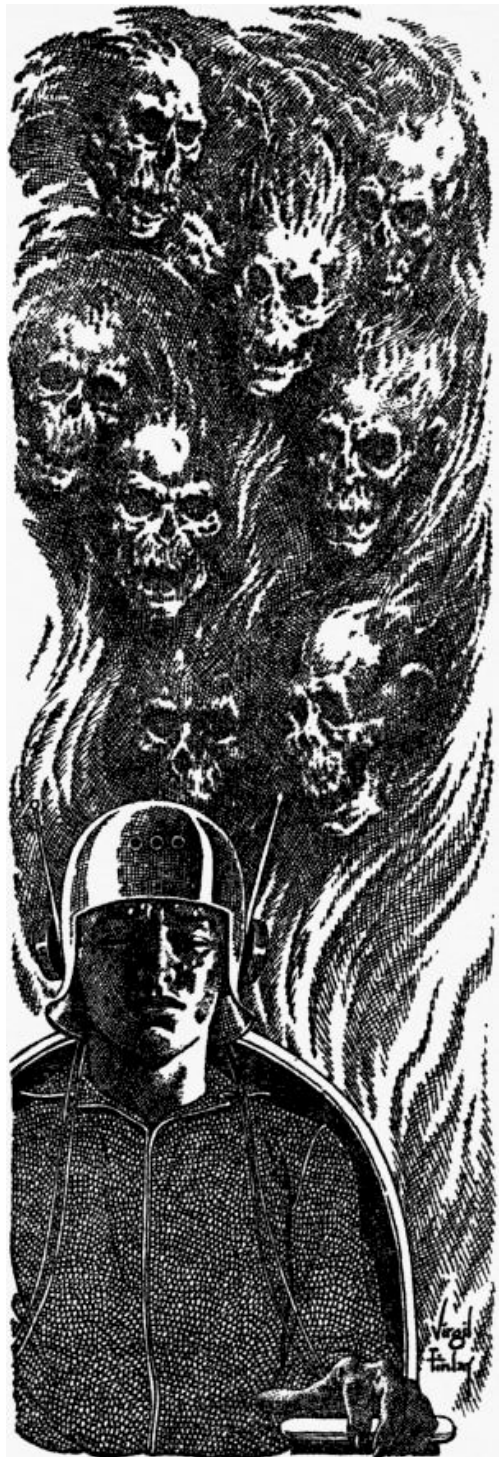
“Suits me.” She was a brat, he told himself, but she was okay. She couldn’t help going high-hat, the way she was brought up, but underneath she was real. “Let’s go,” he said and added, greatly daring, “Joan.”

No lightning struck. Outside the lift a narrow passage stretched straight ahead between towering, gray metal walls toward the source of the muffled thunder. Another corridor crossed it just there at right angles.

“We’re at the base of the plutonium piles,” Brad explained. “This is Number One on our right, Number Two on our left and eight others are lined up ahead there. You’d better pull up your hood. The piles are sheathed in fifteen feet of lead but there’s always a possibility of stray radiations. Here, let me show you how.”

Helping her adjust the black hood with its goggled mask, his fingers brushed hers and an electric tingle prickled up his arms.

“The piles are worked from the level above this,” he continued, a bit breathlessly. “That’s the heart of the Station but there isn’t anything impressive about it, so I thought I’d show you the pits first. They’re really something. You’ll see a whole river



pouring five hundred feet in a foaming  
cataract.”

In the swirling mists the men he saw had  
no faces (CHAP. IV)

“How exciting!” she said. Brad pulled

his own hood over his head, was momentarily blinded. When he could see again, Joan was already thirty feet away between the piles, had stopped to look up at a towering wall.

“Hey! Wait for me.” He snapped his collarband shut—turned at a shout from his right.

Far down the transverse passage a hooded worker repeated it. “Message for you.”

“Wait there, Joan,” Brad called again. “I’ll be right back.” Starting down the sidewall, he wondered what possible message would follow him down here. Had Gar Arlen learned that his daughter—

A sudden blue light laid his shadow on the floor ahead of him! He wheeled, went cold as he saw that the lead wall, there beyond the passage where he’d left the girl, was imbrued with a blue glow which was swiftly brightening.

Training and panic screamed to Brad to flee the lethal rays which could strike through his protective suit as though it were tissue. But he launched into a fear-winged run toward it, his throat locking.

## CHAPTER II

### *Ten Seconds to Murder*

He skidded around a pile corner, saw Joan Arlen gaping up at an azure-lighted wall, wholly unaware that she was bathed in death. He reached her, scooped her up in his arms without stopping. She screamed, pounded his chest with furious little fists but he ignored them, let out a great shout.

“Aid!” Strategically placed mikes would pick it up. “Ray Aid!”

Joan went limp. “What—” she gasped. “What’s happened?” A far-off siren wailed. Brad glanced back, saw that they were well past the flaring wall and that the glow already was fading. He slowed to a dog trot.

“What is it, Brad?”

“Oh, just a little split from Pile Two.” Pile Two! Star! Kozmer’s pile. “You’ll be all right.” Kozmer’s hunch had been for the record all right, the record of a murder alibi. Since the flare could be controlled, he should have controlled it long before it went high enough to penetrate fifteen feet of lead.

“You got quite a dose, Joan, but—” A siren’s scream drowned the rest as an Aid scooter screamed up to them, spun in the passage and braked.

The medic, ungainly in lead helmet and body armor, watched Brad put Joan into the little car’s back seat, get in himself. Then the scooter was in motion again. Gray walls blurred with their speed, vanished. They shot across a topless cavern shuddering with pit-thunder, leaped at a wall and into a sudden aperture at its base, spiralled upward.

The driver lifted off his hood. “How long?” he grunted.

“She got more than I did.” Brad had stripped off his own hood, got to work on Joan’s. “About ten seconds, not much over.”

“You’d better pray it wasn’t any over,” the medic commented dryly. “You’d better pray it was under. Ten’s about all the exposure we can neutralize.” Steering with one hand, he scratched the tip of his freckled nose with the forefinger of the other.

“Over ten, the best we can do is keep you full of dope so you’ll pass out as easy as possible, which ain’t too easy at that.”

Brad felt a little hand creep into his and tighten. It was cold, trembling. She knows, he thought. She knows that ten seconds is only my guess and now she knows what it means to her if I’ve underguessed.

“You came back for me,” she whispered. “You could have been safe but you came into the rays to try and save me.”

The scooter was slowing. Men were running to meet it.

They rushed Brad Lilling off into a cubicle, walled and ceiled and floored with tiny round lenses that emitted no visible light. They stripped him naked and told him to lie down on a cot formed of some oddly resilient, transparent plastic. They told him it would be forty-eight hours before they would know if the emanations from the lenses would be effective or if the effects of the gamma rays on his body cells had gone too far for them to neutralize.

And then they went away and left him there, alone, to think.

---

Brad thought bitterly that if he had not been called away to take that message he would have spotted the first faint beginning of the glow in Pile Two's sheath and so could have saved Joan Arlen a few crucial seconds of exposure.

He recalled that the worker who'd called to him had not come to meet him, and not even waited for him but had vanished the instant Brad started toward him. It dawned on him that the message had been a phoney, designed to pull him away from the flaring pile and leave the girl to take the death-dealing radiation alone.

Not to pull him away. Save for Joan's whim up in the control room, Jon Porsen would have been her guide. Brad had already been masked in the hood compulsory on that level. It was odds-on that the 'message-bearer' had not realized the switch. Porsen then was in on the plot. He was to have spotted the girl beside Two and left her there while the third assassin signalled Kozmer to pull the lever that would start the spit.

It had been shrewdly contrived. No one ignorant of the incipient rebellion would dream the murder try was anything but an accident—and no one who did know would say anything about it, not even Brad.

His failure to report Kozmer's overtures as soon as they began was in itself a crime for which the punishment would be certain, swift and merciless. He dared not go to the Espee with his story—unless the doctors told him he was doomed to die. Then he could. Then it wouldn't matter.

But suppose he lived and Joan Arlen died? Her exposure had been seconds longer than his.



The girl was a heavy burden as Brad staggered up on a sloping, stony beach (CHAP. V)

If Joan died, Brad decided, he would make a clean breast to the police no matter what the consequences to himself might be.

What was happening to her? He'd seen her led into another cubicle like this but, when he asked the attendant who brought him his first meal how she was, the medic flatly denied any knowledge of her, denied that anyone else had been brought to the infirmary with him, denied that there was another patient in any of the neutralizing chambers.

Brad realized that it would be futile to ask again.

That was at the end of the third hour. There were forty-five more. Forty-five hours can seem as many years when, utterly alone, one wonders every minute, every second, if an agonizing death waits at their conclusion or—ininitely worse—life as a ward of the State, too horribly marred to be seen except by others as hideous, seeing only others as hideous.

The forty-ninth hour, when the final tests have been made and nothing is left but to await die pronouncement of the verdict, can be a dark Gethsemane.

The cubicle door whispered open at last and admitted a blank-faced medical technician. "Okay, Mr. Lilling," he directed. "Please get into your clothes and report to the Surgeon-in-Charge."

"Which—" Brad squeezed through a tight throat. "Which means?"

"All clean." The fellow permitted himself a grin. "You're being discharged."

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Doctor Marrow was a gaunt and somber Scientist. "We caught it in time," he told Brad. "You haven't even a burn to show but you will have to be careful."

"Careful, sir?" Brad was puzzled. "How do you mean?"

A faint smile touched the austere mouth. "Have you ever heard," the doctor asked with apparent inconsequence, "of a Scientist being injured in an accident?"

He'd said injured. He hadn't said killed. Brad's pulse pounded but he had to make sure.

"Come to think of it, sir, I never have. I suppose it might give some people ideas." A direct question would not be answered. "By the way, sir," he remarked, careful to get the phrasing just right, "I wonder if you would mind telling me whether your treatment has been as successful in any case similar to mine that you've had in—say in the past week or two."

"I don't mind at all." The tired eyes were obscurely amused. "We've had excellent results in every recent case of ray exposure. However, my boy, I earnestly advise you for your own good to forget everything connected with your recent experience." The smile vanished. "Everything."

He was advising Brad to forget that he'd ever met Joan Arlen. "I'll try, sir. It will be hard but I'll try." Not hard—impossible. "And thanks for all you've done."

"We've just done our job, son." Abruptly the gaunt surgeon was impersonal. "I've put you down for a ten day convalescent leave, Lilling. The attendant will give you your card as you go out."

Brad showed the card to the gate guard, went out on the bus platform atop the Station's Administration Building. It was between shift-changes and he was alone again. But now he could look out over drab square miles of low roofs shimmering in desert heat. . . .

Abruptly he was impatient to get to the laboratory where he spent most of his leisure time. He had a hunch that, with ten uninterrupted days in which to work, he would find at last the solution to the problem that had eluded him for years. If he could no atomician would ever again be maimed or killed by a flaring pile.

"Nice day," a vague voice murmured in his ear.

The little man, gray-haired, clad in inconspicuous gray, seemed to have materialized from thin air.

“Yes,” Brad responded, “it’s a very nice day.” He turned a dismissing shoulder but the fellow couldn’t take a hint.

“Some excitement around here a little while ago,” the man persisted. “Depot approaches closed off by a swarm of Espees, in uniform and out. Sky-cover too. Guess it was some top brass taking off. You got any idea who?”

“No,” Brad lied blandly. “No, I haven’t.”

“Too bad. I’d like to see a Scientist close up, just once. I’d kind of like to see how they’re different from us. Or do you think they really are?”

Brad’s spine prickled. “How should I know?” That last remark, he was certain, was not the casual make-talk it pretended to be. “I’ve never given it a thought, mister.”

“Dulcie,” the gray little man offered, although Brad hadn’t ended his sentence on an interrogative up-beat. “Kag Dulcie, culinary tech two.”

That was altogether uninformative. A cook or baker might be out of the Station’s own refectory or a meal factory or communal dinery anywhere in the region.

“I guess I don’t rate the ‘mister’ from you, though. I figure your rating’s second or maybe even better.”

“Second’s right.” Brad decided against revealing his name or category but he had an uneasy feeling that the little man already knew both. “Wonder what’s keeping that bus?”

“Here she comes, right on time.”

The stratobus was a speck high above the distance-hazed Sierra Oscurro peaks, the next instant a silver bird shape flashing over the forest of spidery powercast towers. Then it sougled to a stop in its cradle, its jets purring. A door folded down out of the gleaming high side, became a ramp slanting down to the depot platform.

“Nor’east local,” a disembodied voice droned. “S’louis, P’ttsb’rg, N’Yawk, Bos’n, Hu’son Bay points. ’Bo-oarrd. All-ll abo-oarrd.”

Brad found a seat near the rear. Kag Dulcie slid in beside him, yawned. “Gosh, I’m sleepy,” he mumbled. “Guess I’ll catch me forty winks.” He scrounged down on his spine and was snoring almost before the bus had resumed flight.

The way the little man’s knees were jammed against the back of the seat in front made it impossible for Brad to get past him into the aisle without waking him. There no longer could be any reasonable doubt that his appearance had not been precisely fortuitous.

Who was he? What was he after? Getting nowhere with the riddle, Brad watched New Mexico slide from under, give place to the Texas Panhandle, to Oklahoma—strange how the old state names persisted.

Toylke far below, the Kansas hydropones were lush with wheat and vegetables, growing gigantic under precise mechanical control of nutrition, temperature, moisture, solar irradiation. The vast Missouri cattle plants succeeded them, raying interminably across the landscape with their calving pens at one end, freezer storage for the dressed meat at the other.

“S’Louis,” the annunciator blared. “Next stop’s S’Louis.”

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Kag Dulcie opened one drowsy eye, closed it again.

He repeated this performance at Pittsburgh but, as New York foamed up over the horizon, its spume of towers the nexus for a cloud of sky traffic dancing midgelike in the sun, he came

fully awake. Now I'm sure he knows all about me, Brad thought. He knows this is where I get off.

The bus eased into its cradle. Dulcie was already in the aisle, had reached the exit before it was jammed by the others whose destination was New York—except Brad.

"Nix, my friend," the latter muttered, staying put. "I'm not falling for that little stunt. You're planning to wait in the crowd and trail me when I pass you but me, I'm going on to Boston."

He could return on the next bus. Even though this would keep him from his lab for another begrudged half-hour, the thirty minutes would be well spent if they rid him of his perturbing incubus.

Out on the platform the little man did not so much as glance back. Watching him trot past the passengers waiting to come aboard, Brad thought his recent companion had forgotten his existence. He jumped up, got down the aisle in time to catch the last of the debarking queue.

As he went down the ramp, the city's hot, metallic smell greeted him and the deep-toned vast growl of its teeming millions. After two days of isolation the terminal's bustle confused, almost terrified Brad but he found himself on the beltway at the platform's center and let it carry him down into the dim cool cavern beneath the enormous depot that bestrides mid-Manhattan.

The conveyor leveled out again, slid past the arched openings of the tubeways whose stupendous subsurface network finally had solved the metropolis' perennial traffic problem. Glowing signs named the farflung metropolitan districts, from Perth Amboy to Peekskill, from Long Island's South Shore to the Raritan.

Behind each a tubecar whined into its terminal trough, disgorged a half-dozen passengers, swallowed a half-dozen others from the head of the waiting line and vanished to be immediately replaced by another.

The whole system fanned out from this hub at the Old City's center. Unless one's destination was on the same line as his starting point, he transferred here. Long before the beltway had carried Brad to his own tube it had become annoyingly congested but there still seemed no good reason why a burly individual should crowd against him on the right, an only slightly smaller one on the left, pinning him between them.

"All right, Lilling," the latter said softly, "you're wanted."

His heart skipped a beat, then sledge-hammered his ribs. "What do you mean, I'm—"

The question died at his lips. The tip of a pencil-thin, four-inch rod in the man's hand had glowed briefly and Brad was voiceless. Were it not for the arms that had slid under his to support him he would have crumpled inertly down.

The neuro-rod had paralyzed him but he still could think. So this is how the Espee did it—but why him?

## CHAPTER III

### *Dangerous Knowledge*

The one on Brad Lilling's right murmured, low-toned: "You can make this tough for us and a lot tougher for yourself or you can make it easy. If you're willing to be sensible bat your eyelids and we'll let up on you."

Anything was better than this awful paralysis. Brad fluttered his eyelids. "Smart boy." The n-rod glowed again and his body came alive.

They crowded close to him, taking no chances. The beltway slid on past tube after tube. All about him was a yakatayakata of casual talk but in the midst of that jostling throng he was terribly alone, a ghost among the living.

"Blast!" someone exclaimed, just ahead. "We've passed our—" Jumping off the conveyor he pulled a woman with him and unscreened a familiar gray figure. Kag Dulcie at once eeled into another group but Brad knew now who had fingered him for the Espee men.

They still made no move to get off. The last lighted sign drifted behind and the three of them were alone on the belt.

"Here," the agent on his left grunted. "Put these on."

'These' were a pair of goggles. Their lenses were opaque and sidepieces fitted snugly to Brad's face. He was completely blinded.

Shoulders pressed him off the belt to his right. There should be no tubeway here but his nostrils were stung by the familiar sharp tang of ozone generated by solenoids' surging current. Queer. He heard a tubecar's door swish closed as he was pressed down into a seat. His ears were blocked by the pressure of speed only slightly less than that of light.

"Look," he ventured. "Aren't you chaps making a mistake?"

"We don't make mistakes." The answering voice was grim. "But you'll be making a bad one if you don't fold your face and keep it folded."

"I only wanted to know—"

"That's what got you into this jam," Brad heard. "You know too much already." His scalp tightened on his skull.

"*There's some think you already know too much,*" Starl Kozmer's fingers had warned him. He knew a lot more now and it was dangerous knowledge. It was so dangerous to Kozmer, to Porsen and to their whole cabal that they would be justified in taking any risk to make certain he did not share it with the authorities.

He had assumed, as anyone would, that these men were police but they had not said they were. It made far more sense if they—

The tubecar stopped Hands cupped Brad's elbows, lifted him to his feet and urged him out. He could see nothing but senses sharpened by apprehension to preternatural acuity told him he was being guided down a long corridor, that he was in an ascending lift, that he'd emerged into another narrow passage and, suddenly, that he was in some large space.

The hands halted him. "Wait here." Footfalls thudded away.

Taut, sightless, Brand heard murmured voices, movement. His palms were wet with cold sweat. He tried to get up nerve enough to lift the goggles, started to but stiffened again at new sounds, sounds like chairs scraping somewhere directly ahead of him. A faint perfume trailed across his nostrils and abruptly he was trembling.



“Yes,” a lilting, musical voice said. “That’s the one. That’s Brad Lilling.”

“Joan,” Brad croaked, “Joan Ar—” but a harsh palm was laid across his mouth and a hoarse voice growled, “Watch it. Watch your manners.” Fingers plucked the goggles from his eyes and light knifed them, iridescent, shimmering light.

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His pupils accommodated themselves to the brilliance. He was in a spacious room, each of whose opalescent walls was centered by the World Council’s symbol, five protons whirling in concentric orbits about a tiny central mapglobe.

Dimly apprehended beside him was a stalwart figure in the gray-green of the Espee’s uniformed corps. They stood facing a long table whose top was a broad, light-drenched crystal slab. Across the table five high-backed, regal chairs were aligned but only the middle three were occupied.

The man on the right—Brad’s left—was sharp-featured, cadaverous, his eyes hooded by lashless, vulturine lids, his lips thin, straight, cruel. He too wore the gray-green Espee uniform but, instead of the guard’s simple shirt, his officer’s jacket had gold-braided epaulettes and its sleeves were crusted with gold almost to the elbows. Brad knew by this that he was Shadrach Gaslin, Commissioner of Region Three’s Security Police.

The man in the central chair was not in uniform. He was tall even when seated, heavily built, his head leonine in proportion and pose. High intellect was in his broadly moulded countenance, the consciousness of power and the infinite loneliness of those possessed of great power. He was Gar Arlen, Region Three’s omnipotent Administrator.



On the screen the giant bulldozer struck, shuddered and disintegrated (CHAP. VII)

On Arlen's left sat his daughter Joan.

In an ill-fitting protective suit she had seemed slim and long-legged and boyish. She was flowerlike now in some filmy, pastel green stuff that hinted modestly of her body's burgeoning womanhood. But no glinting lights danced in her eyes' incredible blue and her

face was so still, so devoid of expression that, save for the quiver of its chiseled nostrils, it might be carved from wax.

Brad hoped that his own face was as stony. “Am I permitted to congratulate Miss Arlen,” he asked tonelessly, “on her recovery from her recent accident?”

A tiny muscle flicked in her cheek but that was all. It was Gaslin who spoke.

“We’ve had you brought here, Technician Lilling, in connection with the episode to which you refer.” Because his lips did not move, his reedy voice had a ventriloquial quality that was curiously intimidating. “Was it an accident?”

Brad’s pulse jumped, steadied. “Have you any reason to think it was not, sir?”

“Answer my question.”

“All I know, sir, is that I was down there with Miss Arlen—”

“No, Lilling,” Gaslin interrupted, “you were not with Miss Arlen when Pile Two flared. She was immediately at its base. You were far enough from it for your protective suit to be effective.”

“That’s right.” What was this all about? “I’d been called away by someone who had a message for me.”

“Which you can produce, no doubt.”

“No.” Brad’s nerves strummed like a radar specline but he contrived to keep his voice steady. “Before I got it the pile started to spit and I dived right back to Miss Arlen.”

“So.” Bony fingertips, immaculately tended, drummed on the table’s edge. “Our investigators failed to find anyone who saw you at the time of the accident or who saw anyone else in a location from which he could see you, much less call to you.”

“I—” Brad licked lips suddenly dry. “Miss Arlen must have heard him.” An iron band was tightening around his brow. “I’m sure she heard him.”

The Espee chief turned to Joan. “How about that, Miss Arlen?”

An artery throbbed in the blue-shadowed hollow beneath the girl’s throat. Her lips moved.

“The only one I heard was Technician Lilling, calling to me to wait for him, that he would be right back. The blue glow,” she added gratuitously, “already was beginning to appear.”

“No,” Brad moaned, “Oh, no!” But his larynx was knotted on his voice and no one heard him.

“So much for that,” Gaslin was saying, “but there is more. The record, Lilling, shows that Technician Kozmer warned you that Pile Two was in an unstable condition and likely to flare at any moment.

“Not only did you not report this to the Station Director at once, as you should have, but, instead of following the customary inspection route on the level above the piles, you conducted Miss Arlen to a level where she would be in imminent peril. All this adds up to clear proof of—”

“Negligence,” Gar Arlen’s deep-chested rumble intervened. “Merely negligence.” Here was help from an unexpected quarter. “And I feel that we must consider in extenuation that the young man did return after his initial panic to rescue my daughter.”

“I agree, your excellency,” Gaslin responded. “We certainly should.” Brad relaxed. “If,” the sharp-faced police head stressed the word, “that was why he returned—but it was not. He went back, true, not to save Miss Arlen but to make good an alibi for himself.”

“Oh, come now. That seems far-fetched.”

“Not in the light of the ray-aid technician’s testimony as to Lilling’s remarks. They conclusively demonstrate he thought your daughter had been exposed more than the critical

ten seconds, himself somewhat less.” An iron band clamped Brad’s brow, tightened.

“That was what he planned. It was a very clever scheme and it failed only because he slipped by a second or two in his timing. It was,” Gaslin’s pale-irised, minatory look returned to the baited atomician, “a deliberately planned attempt at murder.”

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And he was right. By withholding the single, simple bit of evidence as to the fake message, the real assassins had framed Brad with it and neatly cleared themselves of suspicion, making certain in the same stroke that the knowledge he possessed no longer was dangerous to them.

The incredible thing was that Joan Arlen had lied to help fasten the frame on him. Even so there was a flaw in the deftly concocted plot. Brad forced words through his tight throat.

“May I say something, your excellency?”

“Of course. We condemn no one without hearing his defense. Have you one?”

“I have. There’s no way to control the piles from the level where I was. That can be done only from the next level above or from the control room. I couldn’t possibly have flared Pile Two at precisely the crucial instant.”

Arlen’s great head turned to Gaslin. “Could he?”

“No,” the Espee Chief admitted. “He could not.” He smiled thinly. “Not alone. He had at least one confederate, perhaps more. This outrage is part of the mutinous conspiracy we’ve known about for months.” His minatory look laid itself on Brad’s face. “We know all about it, Lilling. You might as well confess.”

The iron band squeezed Brad’s brow. “I have nothing to confess,” he said.

He thought he heard a sound from Joan but, when he looked, her face was as mask-like as before.

“Listen to me, young man,” Gar Arlen murmured, leaning forward, infinite charm in his grave smile. “You are too intelligent not to realize that we do not know all about this conspiracy or we should have smashed it long ago.”

For the first time Brad sensed uneasiness here, an evasive quality of—could it be apprehension.

“Make no mistake, we shall eventually smash it but you can make it easier for us by telling us what you know.”

There it was, the reason he had been brought into the awesome presence of the Region’s top brass, the reason Gaslin and Joan had built up the case against him step by damning step. The Administrator’s reluctance to accept had been designed to underline the futility of denial and at the same time to win his confidence.

“That is why I am offering you a deal, your help in scotching this plot against a full pardon for yourself.”

It was funny—it was excruciatingly funny that, by framing him, Kozmer and Porsen had given him the power to destroy them.

“Come now,” Arlen was saying, persuasively. “There’s no reason in logic or ethics why you should refuse.”

“No, your excellency,” he agreed. “There’s no reason why I shouldn’t make a deal for a pardon. No reason except that I’ve done nothing that needs to be pardoned.”

Gar Arlen sat back in his chair, his face, his expression abruptly stony. “I see,” he sighed. And then, “You leave me no alternative but to sign the warrant for your liquid—”

“Just a moment, Dad,” the girl broke in. “I just thought of something.” She’s coming through for me, Brad’s heart caroled. She couldn’t go through with it. “May I make a suggestion?”

“Of course.” The Administrator’s voice, his expression, softened. “Of course you may, dear.”

“Look, Dad. I’ve heard so much about the new methods of questioning suspects Mr. Gaslin’s information experts have invented. Why don’t you let them try them on this man?”

That’s fine, Brad thought. That’s swell. He was going to give me a quick, clean death, but that wasn’t good enough for her. One word, just one honest word from her would have saved me and this is what she comes up with.

“Very well, Joan,” Gar Arlen was saying. “We’ll try it.”

## CHAPTER IV

### *Inquisition*

Five feet square the cell was. There was nothing in it save the armchair, of some greenish opaque synthetic, oddly resilient, in which Brad Lilling sat. No one but Brad was in the cell.

He knew only that it was in the same building. He did not know even through which of the four dun-colored blank walls he'd been brought in. They had put the blindfolding goggles on again before he'd been led from the room with the World Council's insignia on its walls—he had removed them only when he knew himself to be alone.

Someone had been waiting here for Brad. He hadn't seen him, of course, but he had sensed him moving silently about. He had felt the unseen individual place a weighty cap on his head, a curious helmet that fitted tightly over Brad's scalp. It had an arm which curved down from its back to press a wet sponge against the base of his skull.

He'd felt the silent operative swab his temples and the insides of his wrists with some cool, tingling liquid and tape to them oval plates of thin and flexible metal. He saw now that from each of these plates and from the helmet fine wires coiled down to and into the arms of the chair.

He had the sensation of unseen eyes watching him. His own eyes searched the blank, the terribly blank walls for a peephole, for glint of light on the lens of a scanner. The walls blurred. A gray mist hazed them, swirled out into the room, filled it. The haze swirled into Brad's brain.

The haze cleared. . . .

Donning his hood, Brad Lilling momentarily was blinded. When he could see again, Joan Arlen already was thirty feet away in the aisle between the piles. "Wait for me," he called, snapping the hood's collarband shut with his right hand as his left pressed a stud in the wall behind him. "I'll be right back." Out of the corner of eyes he saw Pile Two's wall begin to glow but he already was wheeling from it to the transverse passage, empty as far as eye could see.

He fled from the flaring pile . . .

"No," Brad groaned, "No. It's a lie!"

The gray mists swirled in and thinned. Brad dimly discerned the cell's walls, blank and questioning and then the mists thickened and the gray haze possessed him once more.

The haze cleared. . . .

Brad Lilling was somewhere on the Station. In the control room? On the level above the piles? In some stealthy corner where he and the man to whom he whispered would not be observed? In some curious manner it was up to him to know where, but he did not. . . .

The man was a vague shape, lead-suited, his hood hanging loose from the back of his collar. Lilling knew who he was but not quite. It was as if recognition trembled, like a name on the tip of his tongue.

Lilling could not hear his own whispered words although their meaning was clear. "Our success depends on split-second timing. I'll signal you the instant she's gone far enough and on that same instant you must start Number Two spitting. Cut the flare in exactly ten seconds, not a hundredth more or less."

"Set," the other man agreed. He turned to Lilling.

He had no face . . .

The gray mists swirled in.

The gray haze was part of Brad and he was part of the haze within which swirled dark shadows that pleaded with him to give them form and substance and voices.

The shadows, Brad Lilling with them, were in a place that had no outlines, no location and there was a horror in this place that chilled his blood, and a menace even more terrible. The horror was in the shapes of the men, Lilling knew, although he could not quite make out what made their shapes so horrible.

In the same tantalizing way that Lilling had known and yet not known the man in the Station, he knew and yet did not know where this place was. If he moved closer to the shadowy men, if he heard them more clearly, if he saw them more clearly, he would know.

His need to know drove him nearer, slowly, relentlessly, in spite of the impalpable miasmatic horror about them. Step by reluctant step he moved nearer to them and now almost could hear their mutterings, almost could see them clearly.

Now!

They had no faces. Where their faces should be were only lacunae, blank and grotesque and more terrible than any nightmare.

The gray mists swirled about Brad and thinned and dissolved. The cell once more was sharply seen and real, its naked floor, its blank walls, real and permanent. Slumped in the chair at its center, Brad was sodden with the cold sweat of exhaustion, drained of strength and emotion.

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Startlingly, a tall ascetic individual stood beside him.

“Who—” Brad gasped. “Who are you?”

“Martin Corbin,” the fellow answered. “Information specialist, grade one.” He started stripping the wires from Brad’s wrists and temples. “I must say you’re a tough nut to crack, Lilling.” Detaching the wires from the chair and winding them into neat coils, he shook his head chidingly. “You simply refused to complete.”

“Complete what?”

“The induced dreams.” The informatician lifted the helmet from Brad’s head, held it up and gazed admiringly at it. “Wonderful instrument this. A great improvement over the old cumbersome methods of actually producing the sounds, smells and so on which cue desired dreams in a sleeping subject.

“This obviates all that and gives much better control of the induced images as well. You see, it impresses precisely measured neuro-electric potentials directly upon the cerebrum, bypassing the subject’s own sensory channels. In addition to that it screens for us his mental images so that we can view them directly instead of having to depend on psychometric readings.”

Brad shook the cobwebs from his head. “You mean that you made me dream those things, expecting me to fill in the blanks from what I’m supposed to know and you want to find out?”

“Precisely. But you wouldn’t, you know.” Corbin sounded very much like a teacher chiding a recalcitrant pupil. “Now I’m going to have to work over your emotional reaction graphs to determine whether you actually lack the information or were resisting.”

“What happens if you decide I was resisting? Another session?”

“Natch. We have ways of breaking down a resister. Not very pleasant ways.” The way he said that sent a cold chill through Brad. “Well, dear fellow, I’d like to stay here and chat with

you but I must be toddling along. I won't say good-by though. I may be seeing you again in a couple of hours although you're such a nice chap I definitely hope I will not. For your sake, of course. Er—do you mind getting up? I have to take this chair along.”

The wall to Brad's right slid shut and he was closed in to pace the naked floor with his thoughts. Not, as Martin Corbin would say, pleasant thoughts. He pondered Starl Kozmer's treachery—but that had been forced on Kozmer. If Brad himself had been cleared the Espee investigators would have returned to the trail.

It would have led them to the leaders of the Technist rebellion and so destroyed it. He was a martyr unwilling but still a martyr to a cause which, to its adherents at least, was more important than any individual.

This was not so with Joan. Pacing endlessly, Brad tried to find some excuse for what she had done. Some reason why she'd changed so from the girl who, merry lights dancing in her incredibly blue eyes, had broken down the barrier between the daughter of the great Gar Arlen and Brad Tilling, Atomic Technician, grade two.

He remembered how, on the ray-aid scooter, her little hand had crept trustingly into his. “You came back for me,” she'd whispered and her blue eyes had been wide with gratitude and with what Brad had dared to think might be something more than gratitude. And then she'd said, those eyes frosty, “The blue glow was just beginning to appear.”

He'd been a fool, a complete and mindless fool to think—

A whisper of sound twisted Brad to the opposite wall from that to which his pacing had taken him. A vertical seam split it, widened, and a gray-green uniform showed in the aperture.

So soon? Could it be time already for Corbin to have completed his analysis and be returning to break down a recalcitrant register?

The panel was open. A guard entered, carrying something—a tray of food-laden dishes. The folded legs dropped, and it became a small table the fellow set on the floor.

“Okay, Mac,” he growled, “Go to it.”

The reprieve left Brad shaken, his stomach twisting. “Thanks,” he choked, “but I'm not hungry.”

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The turnkey's eyes went small in a brutish countenance. “He's not hungry, he says.” His head half turned to the doorway at whose side the shoe-tips and a gray-green trouser leg of another guard were just visible.

“We bust up a good crap game and rustle up a midnight snack for him and what does he say? He says, ‘Thanks. I'm not hungry.’” The lowering gaze came back to Brad. “You'll eat, Mac. You'll eat if I have to shove the stuff down your gullet.”

Brad's bitterness became a throb of unreasoning anger in his veins. “Try it,” he said, stiff-tongued. “Why don't you try it?”

“Sure, Mac.” The guard licked thick lips. “Anything to oblige.”

He moved lock-kneed around the table, moved toward Brad, slowly, hunching arms dangling loose at his sides but hamlike hands curling. Brad crouched, his own fists coming up. He watched a roundhouse blow start toward him, hang in midair. Pupils dilating with puzzled surprise, the fellow folded to the floor.

“Take it easy, Sten,” the other guard said from the doorway. The red glow at the tip of the neuro-rod in his hand faded. “The guy's just scared that chow's drugged.”

The vague voice struck a chord of memory and Brad, staring, made out under the uniform cap's broad visor a face he had good reason to remember.



“It’s okay, mister.” Kag Dulcie stowed the n-rod in the pocket of his gray-green shirt and started gesturing. “Be a nice guy and scoff it up fast.” The gesture meant that Brad was to swap clothes with the man sprawl at his feet. “We’re off-shift soon’s we’re through here and we’re going out.”

He meant Brad. He meant that Brad was going out of here in the other guard’s uniform.

“I’m sorry,” Brad mumbled, talking as Dulcie obviously was for the benefit of some listening device. “I guess I’m a little jumpy and your friend’s getting tough didn’t help.” His fingers were trembling but he was stripping fast. “I won’t make you any more trouble.”

“Darn right you won’t,” growled the n-rod guard. Brad froze, staring down at him. “Get busy.” He was limp on the floor, only his eyes alive. “We ain’t got all night.” It was Dulcie who spoke, the imitation almost perfect. Brad grinned, resumed the exchange of clothing.

The uniform’s fit left much to be desired but that didn’t bother him as, walking on air beside the gray little man, Brad neared the end of a deserted, apparently doorless corridor. His people hadn’t abandoned him. Kag Dulcie was one of them, had taken awful chances to rescue him.

“I fixed it with the lieutenant so we don’t have to report back to the ready room,” the latter said and stopped in front of the seemingly blank wall that terminated the passage. “Kag Dulcie,” he said, low-toned. “Three one six four, Baker shift. Checking out.”

“Dulcie.” The metallic voice seemed to come from the wall itself. “Three one six four. Checking out. Right.”

“Sten Trostig,” Dulcie said, in the voice of the guard they’d left on the cell’s floor. “Five seven two nine, Baker shift. Checking out.”

“Trostig,” the wall acknowledged. “Five seven two nine, checking out. Have a good time boys.”

“We will, lieutenant. Thank you and good-night.”

“Good night.” Released by some unseen mechanism, a wall panel slid open, admitted them to a lift-cage. Dulcie thumbed the topmost number of a vertical column. Brad felt pressure against his soles, sensed that the cubicle shot upward far more swiftly than any lift he’d ever ridden.

His elation had drained away. He was once more tight with apprehension.

Despite its speed the lift ascended interminably. The building must be immensely high, Brad thought. When they finally stepped out he knew that he was right, for they seemed to be among the stars. Beside the exit a guard’s face was eerie in pale luminance from the panel before which he sat, his eyes intent on it. Dulcie went past it and a green light flashed out on it, flashed again as Brad passed.

“’Night, guys,” the guard called. “Have fun.”

Brad followed the little man out on a stone-paved roof, between long rows of parked helicopters. Dulcie finally stopped at one of these, patted its side affectionately.

“Here’s old Nancy,” he said, “waiting for us and raring to go. You want to fly her, Sten, or shall I?”

“You,” Brad answered, not daring more than the one syllable for fear the quiver in his voice would betray him to any possible eavesdropper. He slid to the far end of the skyboat’s front seat and the little man slid in next to him, closed the door and clicked a switch under the cowl.

The airframe thrummed with current tapped from a powercast beam and vanes whirred overhead. Riding lights came on on either side the copter’s nose, orange on the left, green on

the right, the sign manual of the police. The skyboat lifted, rose swiftly.

The impossible had been accomplished. A prisoner of the Espee had escaped.

## CHAPTER V

### *Dark Wasteland*

Veins pounding, Brad Lilling looked down to the sky-reaching spire already far below them, down along its windowless sides, immensely down to a pallid cascade of terraces each of which was a building monstrous in its own right but piled atop another even vaster to make a single, awesome edifice.

And still his eyes dropped, plumbing the night, till they came at last to the mountain dwarfed by the structure man had built atop it and to the glimmering silver thread of the Hudson at the mountain's base. In all the Region there was only one building like this.

"Xanadu." He breathed its name. And then, recalling the poet's ancient and immortal lines from which came the name for this Capitol where Gar Arlen and his counselors lived with their families and from which they ruled one-quarter of the world, "It's not been any 'stately pleasure dome' for me."

"No." Dulcie's eye- corners crinkled in the bright moonlight. "I don't guess it has."

Caught in some current of the upper air, the copter drifted swiftly up-stream. High above, two wide counter streams of riding lights traveled across the stardusted sky, stratocraft traffic to and from New York, but on this level and below it they were quite alone.

Southward, Xanadu's soaring tower was a graceful silhouette against a rainbow arabesque of light widespread across the distant horizon, the varicolored bright tracery of arching skyways and faery spires that is New York at night. Even here the voice of the city pervaded the quiet night, a deep vibration less heard than felt.

"I haven't thanked you yet for what you've done," Brad said. "It was quite a stunt to shake me loose from that bunch."

Dulcie shrugged. "Getting you out was easy. The hard part begins now."

"The hard part?"

"Keeping you out. We'll be safe in this craft and these uniforms only till Gaslin's squadmen come for you and find poor Sten in that cell instead. If you ain't with your friends by then and cached deep, it's going to be just too bad for you."

"And how!" There was no spot on earth's surface that could not be searched for him by the Espee scanners, not a cubic foot of its air that could not be combed by their sky patrols. "Let's go."

"Sure. Whereaway?"

"Don't you—?" Brad caught that back, covered it with a cough. "I can fly there easier than try to direct you." His mouth was dry again, his heart pounding. "Suppose I take the wheel."

"Right." Dulcie pushed up, crowded against the instrument board to let Brad slide in under him, moved sideward to the vacated spot—and plopped heavily down, lolled forward as though abruptly boneless till his head lay on the cowl, a startled and reproachful question in the gray eyes.

Brad released the trigger of the neuro-rod he'd plucked from the little man's shirt pocket. "You gave yourself away," he answered that question, "when you talked about my friends, not yours, and asked me where they were."

Steadying the rocking helicopter, he continued, "I was already a little suspicious after the way the lieutenant who checked us out went right on with his 'have a good time, boys,' after

acknowledging Trostig's name and number, not waiting for anyone else to speak.

"That meant he could see us and that there were only two of us, so should have noticed that you spoke for both. I convinced myself he was drowsy or careless but then you made your slip and I knew that you're an Espee spy trying a stunt that was old when the Greeks built their Trojan horse."

He laughed, curtly, bitterly. "The joke is that, even if I hadn't tumbled I still couldn't have led you to the rebels because I—" A half-sensed sound twisted him around to the rear seat.

His startled glimpse of the glittering, phantom shape that lifted from the floor there and his thumb's jab on the instinctively aimed n-rod's trigger were all but simultaneous. Moonlight slid across the slender, silver-sheathed form swaying in the first instant of paralysis, showed him a heart-shaped, pallid face, and glowed on a cluster of golden tresses.

"Joan," Brad gasped as she crumpled. "Joan Arlen."

As incapable of movement as his rod's two victims, he stared incredulously down over the back of the seat at the still, pathetic heap on the floorboard behind it. He must be dreaming. It was utterly beyond reason that the girl who'd sat mask-faced and lied away his life should have stowed away in this police craft but the final outré touch was that she should have done so clad in an evening dress of cobweb silver cloth that left bare her rounded arms, the singing lines of her white throat and shoulders.

For the laughing-eyed minx of the Station escapade, on the other hand, it was entirely in character—A sense that something more had just gone awry bore in on Brad.

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Yes, something was deadly wrong. The copter's power-thrum abruptly had ceased. The craft was dead in the air—dead and dropping, slowly because the vanes still turned silently overhead but undeniably dropping to the waiting river.

And he knew why. The Espee had taken no chances. They'd kept a listening beam on the skyboat, eavesdropping on all that was said within it. They'd heard him taunt Dulcie with the failure of his trick, had cut off the copter's power and now were dispatching another ship to fetch Brad back to his cell. Heavy with defeat, he turned to watch it come, saw Xanadu's tower glistening in the moonlight but only empty air between.

His skin tightened. Beyond the Capitol New York had vanished.

The shining arabesques had been swept from the sky. Even the metropolis' omnipresent growl was hushed so that the night was invested with a fear man long ago had forgotten, the dread of the sunless hours his jungle ancestors knew as they crouched in their torchlit caves.

Above, the stratocraft lights were gone. Somehow, perhaps because the stars had regained their lost supremacy, the horizon to which Brad's eyes returned seemed immeasurably more distant.

And now the fear that closed on him was no longer ancestral memory but immediate. The horizon where only moments ago the great city had shone in glory, the very stars its shining lights had paled, were blotted out by a black, Gargantuan something beyond experience.

His first inchoate notion, that there had been some failure of the powercast beams, was now unthinkable. In that case, unlit though they might be, New York's towers and skyways still would be silhouetted against the stardusted heavens.

This crouching blackness had a single, semi-circular edge at which the stars were cut sharply off. Within that clean-cut arc, where a hundred thousand leaping structures, where twenty million human beings should be, was—nothing!

A bright spark flared there, exploded into a thousand flaming bits. Some stratocraft had struck the blackness, its fragments dribbled blazing down, outlining the curving surface of an unimaginable half-sphere— A crash jolted Brad from his feet.

The river geysered up through a sudden gash in the skycraft's thin hull. The copter shuddered, tilted to scoop more water over its side. Choking, half-drowned, Brad fought the black flood, realized the copter had slid from the rock that mortally had wounded it, was sinking rapidly.

Somehow he'd kneed to the swimming seat, was over its back into the space behind. Somehow he was overside, the girl's limp body in his arms as he watched the craft whirled away by some darkly malevolent current.

Kag Dulcie, paralyzed, was still in the doomed craft but Brad could do nothing to save him. If he were to save himself and Joan he must swim to the low black line of shore he glimpsed through water-blurred eyes. The disastrous rock, only a jagged, up-thrust spike, offered no refuge.

He was near exhaustion when his kicking feet scraped bottom and, gulping air in great gulps, he could stagger up on a sloping, stony beach. Breathless, dazed, the girl an impossibly heavy burden, he nevertheless was flogged by some instinct of the hunted from this expanse naked to the sky. Squinting, he made out a low, black mass edging it, some thicket that offered the concealment he must have.

He reached it, sank to his knees through rustling bushes, laid Joan down gently.

She lay pitifully still in the dancing, leafy shadows. Her wet-dark hair plastered against cheeks drained of color, her sodden gown a silver skin revealing her every nerve-tingling curve, she seemed a fabled mermaid drowned in air—*drowned!*

Brad suddenly was leaden with a sense of infinite, unbearable loss and then he saw her long, wet lashes flutter open, saw her wide blue eyes find and rest upon his face.

"I'm sorry, Joan," he mumbled. "I didn't realize it was you till I triggered."

He checked his words. Why should he apologize to her? Why, in spite of what she'd done to him, had his first thought when the copter crashed been of her? Why was he so concerned for her that he'd forgotten Dulcie, his own peril, even that he'd just seen New York extinguished?

He hadn't—he could not really have seen that. It had been an illusion, the waking nightmare of a brain wearied by hours of stress, reeling under a swift concatenation of new shocks. It must have been an illusion—and yet that vast void on the southern horizon had seemed, still seemed in retrospect, so vivid. He must see, he must convince himself that it was not real.

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Gathering strength and courage, Brad cautiously edged head and shoulders out from the concealing bush. He'd landed, he saw, at the head of a bay enclosed between the hill-shoulders that sloped down to the river's edge. They cut off his view in either direction but he could look up. He could stare up and see that once more the stratocraft riding lights streamed across the sky.

His brow knitted. Those lights were not moving with their wonted, orderly certitude. Their streams eddied, shifted. In the northward one, great gaps showed.

But the city's voice was in his ears again, deep and comforting. No—what he heard was the thrum of a helicopter's vanes, momentarily more distinct. Not passing, hovering directly overhead and dropping.

So quickly, then, the Espee had located him. Odd—he heard their copter, very near, but he could not see it. He could not see it but he heard its vane thrum, dropping swiftly to the beach.

The sound cut off.

Brad stared toward where it had sounded last. He saw the pallid beach, the river glinting in moonlight, nothing else— Wait! He rubbed his burning eyes and looked again. Yes, there it was, some twenty yards north along the shore. A sort of shimmer as if a whorl of heated air intervened between him and the river.

Abruptly the evanescent bubble of refraction was blotched by a vertical black bar, some six feet high, that widened as the space between a door-edge and its jamb widens when the door slides open. As abruptly a man stepped out of this slit in the night, turned as if to close a door.

The bar narrowed and was gone, but the man still was there on the beach. The moonlight, bright on him, showed his hair as a white mane. Showed his face as he turned and started across the beach to be only half a face, the right half blanked out by an eyeless dark scar.

He was Starl Kozmer.

Brad's numbed lips twitched. He recalled an incident long ago forgotten. In the Station refectory one midnight, before going on-shift, a group had discussed their leisure-time occupations. He'd told them a little about his own ideas for rendering pile-flares harmless but they'd hardly been more than ideas then. Kozmer was farther advanced.

"I'm working on a paint, a coating really, that will make things invisible. The principle's simple enough, but—"

"Simple!" someone had exclaimed, scoffing.

"Quite simple," the old man insisted, unperturbed. "It light rays originating—or reflected—from behind an opaque object can be refracted around it and returned to their original direction, the intervening object would appear perfectly transparent, hence invisible, to an observer. It can be done. Sooner or later I shall do it."

"Okay," the scoffer had yielded. "It can be done but suppose you do it—what use will it be?"

Kozmer's twisted smile had faded. "I don't know," he'd responded, slowly. "I don't know that it would be any use but what's the difference? Working at it keeps me from thinking about —" He'd caught himself and turned the talk to something else.

Now, Brad realized, Kozmer had solved his self-set problem and found a use for the solution. Since the demise of the old soil agriculture and the development of sound-swift aerial transportation, everyone lived in the cities and commuted to the plants and agricules erected in rural areas.

No such installations existed in this hilly Hudson valley stretch so near Xanadu. It was a wasteland never entered. By furnishing the rebels with a means of visiting it unobserved by the Espee sky patrols, Kozmer had made it the ideal spot for their secret meetings.

And, Brad grinned, the ideal spot for him to have landed. All he need do was let Kozmer know he was here and the gaugeman would see to it that he was safely hidden. His troubles were over.

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Except for one thing—one person. The revolutionaries already had tried to kill Joan once—he could not deliver her into their hands to finish the job. Nor could he leave her here, helpless, to be found by one of the wild dog packs that roamed this deserted terrain.

Even if, in the struggle to escape the sinking copter, he had not lost the neuro-rod that would have restored her, she had seen too much, knew too much for him to free her to find her way back to Xanadu and the Espee.

But Kozmer had reached the bushes, was pushing into them and in a moment would be lost in sight.

“I’ll be back,” Brad whispered to the girl, dropped flat and himself wormed into the thicket. He must keep track of the aged atomician, find where he was going, return then to solve the dilemma Joan presented.

The harsh ground rasped his palms. Thorny brambles plucked at his clothes, tore his face. He no longer heard the threshing of foliage by which he guided himself! Brad froze. Had the old man heard him? Was he peering through this black tangle trying to spot him, perhaps with a pocket bazooka in his hand, ready to blast?

Ahead of Brad and above him footfalls thudded. Above puzzled, he ventured to move forward a little and his head broke into the open. An embankment ran here, just beyond the thin strip of bushes he’d traversed and roughly parallel to the river. The footsteps were atop this rise. They were directly overhead. They were passing, had passed.

Brad lifted his head. Limned against the luminous sky a white-haired figure plodded along the embankment toward the hill to the south. He got moving again, lifted to the weed-lush slant, groped blindly overhead for a handhold. His fingers found rusted metal, and with a great effort he drew himself up.

The metal was a rail running along the narrow dike and, at the opposite edge, there was another. They were the tracks of a railroad abandoned years ago when all interurban transport took to the air. They ran away from him to where Kozmer was just entering the hill’s looming shadow.

Once lost on that darkly wooded slope, Kozmer would be lost for good. Brad trotted after him, grateful that the ties to which he gauged his stride were so rotted as to muffle the sound of his footfalls. They muffled his quarry’s too. He’d lost—no! The old gaugeman was silhouetted against an odd gray splotch on the hillside, low down.

He vanished. He hadn’t turned off the embankment. He hadn’t started to climb. It was as if he’d walked right into the side of the hill.

That, Brad learned as he neared the point of disappearance, was exactly what he’d done. The grayness was the stone facing of a tunnel portal into which the tracks plunged.

Brad flattened against the stone, peered into Stygian darkness that smelled of dank earth and slime-scummed rock. Somewhere inside Kozmer’s footsteps echoed, resonant. They stopped. No light appeared but a murmur of voices came to Brad’s straining ears. Then silence.

It didn’t matter. He knew now where, when he was ready, he’d find friends and help. Now he must go back to Joan and figure out what to do about her. Brad turned away—tried to turn away but could not. It was as if the night had gelled to hold him in an impalpable but resistless mould.

He’d been ground-looped.

Pebbles rattled down from the portal’s top, skittered away. A black something dropped formless down, crouched in the blackness of the tunnel mouth. It had a voice, husky, somehow not human.

The voice said, “All right copper, say your prayers.”

## CHAPTER VI

### *Cavern in Hell*

An errant moonbeam glinted on the wrist-thick stubbed barrel of the pocket bazooka that jabbed at Brad Lilling, helpless in the clutch of a Jennsen forcefield.

“Hold it,” he squeezed through his locked larynx. “Hold your blast. I’m no cop.”

The sinister shadow hunched closer and took on the same quality of—of not rightness and made more eerie the husky voice. “You lie. You’re in a cop uniform and it’s sopping wet.” How could he see that in this lightless murk? “You’re off that Espee copter just dropped in the river.”

“Right,” Brad acknowledged, “but that don’t make me a policeman. I was a prisoner and escaped— Look here!” No need going into that long and hardly credible tale when he had an easier out. “There’s someone inside there who’ll vouch for me. Kozmer.”

“Kozmer? The leader knows you?”

“I’ll say he does.” So Starl Kozmer was the leader of the rebellion, was he? “And you’d better take me to him pronto. I’ve got something important to say to him and every minute counts.”

It worked.

“Okay,” Brad staggered, almost fell as the ground-loop released him. “Come on.” He sensed rather than saw that the bazooka gestured him to the tunnel mouth, went into it. He heard shambling footfalls behind him as he stumbled into darkness so absolute it seemed tangibly to thumb his eyes.

Dead air was dank in his nostrils, the hill overhead a terrible weight. The tracks curved and Brad followed the curve. Something rough, sodden, slapped his face, folded about him and tangled his limbs.

Panic subsided as he realized it was only a curtain hung across the tunnel. He pushed through it and blinked into dim luminance from a deep niche in the rocky wall to his right. In there an ungainly form hunched over a wall-bracketed shelf cumbered by the coils and condensers of some electronic setup.

“Go on,” said the man behind him and he passed the niche, discerned a sort of wheeled platform on the tracks, a curious, handled teeter-totter jutting up from its center. “Climb aboard that.”

Brad obeyed, turned and for the first time saw his captor as other than a shadow.

Laboriously hauling himself to the platform, the fellow’s hulking body seemed grotesquely misshapen inside earth-brown clothing to which clung twigs and bits of leaf. His leg had only a leather-covered pad for a foot, the right foot was twisted sidewise. But it was his head at which Brad gaped, his skin crawling.

It was not really a head. Set neckless on lurching shoulders, it was a somewhat larger than head-size cube of flesh-tinted, opaque plastic. It had a lipless round orifice for mouth, tiny fluttering valves for nostrils and for eyes two unblinking lenses between which and a little above there protruded a curious small nodule woven of fine wire.

By a gesture of a three-fingered hand, this macabre apparition indicated that Brad was to take hold of the handle at one end of the seesaw, himself bent and grasped the handle at the other, down-slanted end and pulled it up. The platform groaned, jerked into motion and Brad



realized that it was some sort of conveyance powered by pumping this teeter-totter up and down.

Brad bent, straightened, bent again. The monotonous, mechanical rhythm lulled the apprehension with which he'd begun this weird journey into the bowels of the earth to dull, almost incurious acceptance of whatever it might lead him to. But at the back of his brain lay a nagging worry.

What would happen to Joan, lying paralyzed in the none-too-effective concealment of those bushes? Well, he asked himself, what could he do about her save hope that she'd be discovered neither by prowling animals, by the Espee nor the rebels? Maybe, when he'd learned more about the situation ahead, he'd think of something.

Push down. Pull up. Push down again in the sightless dark. Sightless only to him. Brad knew now that the railcar, himself, the tunnel, were as visible to the individual at the other end of the seesawing bar as though they were bathed in full daylight.

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Paradoxically, this was because the creature was blind.

The lenses in the box that covered his head and the wire nodule between them were part of a most ingenious device. End product of researches begun in the Decade Crossroads when the human debris of war included so many eyeless men and continued through those early days when Atomic Energy was taking so fearful a toll of those who worked with it. These were the antenna and receptors of a radar apparatus whose pulses were stepped down to the infinitesimal potentials of neutral currents and fed directly into the brain's vision area. Since radar is not concerned with light, the system functioned as efficiently in absolute darkness as in the brightest illumination.

Down. Up. Down and up again. Brad recalled that this was only one of the contrivances by which Science salvaged the survivors of atomic and other industrial mishaps. In most instances, however, these survivors were so terribly ravaged that, despite the most skilled surgery, they remained too distressing in appearance to live and work among others more fortunate.

For their own sake they were committed to the Custodial Colonies where they spent the rest of their lives as wards of the State. Here they were provided with every creature comfort, every facility for whatever occupation they elected to keep their minds alive, whether in cultural pursuits, in handicrafts or scientific research. Here, isolated in their own quiet communities, cut off from news of the outer world and never seeing anyone to remind them of their difference from other men, they might achieve some measure of contentment.

What then was his guide doing here, so far from any colony of which Brad knew? He—Brad dropped that speculation as the railcar slowed, then stopped.

"Off," his captor commanded out of the blind murk. He clambered down, heard a thud beside him. A touch on his shoulder steered him away from the tracks.

He was climbing some steep slope. His feet felt rough rock beneath. His fingers trailed rock walls either side, too close for two to walk abreast. Suddenly a hand caught his arm, halted him. His guide shoved past. Directly ahead, metal squealed on metal.

Brightness slit the black, widened with the sinister grinding rasp of an old fashioned, hinged door. The brightness was blotched by the blind man's uncouth silhouette, holding the door open.

"Come ahead." Brad went through, was stopped again by blinding dazzle. The hinges squealed again, behind him, and the door thudded ominously shut. His vision cleared.

He was at one end of an extensive cavern whose low rock roof was supported by ponderous pillars still showing the marks of antique tools. The bluish light, from ancient fluorescent tubes bracketed to the central line of columns, fell on rudely built wooden tables, on backless wooden benches but did not quite reach the cavern's walls so that space seemed limitless, enclosed only by shadows.

Perhaps because of this, Brad had the uneasy feeling that he was back in the last of the induced dreams through which he'd sweated in his cell in Xanadu. Like the place of that dream, this cavern seemed somehow out of space and time; like the dream place it seemed filled with some brooding, inexplicable horror.

As in that dream a cluster of shadowy shapes muttered unintelligibly, far down at the other end.

Unbidden, yet without will of his own, Brad moved toward them. Slowly, as though he pushed through some unseen miasma of deepening dread, he neared them, was near enough to make out that they were back-turned to him, intent on something they screened from him and, now, that the horror brooding here was immanent in their shapes.

He made out one whose limbs were ingeniously articulated rods of metal and plastic, another whose body remained erect only because it was suspended by straps in a wheeled frame. A third seemed altogether whole save that the top of his head was sheared slantingly off, while a number had for heads the boxlike contrivances with which his guide was equipped. Sickened, oblivious of where he walked, he blundered into a bench.

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It toppled, fell with a resounding crash that wheeled the broken men to him. The light fell across their faces.

They had no faces! They had only plastic masks like his guide's or, infinitely worse, ray-burned blanks with mewling little holes for mouths and corrugated slits for eyes.

They were the faceless men of his dream.

One, then another spied Brad in his Espee uniform. Their mutter became a low angry growl that crescendoed into a shrilled oath, a curse. The cluster milled, split and spewed grotesque forerunners who hobbled or limped or rolled in their frames, straight for him. And Brad stood frozen, gaping not at them but at what he'd seen as the cluster of broken men had shredded to stream towards him.

They'd uncurtained a visiscreen there at the cavern's rear and a greater horror had obliterated the lesser.

The screen showed the horizon at which Brad had been gaping in the instant the river rock spiked his helicopter. A fleet of planes now wheeled and weaved in the sky above it and their interlacing dance of searchlight beams, slanting down, was sliced short in mid-night to trace a vast, inverted bowl beneath which was hidden a city of twenty million souls.

It had been no illusion, no trick of a fevered brain. Some unimaginable catastrophe— A sliced-off head leaped between Brad's staring eyes and the screen! Clawed talons slashed the hand he instinctively flung up to fend them off, sank into his shoulder. He jerked free, was clubbed in the face by a fingerless fist, reeled into something that squealed, toppled with a metallic crash, whirled into a flurry of blows that pounded him to his knees.

Abruptly there were no more blows.

Propped on quivering arms, battered, half-blinded, Brad dimly was aware that some command had halted the grisly attack. The same voice came again, flat, curiously without resonance.

“What is this, Vince? How did that policeman get in here?”

His guide’s husk answered. “He says he’s not a policeman, Mr. Kozmer.” The name penetrated Brad’s daze. “He says you know him.” A hostile circle ringed him and the blind man, and no one else. “He told me he had an important message for you so I brought him in.”

They two were alone in the ring but the response hung right here, above them. “You should have checked with me, Vince.” Was it because of the device by which the aged gaugeman had made himself as invisible as his copter that his voice was so changed? “I do not know this man. I never saw him.”

“Look at me, Kozmer,” Brad croaked. “Take a good luck. I’m Lilling.” Was he so battered as to be unrecognizable? “I’m your Controlmaster, Brad Lilling.”

“My Control—” The voice was cut off, interrupted by a murmur just under the threshold of intelligibility. The macabre circle shifted, hating Brad, lusting to be unleashed at him again, but the expressionless, mechanical-seeming voice, speaking again, held them. “Very well, Vince. Fetch him to me.”

The circle parted. Stumbling after his blind guide, it came to Brad that the voice which had saved him had been projected into the cavern from behind the wooden door, embrasured in a sidewall, toward which they went. Vince pulled it open. Brad fumbled through into a smaller cave. The door thudded shut, leaving Vince outside.

“This is a strange place for us to meet, Mr. Lilling,” Starl Kozmer said. “Most strange and most unfortunate.”

## CHAPTER VII

### *Doomed City*

Brad Lilling spraddled weary legs to hold his aching body. His bleared eyes found the white haired atomician, standing near the dial-panel of an intricate and unfamiliar electronic setup stretching across the lower half of the opposite wall. The old man's twisted half-smile seemed more sinister than ever as he sighed and said, "This is my brother, Lilling. Fran Kozmer."

His brother? The figure beside him resembled a human only because, propped on two leglike, articulated struts, the central rectanguloid had the proportions of and was only slightly larger than a man's torso. It sprouted from just below the upper edges of two opposite sides of plastic simulacra of arms and was topped by a head-box like Vince's.

"Starl has told me who you are, Lilling." It had a voice too, the flat voice he'd heard in the cavern. "What is this important message you have for me?"

This then, or rather the unimaginably maimed man encased within this artifact, was the Kozmer whose name worked magic with the faceless men. This was their leader. "Well?"

Brad swallowed and stammered:

"I—er—" His talk of a message had been a desperate stall. What could he say now that would sound at least plausible? "I've just escaped from Xanadu. While I was a prisoner there I learned that the Scientists know you're plotting to overthrow them."

"You did?" The rasping susurrantion might be intended for a laugh. "That's scarcely news, my friend. They know by now not only that we're plotting against them but that we've beaten them. Look here." Fran Kozmer pivoted, touched a panel-stud with the five-tined extremity that was his hand.

The cave dimmed. A square of light appeared on its rear wall, above the panel, shimmered and took on perspective.

Slanting from somewhere above, a searchlight's brilliant beam struck out of the surrounding night two men who stood on an eminence. One was Shadrach Gaslin. The other, stockier, his squarish head set bull-necked on stalwart shoulders, was Lin Forbes, Chief Engineer of the Region. Lonely on that solitary height, they watched something below and beyond it.

The scene shifted to that which they watched. A machine so huge that the men swarming about its towering caterpillar treads seemed fingernail-sized pygmies, Brad knew it for one of the enormous bulldozers that could level a forest or slice off a mountain's top in a single irresistible pass. Gleaming in the beam that spotlighted it, its huge shafts churned and it lurched into gigantic motion.

Other beams laid themselves on the ground ahead of the bulldozer, slid along the path it followed, made vivid the green grass, some scattered pebbles and slid over a sudden sharp edge into a fathomless abyss.

No—Brad was mistaken. This was no chasm. The beams had lifted. Their ends, sliced off, traced the almost imperceptible curve of a curtain that neither reflected light nor diffused it but quenched it. It was as though all light, all existence, ended at that wall. As though beyond it was—nothingness.

Trembling, chilled to the marrow, Brad knew that he saw a close-up of the hemisphere he'd seen clamped down over New York from afar.

The bulldozer again centered the screen. Arrogant in the consciousness that nothing had ever withstood it, that nothing could, the behemoth drove straight at that incomprehensible barrier. It was yards from its target. It had only feet to go. It crouched, hurled its thousand tons of duralsteel against the appalling curtain.

It struck. Shuddered. Disintegrated into a pile of shattered, futile shards. On the hill overlooking this debacle, Lin Forbes' arm went out in a small, involuntary gesture of defeat. Within the cavern of the faceless men, their leader's laugh rasped Brad Lilling's quivering nerves.

The screen blanked out, was alive again. Now it framed a room hung with gray draperies, furnished in stark simplicity. Behind a ponderous desk a quietly dressed, gray-haired man sat, looking down at a sheaf of paper that lay on its otherwise bare top.

"We now bring you Matt Tarlin," an unseen announcer droned, "with the latest information from Xanadu."

Region Three's star newscaster lifted his head, his hollow-cheeked countenance grave, blue shadows pouching his somber eyes. Five pulsebeats of brooding silence, then the rounded, resonant tones familiar in every household.

"Good news, my friends. I can give you the definite assurance that there is no immediate cause for anxiety over the inhabitants of New York.

"I have just come from talking to the top officials of the Regional Administration," Tarlin continued. "Here is the picture as they've drawn it for me. The Food Distribution Authority's files disclose that sufficient food is warehoused within the city to bar any fear of famine for from ten to twelve days, longer if rationing is instituted at once. There is water enough in the mains and auxiliary reservoirs to last nearly as long.

"As for air—well, a Corps of mathematicians has calculated that enough is enclosed within the shell to provide breathable oxygen for some ninety-odd hours and the Chemicals Bureau reports an available supply of the necessary chemicals sufficient to restore the vitiated atmosphere for an additional day or so.

"Therefore, my friends, the city's population can exist for five days to a week. Long before that, you may be confident, the shell that has isolated them will have been dissipated or at least penetrated."

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Fran Kozmer was laughing once more. "No, Tarlin," he husked. "Not in five days or in five centuries. That shell is there to stay."

"The physicists still are uncertain," the newscaster was saying, "as to what connection if any this phenomenon has with the unprecedented failure of the New York area's powercast beams that occurred simultaneously with its appearance. It is doubted that there is any connection. A number of piles flared at the same time and as soon as the flares were controlled, the beams again functioned normally. That phase of the matter probably was mere coincidence."

"That's fine," the human robot muttered. "Let them think it was coincidence if it makes them happier."

Tarlin shuffled a paper to the bottom of his sheaf. "I am now permitted to make public what has been learned about this curious barrier which has cut off New York from the rest of

the world. This is very little, it must be admitted. We know that nothing—light, sound, heat, the whole range of electronic vibrations—can penetrate it.

“Geophysical soundings have established its shape. It extends as far below the city as it does above, rounding down through the tubeway network, through bedrock, perhaps through the edge of Earth’s molten core, to form a true sphere, a hollow globe within which is enclosed the world’s most populous metropolis.”

Once more the newscaster paused and Brad noticed that the carefully tended fingers that rested on his script trembled minutely. There was, however, no quiver in his voice.

“There are two principal theories as to what it is. One that it is an ultra-dimensional stress in space. The other, and more probable theory in this humble layman’s opinion, is that it is an accidentally created bubble of pure energy.”

“Energy, Tarlin,” Fran Kozmer commented. “Naked force but not accidentally created. Not by any means accidental. Your bosses know that even though they haven’t seen fit to tell you.”

“We have shown you,” the calm voice from the screen flowed on, “some of the efforts that are being made to cut through this shell. You naturally are far more interested in what is happening within it. This we can neither show nor tell you. Those inside undoubtedly are endeavoring to communicate with us as desperately as we are trying to get through to them and with as little success.

“At this moment we know as little about them as though, at one seven A.M. Eastern Standard time, a little less than an hour ago, they had been transported to another planet. All we know is that those who are inside, as all of us outside that shell, are disciplined and resourceful and courageous.”

With a quick, impatient thrust, Matt Tarlin sent his papers skidding across the desk top and over its edge. Some indefinable change had come to his expression, to his brooding eyes, as though till now he’d been a mere conduit for the voice of authority, was now about to speak for himself.

“We do not know what is happening inside that shell, my friends, but we can look into it with imagination’s eye and see.”

He paused for a breath. “We see that the street belts, the elevators and ramps, the tubeways, all the vast complex of machinery that beats the tempo of a modern city are so much dead metal. No light penetrates that shell, no light will penetrate it even when the sun finally ends this dreadful night.

“So, in New York, the only illumination is that furnished by ancient lamps from exhumed museums, by tapers and torches contrived out of what ever fats and fabrics are available. Some sort of organization has been improvised. Committees are delegated to ration food and water, to care for the children and the ill, to maintain order.

“With our mind’s eyes we see a city of looming shadows, a city whose teeming millions are surrounded by the machinery of a civilization toward which man has struggled for tens of centuries but who suddenly must depend on their own hands and on the most primitive of contrivances for the bare necessities of existence. We see a city suddenly cut off from humanity, a vast modern city whose great systole and diastole of life has slowed to a faint and feeble pulse.”

A city whose shadowed streets were stalked by fear, Brad thought. A city whose people fought the chill beginning of panic.

“A city,” Fran Kozmer’s cold, not-human voice, added, “irrevocably doomed to extinction.” He blanked out the screen.

Starl Kozmer groaned, closed fists at his sides. “Think, Fran,” he pleaded. “Think of the men, women and children dying inside that shell.”

His brother’s nose-valves fluttered. “I am thinking of them, Starl. I’m thinking of how they put us out of their sight and mind while they enjoyed what we gave them and destroyed ourselves in giving it to them. Now it’s their turn.”

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They seemed to be continuing a discussion started before Brad had appeared.

“I’ve suffered too, Fran,” Starl put a gnarled hand to the scar that purpled half his face, “even if not as much as you and those poor fellows out in the cavern, but I know that no one is responsible. It is human destiny that every step in our climb from the jungle must be accompanied by sacrifice. That is the inevitable price mankind pays for progress.”

“Progress toward what? Toward more sacrifice?” Strange, Brad thought, that the brothers were at such odds. Had not Starl been after him for months to join them? “Are you satisfied with what the price we’ve paid has bought?”

“You know I’m not. You know that I and my friends are fighting to correct the inequities brought about by society’s adjustment to all the implications of Atomic Power. But we follow the age-old pattern. Mechanical and scientific advances must come first, then social readjustment to the new environment.

“What you propose is to stop progress, not only stop but reverse it.” Brad pricked up his ears. Was the murder of New York’s millions animated by something other than insane revenge. “You can’t do it, Fran.”

“Can’t we? You’ve heard Matt Tarlin.” The structure of plastic struts and sinews that was Fran Kozmer’s arm lifted, pointed to the instrument panel “Listen, brother. If I press that stud, Boston will be enclosed in a shell like that which immures New York. That one,” the arm moved minutely, “and the people of New Orleans die. And I will, Starl. I will extinguish your Scientists’ cities one by one until they agree to give up their Atomic Power, demolish their Stations and—”

“Destroy civilization,” Starl broke in. “The pages of human advance cannot be turned backward. Our only choice is between unremitting progress and disaster. Give it up, Fran. You tell me New York is irretrievably destroyed, but you can give up the rest of your mad scheme and let me go ahead with my fight for justice for the Technists for equal opportunity.”

“Opportunity to be blasted into things like me or those poor fellows outside.” The toneless voice seemed all the more impassioned because it was so incapable of expressing passion. “Opportunity to be deprived of fatherhood or to be capable of siring only monsters.”

Heart in mouth, Brad was moving so cautiously he seemed almost not to move at all, toward the side wall to which Fran Kozmer’s back was turned.

“No, Starl. We are determined that no more young men shall be condemned to the hell which we’ve inhabited all these years.”

Keep arguing, Brad prayed. Keep at it and forget me. If he could reach the instrument beyond the two brothers, reach and smash its tubes, its delicate coils, the faceless men could not go on with their plan for mass murder.

“All these weary years,” their leader repeated, “we’ve planned and built and tested for this night. Your Scientists made it easy for us. They gave us laboratories for our research and did not question what we did there.

“If, from time to time, one or two of us vanished from the colonies they made only a desultory search, content as long as we did not appear where our pretty faces and handsome bodies would turn their delicate stomachs. They never suspected that we were gathering in this ancient, abandoned iron mine almost under their very noses in Xanadu.”

In the corner Brad froze. Fran Kozmer had paused, his nose valves fluttering with a long inhalation.

“Now at last,” the toneless voice resumed, “we’ve struck.” Brad was moving again, sidling inch by taut inch along the sidewall. “We’ve enshelled their proudest city and given them till morning to convince themselves they no more can penetrate that shell of force than they can quench the rays from a flaring pile.”

A tiny muscle twitched in the atomician’s cheek.

“If they’ve not accepted our ultimatum by eight o’clock, Chicago meets New York’s fate. At noon San Francisco goes. One by one, till they admit defeat, their cities and everyone within the cities will be blotted out.

“That’s final, Starl.” Brad was hesitating again. He was still too far from his goal to chance a desperate leap but the next inch of cautious movement would bring him into Starl Kozmer’s line of vision. “That is our plan.” Would the white-haired gaugeman betray him? “You can talk from now till doomsday and you’ll not sway me from it.”

Brad moved the critical inch.

The purple-scarred half-face tautened. The old man’s mouth twisted in its bitter half smile.

“Very well, Fran,” he sighed. “I’m licked, but I still think you’ve bitten off more than you can chew.” He’d seen Brad, guessed what he was up to, and was holding his brother’s attention so that he’d have a chance to do it. “Suppose the Espee locates you here before your ultimatum expires and raids you. What then?”

“Then?” It seemed that the box-corners that were Fran Kozmer’s shoulders shrugged, though of course they could not. “Why then, my dear brother, warned by our patrol at the tunnel mouth I should press the master stud that in a single heartbeat will enshell the Region’s ten largest cities and, in the next, this cavern.”

Directly behind him now, Brad was within an ace of gasping aloud but, close enough now, gathered himself for the leap that would make the appalling threat futile.

“We will die, true, but eighty millions will die with us. No one can stop us. Not even you, Mr. Lilling,” the man-robot turned to him, casually, his laugh rasping. “Touch any part of that panel on its circuit and you will be electrocuted instantaneously—before you possibly could damage it.”

He flexed his plastic claws. “That’s one advantage of this artificial body they’ve given me. Another, Lilling, is that the microphones which serve me for ears are so sensitive that the rub of your clothing along that wall was like a file-rasp on sandpaper to them.”



## CHAPTER VIII

### *Hint From the Dead*

Considerably to his surprise Brad felt his lips twist into a wry grin. “Well,” he shrugged, “you can’t blame me for trying.”

“No,” Fran Kozmer agreed. “I can’t blame you for trying. On the other hand you are sentimentalist enough to try again even knowing the attempt must mean your death. I cannot afford that, nor have I any means here of keeping you prisoner and so, much as I regret it, I shall have to liquidate—” A gnarled hand flashed from behind to flatten over his mouth orifice and Starl Kozmer’s other arm clamped around his torso box.

“Get out,” the old man panted. “I’ll try and hold—” But Brad already was darting across the cave. “Try your flare-quencher,” he heard. “It may—” and as his hand closed on the doorknob Starl Kozmer’s shout broke into a shrill scream.

Brad flung open the door, slammed it shut behind him. But, as he hurtled toward the cavern entrance, he carried with him his last glimpse of the aged atomician, flung straight back against the panel, white hair sparking into flame, scarred countenance crisping.

“Stop him,” Fran’s shout batted at him. “Stop that spy.” But the mine’s denizens once more were clotted about the screen at its farther end and before they could get moving Brad had sliced open its entrance door, was through.

He slammed it shut. Black dark swallowed sight but he’d glimpsed the rock-walled stope outside and was half-running, half-falling down its steep slant. Hinges squealed again, behind and above him. Sudden light laid a long, grotesque shadow on the floor. The light faded, but the stope was hideous with the thud of pursuing footfalls and something caught at Brad from behind. A ground-loop!

He jerked loose. It was too feeble at the distance from which it had been thrown to hold him. He stumbled, regained his footing and speed. A bazooka blast pelted him with rock fragments from the stope’s roof and its orange-red flash left on his retina the jagged arch below, framed within it the railcar that had brought him here.

Brad threw himself down the final few feet, was aboard the platform, somehow found in the darkness the teeter-totter’s up-slanted handle, dropped his whole frantic weight on it. It gave. The railcar lurched and as he pulled the handle up again, panic tripling his strength, grated into movement just in time. The blast that luridly lit the tunnel singed the short hairs of his neck.

There was a slant here, perhaps, or his wordless prayer was answered for the car gained speed more swiftly than when two had pumped. Brad heard the wheels clack more and more rapidly beneath him, felt the crossarm move more easily with each desperate stroke, knew that by grace of Starl Kozmer’s sacrifice he’d escaped from the faceless men.

He racketed back in the direction from which he’d come, back toward the portal where an armed guard waited. Nor could he stop the car, dive from it and hope to find safety in this ebon darkness. It wasn’t dark to them, they’d run him down in no time. He had no choice but to speed on, hoping against hope that, in the confusion, no one had remembered to flash the tunnel mouth a warning to stop him.

The need for speed and more speed thrust Brad down, pulled him up although his arms and the muscles of his back screamed protest. Wheel thunder hammered back at him from the

close, unseen walls and the dank odor of slime-scummed rock, of air the sun had never warmed, was in his nostrils.

In them too was recollection of the stench of burning flesh and in his ears an old man's agonized scream, his last heroic words. "Get out. I'll hold—"

Not quite his last. "Try your flare-quencher," he'd called in his moment of extinction. "It may—"

It may what? What had Starl Kozmer meant by that? Why, in his last instant of life, had he recalled the fumbling research heard about years ago? It didn't make sense.

Or did it? Brad tingled with an as yet inchoate notion. Ahead, swiftly brightening, was light from the niche in the bore's wall and a shadow blotched the light and then a black shape moved out onto the tracks. It butted something against its shoulder—a bazooka.

Something crunched sickeningly under the railcar's wheels. It had hurtled down on the faceless man faster than he'd reckoned, had struck and passed him before he could fire. Miraculously still alive, Brad heard the wheels scream around the curve, rocketed out of the tunnel and felt the wind of his speed cool and sweet and fragrant on his face.

The curve had slowed that speed somewhat. He fought the pendulous crossbar to slow it still more—heard a hoarse shout from behind and was blinded by an orange-red flash that missed him only by inches.

He'd forgotten about the sentries outside the portal. In the bright moonlight atop the embankment he made a perfect target. The next blast could not miss. His sideward leap from the still racing car was merely a choice of evils.

For an infinitely long second, Brad Lilling sprawled in midair, then catapulted down to bone-crushing impact, was received by cushioning bushes instead, ploughed down through threshing foliage.

He groaned, tested arms and legs. They still worked. He rolled over to hands and knees, crawled through the black tangle away from the embankment, abruptly saw something other than flicker of leaf shadows. He saw the beach, the river. This was the same thicket where he'd hidden after swimming ashore— The thicket in whose concealment he'd left Joan Arlen only an hour or so ago?

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His head ballooning, Brad scanned the curving, stony beach sloping away from him. His burning eyes found what they sought, the vague, barely describable shimmer that marked the spot where Starl Kozmer's helicopter rested. It was almost directly opposite him. Joan, then should be about twenty yards to his right, toward the hill in whose depths the faceless men had built an unconquerable weapon with which to assassinate civilization.

He could not see her. But he could see first one dark misshapen form, then another and a third, steal out from the black edge of that hill's shadow. They were, without doubt, the portal guard out to hunt him down.

As they gathered in whispered consultation, he glanced back to the all but invisible copter, so temptingly near, then back to the faceless men. They were moving slowly toward him, pausing every step or two to peer into the thicket. They were hugging the rim of the bushes. Inevitably they must stumble on Joan.

Brad measured distances with his eye, estimated speeds. Could he reach the paralyzed girl unseen and burdened with her, steal back in the shadow of the bushes and then make a dash for the copter? Perhaps. It would be a desperate gamble but he might just bring it off.

He pulled his legs up under him, knuckled down in a sprinter's crouch—took off, straight across the beach!

He reached the bubble of refraction, clawed at metal he could not see. His fingers found, twisted an invisible latch, slid open an invisible door. A hoarse shout of discovery lifted him up and into an abruptly seen copter seat and he'd sliced the door shut again, was clicking a switch on an altogether apparent instrument board.

Vane-thrum commenced, crescendoed. Brad's frantic thumbtip jabbed a stud. The helicopter shuddered, leaped straight upward. He had time now to realize that he could see the sky, the river, the beach dropping from under him, that Starl Kozmer's coating blocked sight only one way. Except for the glasslike substance, transparent from within, that cabined it, this craft was exactly the same as any other single-seat copter flitting the airways.

Brad thumbed another stud to check his rise, hovered some seventy feet above where the trio of faceless men, out away from the bushes, gaped up to the sound of his vanes. They'd seen a man appear, as suddenly disappear. They heard a skyboat where they could see none. Mysteriously, magically, their quarry had eluded them.

He could not make out just how two of them were deformed, though he knew they must be. The head of the third, however, was a cube like Vince's. That one flung up a sudden arm and a red flash streaked from it, straight up at Brad's sideslipping craft.

Only in the last split second had he recalled that Vince saw not by light but by radar, and that Kozmer's coating did not refract radar pulses.

The skyboat rocked, leaped up and down again, whirled in antic evasion of the blasts that lashed up at it. The other two also were firing, guiding themselves by the flashes from the gun of the one who could see it. Brad's plan to swoop down and snatch Joan from under their noses effectively was stymied. As long as he could keep them busy with him, she was still safe but at any instant a lucky shot might clip him.

They seemed to have plenty of ammunition. How long— The boxheaded man staggered, fell. The two others wheeled from their stricken comrade, plunged into the bushes just ahead of a green light-thread that licked out from the spot where Joan must be, the tracer pellet of a urathor pistol.

They vanished into the covert and Brad steadied his craft, peered down, his brow furrowing. Who had fired those shots? Surely the girl had no n-rod. Who, then, had found her and was fighting to protect her—and him?

That was the oddest part of it. Espree or rebel, why should anyone fight for him? He was a pariah, hunted by the one, outcast by the other.

Drifting lower he thought he could make out a lumping of blacker shadow just within the shadow of the thicket's edge. Movement at the corner of his eyes pulled them to the embankment. Coming up atop it, the two portal guards turned to scan the bushes.

One pointed, then both were lifting their weapons, taking careful aim. A warning shout broke uselessly from Brad's lips but the copter zoomed down on a shut-vane slant, struck and leaped up again from two crushed, lifeless shapes sprawled across the rusted rails. It spun, hung on humming vanes, dropped again to settle gently on the beach.

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Brad fumbled at the door latch, had it open, started to step from it. Two figures broke from the bushes, ran toward him. One was silver-clothed, lithe and slender—Joan Arlen! The other—Brad's jaw dropped as the moonglow showed him the face of the other. It was Kag Dulcie.

He let them crowd past him into the skyboat, was galvanized into action by Dulcie's, "Let's go, Lilling. There's more of them on that hill." The copter sprang aloft again, slanted up east over the river. Brad turned, saw that Joan was slumped wearily against the other door, brought his eyes back to the gray little man seated between them.

"You," he said inanely. "You're not drowned."

"Not unless I'm a zombie and I'm pretty sure I'm not. No. I floated out of the copter as it sank, and the current washed me ashore there at the tip of the cove."

He'd lain, Dulcie explained, in such a way that he could look across the little bay and see Brad stagger ashore and make for the thicket. He'd seen Kozmer appear, on the beach, vanish in the bushes and reappear on the embankment, had seen Brad show up there and follow him.

"I used to be on sky patrol over this area years ago," he ended, "so I knew about that tunnel and got the idea right off that that's where the rebel hideaway is, somewhere in there. But I couldn't do anything for an hour."

"An hour?"

"Yeah. Don't you know a neuro-rod shot wears off in about sixty minutes? It took a little longer for Miss Arlen, seeing she ain't as tough as me. Say, this invisible copter is a neat stunt, ain't it?"

"Very neat," Brad agreed. "But what did you do after the paralysis wore off?"

"Well, lying there I saw and heard enough to know there were lookouts posted on that hill, so I knew I'd better worm my way around the curve of the bay pretty careful to get to her. I'd just about reached her and found her just beginning to stir when you popped out of the hill and all pandemonium bust loose. What happened? You and your gang have a falling out?"

"Yes," Brad said dryly, "we had a falling out but they're not my gang. How come, since you thought they were, you took a hand in—hello!" he broke off. "What's going on now?"

As the copter rose above the level of the hilltop, he'd spied a pair of riding lights, orange and green, streaking from the direction of Xanadu. Now behind that police craft he saw two more, then four, abreast, then another four and the drum of their vanes filled the air.

"What's bringing that Espee squadron this way in such a hurry?"

"Me," Dulcie replied, complaisantly. "As soon as you showed up I radioed headquarters what I'd spotted down there. With this." He tapped a tiny, hitherto unnoticed packet clamped to his belt. "In a code that sounds like bird calls unless you've got an unscrambler. Your friends are through, Lilling. They're all washed—"

"No!" Brad exploded, watching the lead craft shoot past the brow of the hill, wheel and dive down. "Call them off!" The others followed as if on an unseen track, in beautiful precision. "For Pete's sake, call—too late!" Their lights had blanked out and the thunder of their vanes and Brad's own vanes were silenced as his craft dropped.

"Eternally too late," he groaned, the blood draining from the surface of his body. "Heaven forgive you, Dulcie, for what you've done."

"What—?"

The vane-thrum began again but only the thrum of their own vanes as their craft once more was rising.

"What did I do?" Dulcie finished his question.

"Look down there."

Down there the railroad ended abruptly before it reached the hill. There was no hill. There was only a great hemispherical void gouged out of the night, circling out into the river and

above it, a single high skyboat rode the sky starkly alone, its searchlight beam, shooting down in search for its comrades, cut sharply off by the pall of nothingness that had engulfed them.

“Lord!” the Espee man whispered.

Joan Arlen, her voice almost as toneless as Fran Kozmer’s, asked, “What is it, Brad Lilling? You seem to know.”

“I know,” he assented, dully, recalling now that neither she nor Dulcie had seen New York blanked out, that they had not heard the faceless man threaten that if the Espee raided his lair he’d enclose it in a similar shell but first would obliterate ten more cities. “I wish I didn’t.”

“Tell us.”

“I’ll show you.” Brad lifted his invisible craft high enough that its passengers could see, far to the south, the living grave of twenty million. Then he told them what the vast blank in the sky was, told them what he’d seen on the visi-screen in the cavern of the faceless men and what he’d heard there, told them of Fran Kozmer’s threat.

“He’s done it,” he ended. “What he did to New York he’s just done to Boston and Chicago, New Orleans and San Francisco and six more cities whose names you can guess as well as I.”

The copter’s transparent cabin walled in a throbbing silence while each of the three pictured the sudden dark, the awful isolation, the gradual certainty of slow death that had come to eighty million humans.

Joan broke it. “Can’t anything be done to save them?”

Tight-lipped, skin taut over the bones of his face, Brad answered her. “Maybe.” Recalling the cry of a white-haired man who’d perished in the next instant, he said, “Yes, maybe something can be done. Maybe I can do it.”

## CHAPTER IX

### *“Blast to Kill”*

Even though the moonlight was brighter at this high level Dulcie still was shadowy; but there was a golden nimbus about Joan Arlen’s head. Her eyes turned to Brad Tilling as he muttered, working out aloud the half-thought that had come to him in the tunnel.

“I didn’t mean that much to him. Something a lot bigger made him do it.”

“Who?” Joan asked. “Made whom do what?”

“Starl Kozmer. Made him buy with his life my chance to escape. He’d gone in there to beg Fran to lay off, so he already knew something about that shell and a lot more came out while they wrangled. Fran was certain nothing can crack it but Starl—sure. That’s what he meant.

“Try your flare-quencher. It may—’ It may be the answer, he meant. Seeing me had brought back to him the principle of it that I told him way back when and it hitched up somehow with this other thing. But how?”

Quivering, but not with fear, Brad halted the copter’s rise, sent it into horizontal flight south of east. “I’ve got to get to my lab and figure it out.”

“Oh yeah?” Kag Dulcie grunted. “Ain’t there something else you gotta figure out first?”

“Not that I know of. That’s where I think best and that’s where all my notes and apparatus are.”

“Sure. But how’re you going to get to them without being picked up? That’s one place the cops’ll be keeping a close eye on.”

“An eye? For me?”

“For who else? You don’t think the Force would let even this hurly-burly call them off the hunt for an escaped murderer, do you?”

“A murd— Oh, good grief! So that’s why you saved me from those faceless men, to preserve me for a due and legal execution.”

“No, Lilling.” The little man’s lips moved in their vague smile. “Not any more than I sneaked you out of Xanadu so you’d stooge me to the rebel hangout. My orders was to get you to some place where you could be hid.”

“Your orders! But you just said that the Force— Who gave you those orders?”

“The same person that had me pick you up at the Station to make sure you got away okay. The only person for who I’d take the chance of being busted or worse. The Lord knows,” Dulcie grinned, “I’ve taken enough of them chances since I been her bodyguard.”

“Her!” Brad snatched at the pronoun. “You mean—”

“Yes, he means me.” The girl’s low voice was abashed. “I kept Dad from signing that warrant so as to gain a little time and then I asked Sergeant Dulcie to help you escape. And—and even that wasn’t enough.” A flush mounted in her cheeks.

“I couldn’t wait for him to come back and tell me you were all right. I hid in his copter. I was an awful fool, I suppose, but I couldn’t get it out of my head that you’d risked yourself to save me even though you’d planned in the first place to kill me.”

The stars spun around Brad in a dizzy whirl. “But you knew I hadn’t, Joan. You knew that pile didn’t start to flare till after I’d started away from it.”

“I knew nothing of the sort, Brad Lilling. It was already glowing when you called to me to wait for you.”

There it was again but she wasn't lying. She believed it.

"Got it!" Brad's palm slapped his thigh. "I was the fool. I never thought of that. The flare showed down there at the center where you were, but not yet at the corner where I was."

"You mean you didn't see—"

"Wait. Let me think." Once more the astringent prickle of inspiration coursed his spine. "A pile flares from the center outward only when one or more of the beams it feeds are overloaded. But we haven't logged that kind of spit since all machines drawing a dekakil or more were equipped with Laughlin automatic demand equalizers. All authorized machines. That flare was brought on by some illegal energy user tapping Pile Two beam. Do you follow me, Joan?"

"Follow you?" She laughed, the silver tinkle back in the sound of it, unshed tears of happiness making moonstones of her eyes. "I lost you at the corner where the glow didn't show yet, but that was far enough to tell me that the voice inside here," her hands indicated her heart, "was right!"

"There wasn't any plot, Joan. Not against you." More bits of the talk in the cave were coming back to make a pattern. "Quite the contrary. That message wasn't a phoney but an attempt to save you—and me."

"The amount of power they drew for their tests would have to cause overload flares if they used one beam but none was ever logged. They were tapping a beam fed by Pile Two, by Starl Kozmer's pile. They tapped it only during his shifts and he covered up the spits."

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Didn't something in one of the induced dreams fit in here too, something that could be in the dream only if the Espee knew it?

"Starl gimmicked the gauges so they wouldn't register on the control desk graph-lines but he couldn't keep them gimmicked all the time or it would have been spotted. So he had to know when the flares were due.

"He knew one was due when we went down there, sent that message down through his own undercover organization to steer us out of danger, was seconds too late because I'd taken straight to the lower level."

"Makes sense," observed Kag Dulcie, who'd been listening avidly. "But that means you're wrong about this Starl Kozmer bird not knowing all about this business till after he went in the tunnel. He knew where they was headed all along."

"Not necessarily. Here's the way I think it was. Fran fooled him into thinking he was working on something that would give Starl a bargaining point to get out of the Scientists the reforms he was after. It was only when New York was blotted out that he realized what his brother really was up to and even then he had no idea the shell couldn't be lifted. He only found that out when he rushed to the mine to plead with Fran to drop his scheme."

"Could be," the little man yielded, grudgingly. "So what?"

"So you're going to use that gadget at your belt to get permission for me to enter my laboratory and work there. Tell your bosses I may be able to save the cities and they won't refuse."

"Says you! Me, I have my doubts but it's worth a try." Dulcie put fingers to the box at his midriff, started tapping.

"Blast!" Brad groaned. "There's something else. How do I know I can get to my lab? Suppose it's inside the shell." He peered out into the night. "I can't see—"

“Brad,” the girl’s voice brought his head around. “Look there.” She pointed to the instrument board. “Isn’t that a radarscope?”

“Thanks.” He grinned shamefacedly, clicked the ’scope’s switch. “Good thing somebody in this craft’s keeping a clear head.”

The lenticular disk became luminescent with a maplike picture of the river below, the rusting ruins of Poughkeepsie Bridge, the mile square roof of the tubecar that had replaced the homes of the historic town.

The light dot indicating the copter’s position drifted to the disk edge as Brad twirled a knurled knob. The rolling Westchester hills slid across the lens, skirted here and there by the gray lines of unused highways, dotted by lightless clusters that once were bustling suburban hamlets.

And abruptly there peeped out from beneath the disk’s rim, at the top, a black crescent that did not reflect the radar pulses. “That’s it,” Brad breathed. “That’s the edge of the shell.”

“No,” Joan whispered. “Oh, no.”

“Steady, there’s still a chance.” But his own fingers were far from steady as they turned the knob slowly, slowly rolling that lightless crescent clockwise down along the ’scope’s rim as the imaged countryside rolled counter-clockwise up into the disk. Now the crescent was almost to the lens’ bottom and Taconic Park was wheeling up into view. But the antique soil-gardens that border the great area devoted to Technist recreation were blotted out by New York’s coffin.

Brad’s fingers were icy slivers as they turned the knob, bringing into the scope a pitiful eighth of the spreading fields where the old games are played with balls, a somewhat larger fraction of the swimming lagoon.

Nearly half of the air-polo pylons were outside the shell, but of the shops where were kept alive the ancient handicrafts only one low metalworking structure had escaped the blight. Now the disk contained a grassy expanse. It was too featureless to judge how much was obliterated, how much not. And now, rising five hundred feet from that sward—

“The Lab building! It’s outside. Only by fifty yards or so, judging from here, but enough.”

“It’s a good omen, Brad. Now I’m sure you’re going to get there and save the cities.”

But Kag Dulcie turned a bleak face to Joan and murmured, “Listen.”

Beneath the deep thrum of the copter’s vanes there was audible a low twitter. “What does it say, Kag?”

“It’s our answer, Miss Arlen. From the boss. From Shad Gaslin. He’s saying, ‘Lilling’s proposal patently subterfuge gain time for another attempt escape. You are ordered take him into custody and return at once to Xanadu. If resisted, blast to kill. That is all.’”

“The fool!” Joan flared, her eyes blazing. “The utter idiot. Dad would never— Get him, Kag. Get my father. You should have addressed him in the first place.”

“I did, Miss Arlen.”

“Then why did Mr. Gaslin answer?” she asked, frowning.

“Because—” The gray voice hesitated. “You remember why you’re all dressed up the way you are, Miss Arlen.”

“Why, yes.” Her white brow puckered with puzzlement. “I was supposed to go to a banquet with Dad. Just as we were boarding his skyacht I told him I felt ill and begged off, but instead of going to our apartment I hid in your—oh-h-h!” Her pupils widened. “You’re trying to break it to me that—”



“Yes, miss,” the little man murmured, miserably. “That dinner was in New York and the speechmaking was still going on when—”

“Dad’s inside there.” The little sound in her throat was a moan.

Brad yearned to take her in his arms but the gray little man was between them, so all he could do was say, “It’s all right, Joan. We’ll get your father out. I’m getting into that lab somehow, and—”

“Not if Gaslin knows it,” Dulcie broke in. “He was too smart to trust me. Look out behind.”

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Brad looked. The lonely police copter no longer was wheeling over the blacked-out hill of the faceless men. It had straightened out, was speeding toward them.

“They fixed our location while I was sending and now they’ve ordered that cop to come and take us.”

“But this ship’s invisible.”

“He’s got radar, ain’t he?” The box at Dulcie’s belt was twittering again. “He can see us and he can blast us out of the sky if we don’t hover and wait for him like he’s telling us to.”

Small muscles knotted the ridge of Brad’s jaw as he revved up vanes to maximum, veered to a new course. The pursuing lights changed course too.

“Yes. He’s got radar and can see us. Your dress, Joan. Take it off. Fast.”

“What?”

“Take it off, Joan, if you want ever to see your father again. You, Dulcie, tell your pal to take it easy. Tell him you’re about to hop me. Tell him anything but stall him.”

“Now look here, Lilling. You—”

The Espee man’s protest was checked by the girl’s snapped, “Do what he says.” Blushing, she was tearing open fastenings, ripping at fabric. Dulcie shrugged, put a hand to his belt and Brad rocked the copter as though a struggle were going on within it, glanced sidewise. Clothed only in stockings and two insignificant wisps of silk, Joan had the silver sheath in her hands.

“Good girl. Tear it in half. Toss me one half and start ripping the other into as small bits as you can.”

“Let me have some.” Sudden comprehension had dawned in Dulcie’s face. “We’ve got to work fast.” The twitter that had broken out again cut off. “That was him telling me to go to blazes. He’s pulling up on us.”

“Let him.” Brad’s fingers tore brutally at the shining, foam-soft fabric. “He’s in for a surprise.” The floor was ankle deep in gossamer shreds. “Open your door, Joan, and start shoveling this stuff out.”

He pawed his own door open. The wind roared in. The copter was enveloped by a sudden glittering cloud, a swiftly expanding flurry of silver snow pulled across the sky by their speed. The doors were shut again and anxious eyes sought the orange and green light-specks in the sky behind.

They were there but they no longer darted across the night with assurance.

“It’s working,” Dulcie grunted. “By all that’s holy, it’s working. He’s lost us.”

“And he won’t find us again,” Brad grinned as he sent their own craft climbing on a steep, swift slant towards Taconic Park. “Unless he has the luck of the condemned. His radarscope’s filled with thousands of darting specks and he can’t make out which one’s us. Lucky I

remembered reading how in the war before Decade Crossroads, the bombing fleets often masked themselves by strewing clouds of silvered paper along their path.”

“I call that ace remembering,” Dulcie commented. Something like awe had come into his tone and he no longer smiled. The grin of triumph faded from Brad’s face too and, as he cut off power and the copter hung on silent vanes, Joan’s deep-drawn breath was startling loud in the sudden hush.

High though they were, the dark mass to their right mounted immensely higher, black, appalling. Below, far below and out in front, the Laboratory Building crouched, tiny at the shell’s edge. Brad touched the radar knob, brought it up into the lens. Its roof, its walls and what was left of the surrounding greensward showed clear and distinct and there was no sign of life anywhere.

“Looks like you gave the Espee more credit than is coming to them, Dulcie. They’re not here.”

“Not where you can see them. They want to trap you, not scare you off. They’re waiting in that lab of yours.”

“No.” Invisible and without sound, the copter glided for that roof. “You forget no one, not even the police, may enter a private research lab except in the presence of the worker to whom it has been assigned. That’s the law and to make sure it’s obeyed every lab entrance panel is set so it can be unlocked only in response to its owner’s specific neural aura.”

“Okay, I forgot that. So what? They’re in the building. They’re in the corridor right outside your door. You still can’t get in.”

“I have to.” The roof was very near now. “I’ll get into it somehow.” But Brad had miscalculated. The skyboat just missed its edge, drifted down the pallid wall.

“It’s got windows,” Joan exclaimed. “Why’s that, Brad?”

“Because so many lines of research need natural light. But the panes are a transparent plastic that passes through the whole solar spectrum and they can’t be opened.” With apparent irrelevance, Brad added, “Let me have that urathor pistol, Dulcie.”

“No! I’m willing to try and help you keep from being nabbed, but I’ll be cursed if I give you a gun to kill my buddies.”

“I’m not going to kill anyone except possibly myself. Give me that pistol.”

Brad felt the cold grip in the hand he’d held out sideways for it but his other hand clicked a switch and vane-thrum broke out again, thunderous, to check the copter’s fall and hold it, heaving a little, with its door opposite the paned aperture behind which was the laboratory he must enter.

“Take the controls, Dulcie.”

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He was up. He had the door open. Some curve or projection of the skyboat’s hull kept the doorsill some thirty inches from the window. He looked down four hundred sheer, vertiginous feet of empty space. His left hand grasped and fiercely held the doorway’s edge. His right brought Dulcie’s pistol up, squeezed the trigger.

The green streak pierced the shatterproof pane, left a tiny, ineffectual hole. The hole was edged with a thread of greenish light that expanded to an inch-wide circle, to a circle two inches, three inches across and still growing. Holding grimly to the door-edge, Brad put his right leg across to the windowsill, straddled the dizzy gap.

He heard Joan gasp within the copter.

The light-thread reached the ferrocrete frame, blinked out along it. He pulled his other leg across, was through the paneless aperture, was down inside, only now dared to think what might have happened had he slipped, had the skyboat swung or drifted.

“Brad!” He heard Joan’s voice and swung to the window, to see a slim stockinged leg on its sill, a white thigh, a silk-swathed waist around which his arms flashed and tightened.

He lifted Joan in, held her warm, satin-skinned, to his terror-emptied chest. “You little fool,” he gasped. “Suppose you’d fallen.”

Warm breath on his face, warm and very sweet. Blue eyes so close to his they swam and were almost one. Lips all but touching his as they asked, softly, “Would it have made a difference to you?”

Would it make a difference to him if the sun never rose again? But Brad put her from him, wrenched away from her to the vane-thrum outside.

“Get that copter away from here, Kag, before they hear it and guess what’s up. And— And thanks for everything.”

“Think nothing of it, pal.” The door was sliding shut. The gray little man lifted a hand, smiled vaguely. “Good luck, Lilling.” He wasn’t there. The sound of vanes moved away, lifting. Abruptly there was no sound. There was only a faint shimmer, as of a swirl of heated air, between the window and the shell’s black loom.

## CHAPTER X

### *Last Chance*

Slowly, Brad Lilling's arm dropped from its answering wave. He twisted, strode stiffly past shadows familiar as the lines of his palm, jerked open a cupboard door.

"You ought to be spanked for this cute trick," he growled, fumbling inside the closet.

"Why, Brad?" He knew just how the blue eyes rounded, naively innocent, behind him. "I just wanted to help you."

"The help I need is someone to keep you off my neck. Here." He reached back a long laboratory coat. "Put this on." The garment was pulled from his fingers and he went on along the wall to the entrance panel. "Hate to light up but I can't work without seeing." His hand found, pressed a wall switch.

The white, apparently sourceless light filled a wide and lofty room, gleamed from polished metal surfaces, was netted by snaking cables. Dominating everything else, tall and intricate in the center of the room, was a machine that bore some faint resemblance to a gammatron. From beside it as Brad turned, demure and once more boyish in the long coat that hung clumsily about her, Joan smiled timorously at him.

"I'll be good, Brad. I promise I won't be in your way."

"Better not," he said absently. His look slid past her to the window and through it to the dark and terrible curtain that hung so close outside. "Why was he destroying the cities if all he wanted was to abolish Atomic Power? Why not just obliterate the Stations?"

"I'm sure I can't tell you, Brad. I—"

"Oh, for—look, Joan. There's a visi-screen down there at the other end. Go turn it on, like a good girl and amuse yourself watching it."

"I—" Her upper lip trembled, for all the world like a small child's told to stop annoying its elders. "You—"

"Run along and look at the pretty pictures. No sound, though. Can't chance being overheard." She turned listlessly away and Brad forgot her as the answer came to the questions he'd asked of himself.

"They couldn't put a shell around the stations because they needed the energy produced there to form the shells." Over the years of solitary research here, he'd formed the habit of thinking aloud in muttered, often hardly comprehensible phrases. "To form them, but not to maintain them. Maybe a hint in that."

What other clues had Fran Kozmer dropped, there in the cave? "He could set one up anywhere in the Region by pressing a stud on that panel. A signal to confederates? Doubt it. Improbable he had enough faceless men to scatter around or could secretly build that many installations. Some radiation then, directionally beamed from the cave. Impacting on the powercast beams somehow. But how?"

Brad prowled the room, another habit of the lonely years. "It's a shell, he said, and when Tarlin said it was hollow he didn't deny it. Naked force, he said. A bubble of force. Not really. A bubble presupposes a material film taking shape of least surface for given volume and force is not material. But then why a sphere?"

He narrowly avoided collision with the bits of apparatus strewn the room, almost but not quite was tripped by one of the cables that snaked all over its floor.

“Spherical force. Sphere implies rotating. That’s it! It’s a whirling, hollow ball of pure force. That’s why so much power, to set it whirling. But what force? Not from the piles, a priori. Obviously not produced in the cavern. Then—yes.”

It was coming now, almost too fast for him to put into words. “We know that the innumerable machines of a vast modern city, most of them at high potential, induce stresses, secondary forces, in space all about. Example, magnetic field around dyamo. Have ignored them since they were random-vectored, cancelled one another out.

“Some way—not important how—Kozmer’s radiation from machine in cave gathered all powercast beams at chosen point into a single one of almost incalculable total energy, directed it tangentially to that complex of stresses.

“Effect was to orient, polarize them and simultaneously sweep them into a whirlpool, a spinning sphere of forces that once set going maintains itself independently of the initiating beam. Since force—energy—and matter are intrinsically identical, this sphere acts like a bubble, like a shell of infinitely dense, hence impenetrable, matter.”

“Okay.” Halting in his prowling, Brad was dimly aware he was talking to Joan’s back as she gazed raptly at the visiscreen. “I know now with what I’ve got to deal, can start figuring what made Starl think my—” A white flash from the screen broke his chain of thought and he heard the girl whisper, “They did it. They dared to do it.”

“Do what?” Brad demanded.

There was no answer. He blinked at the wall, saw, as if from very high above, wild waters luridly lit, enclosed by land whose shape told him this was New York’s Lower Bay—saw a vast abyss walled by a mountainous, upsurging wave and by the force-shell’s black, incurving under-surface—saw a cloud-column spout up out of the monstrous chasm, a turbulent mass that, as it leaped skyward, was shot through by the dark lightnings that illumined Bay and land.

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Rolling, billowing in upon itself, the vaporous pillar climbed a thousand feet. Three thousand. Ten. It mushroomed, spurted another, darker cloud up out of the top of the screen.

“A bomb,” Brad’s stiff lips named the thing that had given birth to that cloud. “They made a fission bomb and took the chance of using it to break the shell.”

The screened scene whirled, obviously cameraed from some aircraft at a safe distance and altitude. He looked now behind the cloud, along the sphere’s surface— Its unbroken surface! It had defied the supposedly irresistible blast as it had vanquished the puny bulldozer.

Joan turned to him a face ravaged by despair. “It’s no use, Brad. It’s no use hoping any more.” The world’s watching billions, all mankind except the eighty millions confined within the shells, knew that same despair. “They’re lost. They’re forever lost. Nothing can save them.”

She was in his arms, racked by tearing sobs. “Hush, baby,” Brad murmured, holding her tight. “Hush. We’ve got each other. We’ve found one another and—holy smoke! I’ve got it!”

Joan lifted a tear-stained face from his chest. “What, darling?”

“What Starl Kozmer was driving at. Look. We’ve just seen the Scientists try to blast through the shell with the greatest force man has yet produced and fail. Why? Because the shell is force and you can’t fight force with force, you can only change its direction. Starl knew that and he knew I had a way not to fight force but to obliterate it. He knew I was building a machine to extinguish the rays from a flaring pile.”

“But what have rays got to do with force?”

“Everything, honey. Matter and energy and the rays that partake of the nature of both because they’re the product of their transmutation, all are fundamentally one thing and that one thing is, very simply, motion. Everything—light waves, atoms with their orbiting protons and everything between—is motion. Stop motion and you destroy it. You destroy matter, the bridging rays and energy—force—the force that makes that shell. And I can do it.”

He didn’t know he had dropped Joan to the floor, didn’t know he had dropped on the table to which he strode, the urathor pistol he had brandished all this time, forgetting he held it.

“Motion is a function of heat.” He snatched from the table the tools he needed, whirled to the machine in the room’s center. “The less motion, the less heat. The less heat, the less motion. In the complete absence of heat, at absolute zero, there would be no motion, therefore no rays.”

This was what he’d told Starl Kozmer in that long ago talk in the Station refectory. “But no one had ever produced absolute zero. That’s what I set out to do, to produce absolute zero at the surface of a flaring pile and so destroy the rays at its surface.”

He was shifting connections as he talked, tightening screws, making the adjustments that were as clear-cut, as vivid in his brain as though diagrammed there in lines of fire.

“It had to be at the surface, Joan, because, if absolute cold were created within the pile, it could not function. That meant my flare-quencher had to be outside the pile, had to focus on its walls from a distance.”

Somewhere there was obtruding sound, but Brad was only dimly aware of it. “I have it. I almost have it. I can focus on anything within a hundred yards and almost instantaneously bring its temperature down to absolute zero, but to do that I pull heat from it, of course, and so my machine fuses.

“I haven’t found a way to prevent that, but— Let go.” Something had hold of his shoulder. “What the—?” He pawed at it, felt a hand, Joan’s small hand, turned irritably to her white and frightened face.

“Brad,” she whispered. “Listen!”

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He heard it now, another voice. “For the last time, open up.” From the diaphragm over the entrance panel, hence the speaker was right outside. “Open up, Lilling. We’re the police.”

“The police.” Brad’s hands were back at their work but his brow was furrowed. “They must have seen the light in the window.” He was making the final connection. “Wish they’d be quieter.”

“Let us in,” the raucous voice demanded, “or we blast in.”

“You—” Anger clamped Brad’s throat as he twisted to the diaphragm, then he could speak again. “This is a private lab. It’s inviolate and you know it.” He turned back to the machine and made the last connection. “That’s it,” he sighed. “Now we’ve got to turn it so as to focus through the window. Help me, Joan.”

“Of course.” His shoulder butted a strut, the girl’s another. “Heave.” The machine did not move. “Heave.” Muscles tightened in his legs, his back. “Heave.”

“No use.” The apparatus was not bolted down but it was too heavy for them. “Got to have help.” Brad’s eyes went to the door panel. “Those cops!” He leaped across to it. “You out there,” he called. “I need your help. I’m letting you in.”

“No, Brad, no!” But Joan’s urgent whisper was too late. His neural aura completing the circuit, he’d flicked the latch and the panel was sliding open as he darted back to the flare-quencher. Light fell across the gray-green uniform of one, then another, and a third man,

coming through, bazookas ready for action. The first, tall, lean, lantern-jawed, spied Brad, grinned humorlessly.

“You’re Lilling, all right. You’re under arrest.”

“Yes, yes—I know. Look, you get hold of this here, and you there, and—”

“What the— What’s the idea?”

“You’ve got to help me turn this machine around so I can break the shell.”

“Oh, sure.” The tall man was moving toward him, wary. “Sure we’ll help you—in a pig’s eye.” His weapon held on Brad, pointblank. “We’ve just got warning that if you showed up here you’d try to pull some phoney like that.” He’d stopped short, the other two crowding him, fear of the unknown crawling in their eyes. “Get away from that dingus, mister. Don’t touch it.”

“But I tell you—” A green light-thread flicked past the tall man’s ear, spattered the wall. “The next one goes into you,” Joan said quietly from behind the policeman, “unless you drop that gun.” Her eyes were blue fire and in her steady hand was the urathor pistol she’d picked up from the table. Even Brad had not seen her slip around behind the cops, and as their attention had been concentrated on him, they’d not expected n-find anyone else in here.

“Drop them, all of you, or I’ll fire.”

Three bazookas thudded to the floor. “Thank you.” Her voice was thin and cold “All right, Brad. Kick those back here to me, then tell them what you want them to do.”

He told them. They protested but Joan’s pistol convinced them they ought to put their shoulders to the machine. It slewed around, slowly, ponderously.

“Okay.” Brad grunted. “That’s the way I want it. Now let me at it.”

They seemed very glad to move back and stand watching him. They were brave men. They would have faced unflinchingly any peril they understood but this was something they did not understand.

Brad had forgotten them. He was aware only of the lever on which his right hand closed, of the window he faced and the black wall, fifty yards outside the window, behind which twenty million human beings were imprisoned. This machine, this untried theory of his was their last chance, the last chance of sixty million more, to escape the living death they faced.

If his theory was wrong, if his machine failed, they were irrevocably doomed.

The lever moved under his hand. A shaft, not of light but of the absence of light leaped through the window to that lightless curtain.

And nothing happened—nothing except that the lever was too hot to hold. Brad snatched his hand from it but he didn’t know it was burned. The machine glowed dully red, then brilliant orange. Now it was an eye-searing, transparent white and the heat drove Brad back, step by step, from this machine of his that had failed.

It blurred, was melting— Out there, where lightless shaft met lightless wall, there was a soundless, brilliant coruscation of sparks.

And suddenly there was no curtain, no blank void. There was, instead, the vista at which Brad Lilling had gazed so often, a landscaped expanse, gardens, then buildings pallid in starglow and more and more buildings piling even higher into the stardusted sky. And, suddenly, light— The soaring arabesques of varicolored light that is New York at night.

Hands pulled Brad Lilling back from something that had been a machine and now was a shapeless mass of molten metal spreading across the floor. That didn’t matter. He could build more machines like this, one for each city that was no longer doomed.

Somewhere there was cheering, a vast, prayerful chorus but Brad was aware only of a shining flowerlike face, of eyes that were twin, shining stars, of the warm and pulsant form crushed to his.

And of the velvet lips that his lips sought thirstily.

[The end of *The Faceless Men* by Arthur Leo Zagat]