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**TOMORROW AND
TOMORROW**

BY LEWIS PADGETT



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TOMORROW AND TOMORROW

By

Henry Kuttner

Writing under the pseudonym Lewis Padgett.

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With the best of good intentions, someone was trying—and trying hard!—to start an atomic war that would blow their civilization off the map!

I.

He knew it was a dream when he shot Carolyn through the head. But not until then. The imperceptible shifting from reality to the familiar nightmare had come, as always, so stealthily that the shock of surprise almost woke him. Then there came the thought: *I must tell the Controllers.*

And after that: *But in three weeks there'll be the quarterly psych check, and they'll find out anyhow.*

Standing, he looked down at the motionless gray head aureoled in spreading red, and listened, and made a bargain with himself. *If I can't get rid of this recurrent dream, this warp, this compulsion before the psych check, I'll be fired automatically. There can't be any danger from a dream. It's merely a fear-dream; it can't be wish-fulfillment.*

The thought chilled him horribly.

He dreaded the next moment, when the pattern of weeks would repeat itself, and he would straighten up above the narrow table, with its intricate controls and warning signal lights, and turn toward the door that led to the unthinkable.

But he turned.

Tomorrow I'll report to the psych board.

It won't mean being fired, really. Not washed up. I'll simply be reconditioned and tested. But I can never hold this post again!

The ancient, powerful conditioning of his early environment stirred in savage rebellion. *I can't give it up! The highest honor in the world—*

He walked down the passage. He made the secret signals that permitted his safe ingress. But he knew it was impossible; there were protective devices that even he did not know how to deactivate. In real life, he could never have penetrated this far toward—toward it.

The dream blurred. There was a confusion of nightmare.

That coalesced suddenly. He found himself in the brain and the heart. He stood before It.

And as always he felt that what he had to do was impossible. He had been chosen and trained for his post simply because his psychological background was entirely trustworthy, a more important factor than his technical training. Yet the perverse devil hung on his shoulder, laughing.

Of course, if I were awake, I would never do it. But in a dream—

Do it. It's the release I need, said the devil at his shoulder. The release you need. That we need. You're under terrific tension, and you're neurotic and worried for fear this very thing will happen. So get your release. A dream is harmless.

Somehow in the dream it was ridiculously easy to do. You merely had to detach the boron dampers and pull them out. But what had happened to their locks?

He watched the gauges on the walls. Geiger counters began to chatter insanely. Needles rose in jumpy, warning spasms as the dampers were withdrawn. The critical mass had nearly been reached.

But it's only a dream, of course, he thought, as he woke amid the inconceivable fractional-second beginning of the atomic blast.

II.

Joseph Breden made himself sit motionless. He opened his eyes slowly, saw the tri-di chessboards in front of him, red and black, and let his lids drop against the light. But the light was not dazzling. A chain of reactions leaped through his mind; he drew a long breath of relief. He could not have been asleep longer than a few seconds, or his pupils would have contracted against light that would have seemed blinding to him.

There was no reason to feel surprise. It always happened this way. But there was always the sense that he had been asleep for a long, long time, and that Carolyn Kohl would have noticed. She would have had to report him then. Though that would scarcely have been necessary, with the built-in visio-recorders always focused on the guardians who sat in this room, and in two others elsewhere in the enormous sunken ziggurat.

He tapped one finger a little on the table, to show Carolyn he was awake. The recorders would catch that, too, on their wire tape. A small panic touched him. He stared at the chessboards, pawn, knight, bishop, king; to save his life he could not remember the gambit, and whose move it was. He had a feeling that this exact situation had occurred before. He remembered—

His mind leaped on ahead, taking fire with its own irrational hysteria. He had to make the right move. It was vital. If he didn't Carolyn would notice and suspect, or the recorders would, and he would be investigated and psych-checked and lose his post; there would be disgrace—

Stop it, he told himself frantically. Move any place. No, don't do that. Carolyn knows your game. The records note any deviation from the norm. But do something!

His brain was empty. All he could feel was that flailing panic, and all he could sense was the silent terror far under his feet, the uranium pile that hovered below the critical mass, the incubus he guarded.

Something shifted, a soft rustle of motion, across the table, and the terror drained swiftly out of Breden. He knew, now, what it was he had feared.

He raised his eyes and looked at Carolyn Kohl. There was no cinder-edged hole marring her smooth forehead under the gray hair. A bulky, heavy-faced woman of sixty-eight, she lay back comfortably in her chair, sharp black eyes watching Breden through her contact lenses, her rather thick lips parted to show strikingly even white dentures. Though nearly seventy, she was still a top-flight nuclear physicist, and until lately had been better than Breden. But now she was slowing down a little, and Breden silently blessed that factor; if she had been sharper, she might have suspected something.

She was sharp, though. And Breden knew he could not go on with the game. He had to find an out. That wouldn't be easy. There must be no deviations from his habit-patterns for the recorders to pounce on. The cool, soft light of the room was smothering.

The tension was growing again within him.

He thought of Margaret. But his wife's familiar features blended, somehow, with the dark, placid, confident face of his brother Louis. And instantly all stability left him. It had always been that way, since he was old enough to understand that Louis was different, though not until years after that did he fully comprehend why his brother was a member of the strangest club that had ever existed on earth.

A club of the cursed and the blessed. The damned and the saved. And membership was strictly limited; it was so highly exclusive that you had to be born into it. You had to have been born within the effective limits of a chain reaction—not so close to the monstrous center that you disintegrated or were charred or died more slowly, with your flesh flaking off and your bones rotting, and not so far distant that your parents' genes and chromosomes were unaltered. You had to have been in exactly the right place at the right time. It had only happened a few times since 1945, in Japan and New Mexico, and, some years later, in other localities, but the atomic explosions had salted humanity with a few very special specimens. Not supermen, although rumors were still highly popular about mysterious, omnipotent figures who stayed godlike in the background and moved humans like puppets. That was standard stuff in the television shows. The truth was less flamboyant, as usual. The mutants were a mixed breed. Some survived, but neither the best nor the worst. They were, however, better than humans in a number of ways. Not that they weren't human themselves; it was semantically wrong to consider them alien. They were merely humans extended, just as Louis had been. As Louis *was*.

The old hatred and love and shame and fear flooded back, and Breden began to hear a totally imaginary throbbing from beneath his feet, the heartbeat of the uranium pile that was, in reality, simply a machine, waiting, latent and still, for its use to come. It was a symbol, nothing more. Its use *had* come. But that use would fail entirely if it ever reached critical mass.

It throbbed!

Its gigantic pulse crushed rhythmically into Breden's brain!

For the first time in years he acted on impulse. He reached out at random and moved a knight on the nearest board. And, as he did so, he realized that he had made a serious mistake.

But nothing happened. Only the eyes of the recorders, watching from the walls, irretrievably photographed the blunder that did not jibe with Joseph Breden's mental and habit patterns. It would never be ignored. Breden thought: *I must think of an alibi. There'll be questioning—*

Carolyn said lazily, "What the devil's the matter with you, Joe? Got a fixation or something?"

Breden said, "I guess you've licked me so often I've developed a chessboard death-wish."

"Well, you're certainly asking to be murdered," she said, grimacing at the board. "No use playing this through. I'd have you in three moves. Want some coffee?"

Breden nodded. He lay back, weak with relief, exhausted from the long-maintained tension, but still knowing that he had to be wary. There was still a chance of retrieving his blunder. Carolyn, no psychologist, didn't comprehend the significance of that inexcusable knight's move, but the Controllers' psychologists would know, or at least wonder and investigate. Not even the slightest shadow of a doubt must fall upon the guardians of the sunken ziggurat.

He studied Carolyn as she ordered coffee. Nearly seventy. A new thought came, and he was briefly shocked at himself. If he could throw suspicion on her, somehow, lay the blame for the lapse on her shoulders— She was approaching the age when she would be no longer a perfectly functioning machine. She was, even now, the oldest of the technical crew. If he could make the responsibility hers, broach, somehow, a hint that the beginnings of senility were weakening her keenness—

He phrased a reply to a hypothetical question: *I've been letting her win at chess. I felt sorry for her, a little. She used to be able to lick me easily, but not any more.*

It would have to be subtler than that to convince the questioners. Yet the germ of the idea remained. Breden tried to put it away. He thought of his mutant brother again, and, as always, became conscious of his own weaknesses; but that brought its own cure. If he lost his job now, it would prove that Louis was the better man.

The thermobulbs of coffee popped into the analyzer, hesitated a moment while gadgets ascertained that no dynamite, uranium isotopes, or cyanide was being smuggled in, and then slid smoothly to the table. Breden turned his around till he found the right place and pushed in the sugar-cream lid. He watched it dissolve. Carolyn said something.

"Eh?"

"Margaret. Your wife. You remember. You married her, or has that slipped your mind? It's no use trying to work out the right gambit now; the game's over."

Not the real game, Carrie.

He said, "Oh, I'm sorry. She's up in the Rockies, near Denver. Thought the change of air might be good for her."

"It's her first baby, isn't it?"

Breden nodded. Carolyn sipped coffee and watched him over the rim.

"Cheer up," she said abruptly. "I know what's bothering you. But you've got the Mendelian law on your side."

Another out?

Breden said, "I guess I'm a little worried, Carrie. My brother is a mutant."

"But your parents weren't," Carolyn said. "Go see a good geneticist. Of course nothing new has been discovered for a hundred years; we can't afford research in these times. But we certainly know enough about genes. How' old is Louis, anyway?"

"Fifty-two. He's twenty-two years older than I."

"Well, good gracious," Carolyn said, looking slightly like an indignant, though more sophisticated, Queen Victoria. "Even though your parents *were* exposed to the hard radiations—where was it?"

"The Hawaiian experiment in ninety-two."

"Well! The gene-pattern trends back toward the norm. And in twenty-two years—! You can feel sure your parents were normal by the time you were conceived. There's no question about Margaret's heredity, is there?"

"Mutation? No. No exposure. Her grandfather worked with X rays, but that was all."

"X rays," said Carolyn, with the scorn of one who worked with mesatrons and went on from there. "Your child won't be a mutant. He can't be."

"Unless I disprove that empirically," Breden said. "You're talking theory. There's been no independent research along those lines—along *any* lines—for a hundred years"—conscious suddenly of the watching recorders, he added—"which is a very lucky thing. *It could* happen that my parents were accidentally exposed again before I was born; they'd have been prone to the effect, after the first exposure."

"You're no mutant."

"Might be latent in me. Recessive."

"It's impossible," Carolyn said decisively. "And, at worse, you'd have a mutant child like Louis. He's quite a big shot, isn't he?"

“He is. His I. Q. is remarkable. He’s also got alcaptonuria. His blood hasn’t got the enzyme that takes care of alcapton through oxidation. He has one defective gene. When you do get a mutant, it upsets the apple cart, and while certain genes may be wonders for the I. Q. and so forth, there’s always the danger of a corresponding quirk somewhere. That’s why so few of the mutants lived. They were mostly freaks.”

“Louis gets along, doesn’t he?”

“Alcaptonuria isn’t serious. But suppose I have a child with phenylketonuria?”

“It sounds pretty bad,” Carolyn admitted. “Is it?”

“No, it just means that a certain acid in the blood isn’t changed—unfortunately, phenylketonurics are always imbeciles or idiots, too. The central nervous system is affected. They’re always mentally defective, Carrie.”

“I hope you haven’t told Margaret these cheerful little ideas of yours,” the woman said. “Even I know you’re all wrong.”

“It’s an occupational disease of potential parents. Ever since the first mutants were born, people started to worry if they were expecting a child. Oh, well. I guess you’re right. When the kid’s born, I’ll take a look at his medical charts and be able to relax.”

“Aren’t there any prenatal charts?”

“Sure. But . . . ah, forget it.”

Carolyn studied him. “Why don’t you go and see Margaret?” she suggested. “She might be having similar ideas. Cheer her up.”

“She’s cheerful. A little peaked physically, but the Colorado air ought to help that. I *am* going to see her; tomorrow’s my last night here for a week.”

“You don’t have to tell me. I’m spending my time off in the Berkshires, with my grandchildren.” Carolyn sighed luxuriously. “I’m not going to do a thing but work my fool head off. I’m going to bake bread and make rhubarb pies. I’m going to dust and sweep and paint the furniture. I’m going to dig in the garden.”

“Good therapy,” Breden said, and Carolyn snorted.

“Joe, sometimes you irritate me. It’s *fun*! I wouldn’t like it as a steady diet, but I grew up in a midwest farmhouse, and I loved it. Ever eat fresh-baked bread?”

“No. Why bother? You can’t get refrigomeals—”

“Sure. A frozen Creole dinner is really something. Or a frozen Mandarin special. We never had those on the farm, and I couldn’t do without ’em now. But no quick-freezer can give you fresh-baked bread, either; it can’t give you the smell of it, which is half the pleasure. I came across no wine more wonderful than thirst,” Carolyn quoted.

Two men came into view on a visor screen—the relief crew. They said hello, while they stood in the entrance chamber and were thoroughly checked before admittance. Fingerprints, the rod-and-cone patterns of their eyes, respiration, pulse; traces of radioactivity on their clothes—a highly unlikely contingency, since nobody went near the forbidden sites of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Hilo, the New Mexican danger area, or the few other scattered radiation radii. Dust samples were analyzed; the brain’s energy-pattern was recorded and checked; finally Sam Carse and Wilbur Fielding were discovered to be Sam Carse and Wilbur Fielding, and were admitted to the sanctum.

“Well, take over,” Carolyn said, getting up a little stiffly. “I guess Baby won’t explode tonight.”

And suddenly they were all quiet, listening, while four pairs of eyes moved with experienced swiftness across the faces of dial and gauge. But only Breden felt that dreadful,

impossible pulse come up from below and vibrate through his body and shock against his brain.

Uranium Pile One.

If Archimedes had had this lever, he could have moved the world.

A voice from the wall said, "Breden, report to M. A. before you check out."

No one commented; the reactions of Medical Administration were erratic and unpredictable. But Breden thought: *I must get help! Somewhere—somehow—*

First, though—there would be the matter of tricking Medical Administration.

III.

The only thing that could save Breden from having the veils ripped from his mind was the common phobia of all technicians, that he himself shared. Research men *could* think along experimental lines; they could scarcely help doing so or they wouldn't have become researchers in the first place. But they didn't do it in public. Implanted in their conscious was the idea of wrong-doing whenever they touched on independent research. It was *contra bonos mores*. *Status quo* was the ideal. A man who discovered how to draw free energy out of the air would have been suppressed, like the guinea pigs in "Alice," had he been rash enough to announce his success. Guinea pigs, in fact, were not the popular little research controls they had once been.

It was likely, though, that a man discovering how to utilize free aerial energy would have forgotten his method as soon as he could. Unless strongly antisocial, he would have, instead, concentrated on perfecting some method to make independent research impossible. For *status quo* was the safety and the ideal and, by propagandized psychic implantation, the norm.

Civilization and technology had, in the middle of the twentieth century, approached the critical mass. Only the creation of the unified world government, with its practically unlimited powers, could have kept the global pile from beginning a fatal chain reaction. That was axiomatic.

So the technicians depended on safe axioms.

The patient is uneasy, apprehensive, insecure and fearful.

Dr. Hoag was a smiling little fat man. He said that they were getting a detailed report from Margaret's clinical observers, with special reference to biology and genetics. "So that should relieve your mind about the danger of having a mutant baby," he told Breden.

Three other psychiatrists regarded Breden thoughtfully. Breden said he knew it was illogical, but he couldn't help worrying a little. He hoped it didn't show in his work.

"You're too good a man to lose," Dr. Hoag said, glancing at a stack of cards and tapes on the desk before him. "Of course we can't take chances—you know that. But this doesn't look serious. You made a wrong move at chess. All we want to do is find out why."

"Couldn't it be an accident?"

"Nothing is an accident," said one of the psychiatrists very wisely.

"Mm-m-m," Dr. Hoag grunted. "This Wechsler test you just took, Breden—it's not conclusive, but it's indicative. So are these doodles of yours, and the association check-up. I know it's natural for you to be worried about the uranium pile, but you've always compensated nicely till now."

Breden waited. He had rigged the tests as much as he had dared. But he didn't know whether or not he had managed to outguess the psychiatrists. This wasn't the exhaustive check-up the Controllers supervised, or the arduous psych tests, with their mechanical detectors and their thoroughly efficient exhaustiveness. This was simply routine. At any rate, the psychiatrists thought so. They weren't expecting real trouble. But if he'd given himself away in the tests, if they found out about his recurrent dream—!

Hoag said, "We're agreed on the main point, though. I want you to listen to this closely. You play chess with Carolyn Kohl. You don't want her to lose."

Breden frowned. "I don't quite agree with that. It's natural to want to win, isn't it?"

"Normally. But in the past Carolyn Kohl has showed herself a far better chess player than you. Lately, these tests of yours show, you've found her easier to beat But you haven't won many games. Now why is that?"

"I don't know," Breden said politely.

"Because you haven't let yourself win. You'd rather make an obviously fatal move for one of your own men than prove to yourself something you've been trying to ignore. The fact that Carolyn Kohl has become inefficient. She is sixty-eight years old. She is slowing down. The earliest beginnings of senility are beginning to affect her brain. And she holds one of the most responsible positions in the world. She guards the uranium pile."

Breden said, "But . . . Carolyn—"

"Am I right?"

Breden didn't answer.

Dr. Hoag said, "You know what depends on the safety of keeping this unit below CM. And critical mass is something you can't play with. The physicists who are selected for this duty are very carefully chosen. And once a month they're given a psych check. The efficiency of the organization *must* be perfect. If it isn't, if the human factor fails at one point, there's the danger of an atomic blast. And that can mean the end of civilization."

It would. That, too, was axiomatic. That had been dinned in the ears of the world for a hundred years. Safety lay in only one thing; keeping the uranium piles and civilization below the critical mass.

"All right," Hoag said, leaning back. "Naturally you're afraid. You don't dare let yourself realize that the human factor, represented by Carolyn Kohl, is failing. So you try to assure yourself that she's *not* failing. The symbol is chess. As long as she can beat you at chess, you can feel safe in assuming that she's not weakening. That explains your deviation from the norm. So. Now look at these."

He pushed a card and a tape toward Breden, who took them and looked inquiringly at the psychiatrist.

Hoag said, "Latest report on Carolyn Kohl. I've had some of it put into language you can understand. It should reassure you. She's still at par. Your phobia is imaginary. It can be eliminated. There is no trace of approaching senility in her mind or body."

One of the medics said, "Dr. Hoag—"

"Just a moment, please. Breden, please study those reports. We'll be back soon."

Hoag rose and went out with the others.

It had worked, then. There would be another routine test tomorrow night, when he came back on duty, but he was safe for the nonce. And, after all, Carrie hadn't suffered. His momentary twinge of guilt died; he hadn't hurt her by passing the buck. And he had saved himself.

Nevertheless conscience stirred. As far as he knew, there had been no question till now of Carolyn Kohl's capabilities. He had implanted the first doubt. Nothing would come of it as yet, but the psychiatrists, he felt certain, would from now on watch her tests with a more stringent eye. But that wasn't his affair! Anybody who became really incapable shouldn't be on the staff here.

His heart lightened almost tangibly as the elevator rose through the enormous ziggurat.

The ziggurat. The coping stone. The keystone of the arch. Uranium Pile One. The one thing that now, quite strangely, after a hundred years, the security of the world depended on—more than merely a symbol, it was the Power itself.

A protective thought came: *is it more than a symbol, after all?*

A hundred years ago, fifty years ago, even, the human factor was more important. Now there were the machines. He and Carolyn Kohl and the other nuclear physicists—weren't they purely ornamental, by this time? For if the terror ever reached CM, what could the human factor do that the protective machines could not do better?

Was the human guard merely a guard of honor—an anachronistic symbol? Or worse—now? What had once been a strength might have become a weakness. The machines were enough. They could never turn traitor.

But he could.

His orders were checked; he was cleared; and in the pearly gray dawn the helicopter rose aslant along the air channels. Unseen radar watched him. He instinctively reached for the controls, but any deviation from the robot-charted course would be dangerous. He forced himself to relax, fumbling out a cigarette, type-sedative, and sucking it alight. He looked down, watching the patterns on the sea.

Too much time! He snapped open the small bookshelf and tried to find something there. Technical books, a few novels, a western—left by Carrie, of course, he realized—and a stack of wire-tape book reels. He did not even glance at the titles of these. He sank back again, closing his eyes and inhaling deeply on the half-narcotic smoke.

He tried to make plans.

There was no use worrying about this delay; no jet planes were allowed in the vicinity of the island that based Uranium Pile One. It was forbidden area, clearly marked as such on the aerial maps. Radar interceptors would have done their best to open the batteries at any unexpected intruder. It wasn't infallible; in a barrage of rockets, some would have got through, but where on earth could be based such weapons? GPC—Global Peace Commission—made certain that there could be no base that might threaten security.

In 1950 that would have been impossible. In the ancient rivalry between ballistics and armor the balance has gone back and forth as new weights have been placed in the scales. Build a better mousetrap, and eugenics will breed a better mouse—more adaptive, perhaps.

But if the geneticists are on the other side—

The experiments of UNO had culminated, after the abortive start of World War III, in GPC. Not at once. That had taken time, after the riots, the mutinies, the intrigues and the detonations had died down. There was chaos for a while. From 1946 on, the nations had been, naturally, afraid of one another. Power politics hadn't halted when Japan and Germany capitulated. Social postwar problems worried a neurotic, convalescent world. Unemployment, strikes, famine, the old labor vs. capital rivalry, economic fights between countries, blocs, and areas—the merry-go-round was still whirling.

Then the merry-go-round broke down.

International espionage was a highly developed art, squared by the new achievements of the technicians. The race for atomic power went on underground. True, the atom blast had been developed, but there must be easier ways—deadlier ways. *There were!*

One nation began it. But before the bombardment had really started, six other nations were unloosing their atomic power. Some of them couldn't help it. The atomic bombs secretly

planted in their vital areas and key centers had been detonated by other bombs they themselves were sending up.

It was an abortive war, because no one had really counted the cost. The politicians, demagogues, and war makers had simply not comprehended what atomic power meant. To them, it had been just another weapon.

That was when GPC took—or was given—power.

It had been stronger than the League of Nations and stronger than UNO. But not strong enough. That was proved; it could not cope with an aggressor country. However, paradoxically, it could cope with a dozen aggressors, and it could do that efficiently.

For the merry-go-round had broken down. The world was partly paralyzed. Nearly every key area was crippled. But GPC remained mobile, and it was, being international, decentralized. It was a loosely integrated unit physically, but a very tight one in all other respects.

Civil war helped, too. Take a typical nation—any one. It used its atomic bombs in an attack on its neighbor, and the secretly planted blasts within its own geographic body had detonated. The centers were smashed. They could be repaired, but not instantly, and meanwhile its neighbors threatened. A general seized power; he was defied by a politician; both of them were killed by a demagogue. Meanwhile there were riots. In the military, there was mutiny.

And all of this—it took no time at all. This was an era of fast communication and transportation.

Only GPC remained functioning, and only GPC, with its specialized membership, had the knowledge and training for the necessary instantaneous social integration. The demagogue, seeing rivals rising, declared his country under the temporary jurisdiction of GPC. He did that to save his own hide, but that did not prevent him from being shot later. In the meantime, two other nations had fled to GPC. That gave the organization aircraft and the beginnings of a military.

It proclaimed an enforced peace. The balance shivered. Then it moved. It moved in the right direction.

For the war makers had found out, now, the true meaning of atomic power, and that global murder had been psychically contagious. The riots raging across the world had perhaps never been equalled in ferocious violence. When a man is in an ammunition dump that is on fire, he will have less hesitancy in firing a gun. The aim didn't matter. The administrators the people had depended on to save them had betrayed them, instead, and in blind fury the mobs turned on the nearest symbols that they could destroy. They had atomic power, so it was not safe to rule.

It was not safe—except for GPC. GPC was the champion. It was the only tool that could steer the world away from the vicinity of the proximity fuse.

Most nations gave up their power willingly, although only temporarily. The others were whipped into line. Or else smashed. No nation could stand against a world organization that had a policy and power to enforce it. There were no party politics in GPC.

A policy and power. But such power had never been known or used before. It was, in the true sense of the word—*unlimited!*

After World War III, in sheer, blind panic and a fury for self-preservation, the globe stripped itself of weapons and armor. It gave GPC its military secrets, and if any were

reserved, GPC took them too, and that made it possible for the organization to reach out and secure the hundred-year stranglehold that had maintained peace.

It was the only possible way.

But there was the inevitable danger that such a peace could not last.

GPC took stock, weighed the chances, and made its decision. It eliminated that peril. As long as the *status quo* held, there would be no war and atomic power could be controlled safely.

The scale had tipped in the right direction.

GPC reached out and gripped the scale. It held it motionless.

For a hundred years the grip had not relaxed.

IV.

Naturally there were changes. This wasn't the New York of 1947. But, on the other hand, it wasn't the lovely, strange metropolis it might have been with utilization of paragravity, antigravity, and contraterrene material. The new alloys made city engineering a pleasure, and the Old Districts had been razed decades ago—the areas that had escaped atomic-blasting, that is—but a few familiar things still lingered. Nobody called Way Six anything but Broadway; place-names are harder to change than topography.

The copter had taken Breden to the Pacific sea base, and from there a jet plane raced him across ocean and land to the eastern coast. He hadn't lost much time by going from west to east; the jet plane had been nearly fast enough to equalize the time lag. Still, it was morning in New York, early morning, and he wasn't sure whether or not Louis would be in his office yet.

He was.

The dark, impassive face showed on the televisor. Louis said, "Hiya, Joe. Off duty already?"

"Yes. Till tonight. What about breakfast?"

"I've had it hours ago," Louis said. "I'll take a sandwich and coffee, though; I'm about ready for that. Hard work today! Let's see—where are you?" He looked up, reading the map light on the screen of his own visor. "O.K., at the Murray Hill. That suit you?"

"Why not," Breden said, and broke the connection. The thought of breakfast made his stomach feel queasy. He lit another sedative-cigarette and went into the nearest pneumo-tube terminal, trying to blank out his mind by studying the advertising placards.

At the Murray Hill it was difficult to open the subject. Besides, Breden didn't know how much he wanted to say. He talked idly, playing with his food, while Louis cheerfully gossiped and went into detail about his work. He was a bacteriologist; many mutants had gone into medicine of one kind or another.

"It's an atypical virus," Louis said, drawing a picture on the table top. "That doesn't mean a thing, of course. Still, it definitely puts it on the wrong side of the ledger. No research allowed. It's a pity, I suppose, but unless it develops into an epidemic, one can have only abstract interest in it. And if there should be an epidemic, the ban would be lifted, and we'd be assigned to research so we could give the little devil a label."

Breden looked at his brother. Not his brother, really, he thought. They'd had the same parents, but the same blood didn't run in their veins. How can you be kin to a mutant? And, as usual, Louis was the same casual, imperturbable success. You'd think he'd be a little self-conscious about being a freak!

Breden checked himself with a small start. What was going wrong between himself and Louis? This . . . feeling . . . was something new. He'd never disliked Louis before. He didn't really dislike him now. It was only that his brother made him feel gauche, embarrassed, self-conscious. But why? He was certainly as much of a success in his own field as Louis was in bacteriology.

Yes—but he'd had to work a lot harder at it! It was as though they'd both been born typists, and Louis' mutation had included a pair of extra hands. There was a hint of unfairness in it. Men were supposed to be created equal. Though, of course, they never were. The blind, precise rearrangement of genes took care of that thoroughly.

Suddenly he ached to surpass his brother in something—anything!

Louis' dark, friendly stare studied Breden. "What's on your mind?" he demanded. "I just told you there was a bubonic plague germ crawling up your arm and you nodded and said 'Sure, sure.' Is there trouble?"

Breden said, "Trouble? No. Why should there be?"

"I don't know. I don't even know why you came to see me, instead of stopping off in Colorado. After all, Margaret's there, not here. There's nothing wrong between you two, is there?"

There could never be that, Breden thought. He managed a smile.

"Relax," he said. "I'm just anxious for my week off, that's all. Overwork. It could happen to anybody."

"Yeah," Louis said, unconvinced. "I suppose those doctors out there—they know their stuff?"

"I'm healthy."

"Well, I'm no medico. But medicine's just a little too conservative these days. I know it has to be. But I always thought more of old Springfield than anybody else. He was a witch-doctor in a lot of ways. Just the same, a man like that—" Louis hesitated. "Efficiency is a wonderful thing. But the human organism isn't efficient. A slightly unorthodox GP with psychiatric leanings might be a good guy to balance your aseptic robot medics at your base."

Breden said stubbornly, "There's nothing wrong with me, Louis. The minute you see a man, you start looking for bacilli and taking his blood count."

"Not me. I'm a bacteriologist. People are just cultures to me. That babe over there." He indicated a handsome wench at a nearby table. "A hyperthyroid type. I can't help thinking what a wonderful broth she'd make for some nice germs. That's my first instinct. Luckily I have secondary reactions." He eyed the girl speculatively, but she ignored him. Louis sighed and turned back to his brother.

"Some nonpolitical group tried to get me to join 'em this morning," he said. "The Neoculturalists. Ever heard of 'em?"

Breden shook his head. "Should I know what they are?"

"Not necessarily. There've been a lot of these blocs lately, though. People always want to scratch. When they haven't got an itch, they imagine it. But there's no cure, I guess. There isn't any cure for shingles, though there could be. Itches in the body politic. Maybe it's some social virus. Do you suppose there could be any trouble, Joe?"

Breden, startled, said, "Of course not! Who'd make trouble?"

"People who itch," Louis said. "Not that they could do much. The minute a bloc gets too big, GPC steps in. But I can't help wondering—I'm no physicist. And I'm not asking questions; I know your work is top secret. I'm just idly asking if you've heard anything."

"Such as?"

"That's what I don't know. Call it trouble. I suppose you'd know if there were any extra precautions being taken?"

"I'd know, of course," Breden said. "I think you're the one who had better relax now. Nobody's going to drop an atomic bomb on our base."

Louis looked startled. "Lord, I hadn't considered . . . I merely thought there was a little more unrest than usual. More organizations and blocs. These boys were sounding me out about interplanetary travel."

“That’s illegal.”

“It isn’t illegal to talk about it. But I admit it’s unusual.”

Breden said, “Interplanetary travel was banned eighty-five years ago, wasn’t it?”

“Eighty-five years,” Louis agreed, and his hand came up swiftly and touched the patch of gray at one temple. He seemed unconscious of the gesture. “We reached the Moon, and Mars —”

“And Venus,” Breden said. “But only Venus was inhabited—and by an amphibious race. They didn’t have atomic power or even jet propulsion. So it’s safe to leave Venus alone. And of course it’s safest to stay right here on earth. GPC can check bases here.”

“I know the angle. Somebody might establish a base on the Moon and drop bombs. The difficulties are—”

“Are not insurmountable,” Breden explained. “The time-lag might make all the difference; before we could locate the interplanetary base and destroy it, our centers could be smashed. And a few spaceships, being mobile, could drop bombs on Earth and skip around so fast we could never locate them.”

“O.K., so these Neoculturalists thought we should have a few GPC controlled industries and ports on the Moon. They stressed the angle of GPC control.”

“Lunatic fringe,” Breden said.

“They’re not the only ones. There are plenty of groups these days.”

“But you can’t allow interplanetary travel—”

“Oh, don’t try to convince me,” Louis said. “We’re vulnerable now that we’re centralized under GPC. If you live in big cities, you’ve got to make thoroughly certain that nobody can make bombs or drop them or have any bases. I believe it.”

Competent, casual, perfectly satisfied, he sat there across the table, and Breden was weakened by a quick surge of emotion that caught him unawares. And he could not quite analyze it. It boomeranged back, that wave of—anger?—and left him weak and at a loss.

“I’ve got to catch a plane,” he said abruptly.

Louis stood up. “All right, kid,” he agreed. “Give my love to Margaret. And—give me a call any time you want, will you?”

“Sure,” Breden said. He left Louis at the door. After he had gone a few steps, he stopped, turned, and watched the mutant mingle with the crowds on the sliding ways.

What next? He tried to make plans. But his thoughts jumped ahead to the time when he was due back at the Pacific island. Then he knew what troubled him most immediately. He was afraid of night. He was afraid of the recurrent dream that night would bring.

Maturity brought its own problems. He sat in the televisor booth and watched directory pages sliding across the screen. As a child, there had been no responsibility. He wouldn’t want those days back, of course; maturity has its compensations, and security had to be earned. But that hard-won safety was slipping from beneath him. And there was no anchor, no dependable refuge, no one to whom he could delegate his problem. For the fault must lie in himself, and it was perhaps a very serious one. He could not go to the proper medical authorities and lay his vague story before them. They would sympathize and do their best to cure him, but they would also remove him from his post. They would have to do that.

What about Mike de Anza?

Mike had been close to him since their university days; Mike, too, had become a nuclear physicist. They still saw each other often. And Mike would be highly curative. He was a

chubby, blond, wide-eyed man with an unquenchable enthusiasm for practically everything, and a deep sympathy for any of his friends who might need help. Mike de Anza might be able to suggest something. It would be safe to talk to him, anyway. And that was a vital factor.

Relieved, Breden placed the call. But de Anza was out, and no one knew when he would be back.

Then—Margaret?

No. He couldn't dump his trouble in her lap at this time. Louis was not the one; he had tried that already. Carrie Kohl—*no!* Who, then?

Nobody. Nobody he knew.

Well, what about somebody he didn't know? What about Springfield? It had been twelve years since he had seen the old physician. And Springfield *was* unorthodox, so much so that he wasn't held in high esteem by the medical authorities of GPC.

The pressure was unendurable. He had to talk to someone. Make it Springfield, then.

He made it Springfield.

Dr. Sam Springfield lived in the suburbs. He was seventy-three, a gaunt, white-haired man with wrinkled, drooping eyelids and liver-spotted hands. The neighborhood was as shabby as was permissible. There was only one nurse, who also served as receptionist, a tired-looking woman with unlikely auburn hair.

She announced Breden and went out. Breden shook hands with the old physician, sat down in a comfortable plastic chair, and presently was smoking. Springfield looked at him.

"Sedative cigarette," he said. "Why, Joe?"

"That's what I want to talk to you about. But it's got to be highly confidential. First I want your promise that you won't pass this on to anyone. I mean *anyone*."

Springfield blinked. "What have you been up to? Murder or treason? Let me try your pulse."

"Not just yet, please. There's time enough for that later. I mean this, Doc; I hold a responsible position, and if I'm not in perfect health, I'll be fired."

Springfield said, "I know what position you hold. I see Louis occasionally. But he never told me you were ill."

"I . . . I'm not, physically. The medics at the base would have caught anything like that."

"Mental?" Springfield said.

"You've done a lot of psychiatric work, haven't you?"

"Not so much lately. I'm getting old, Joe. I'm satisfied just to sit back. Anyhow, research is forbidden, except along conventional lines."

"Not *forbidden*," Breden said.

"That's what it amounts to, though, doesn't it? Ah, well. People are getting conditioned against research anyway. Well, what's bothering you? Hear voices or something?" Springfield laughed and lit a black cigar.

Breden said, "My work is to guard Uranium Pile One. Well, I've been having recurrent dreams. In my dream I detonate the pile."

"Uh. You do, eh? Well, go on."

"That's all."

"How do you feel about it, I mean? In the dream? Happy or scared? Do you wake up feeling better or worse?"

"Worse. I'm scared. Naturally."

“But you detonate the pile anyhow.”

“It’s like a compulsion,” Breden said painfully. “I suppose it’s easy to explain. The medics at the base could do it and cure it. But then I’d be fired.”

“Funny word to use,” Springfield said. “People don’t get fired nowadays. We’ve got security. What would you do if they fired you?”

Breden hesitated. “I . . . don’t know. It would be the end, pretty much.”

“Yet you could be cured of this ailment, whatever it is, and go on into different work—along your own line, naturally.”

“I suppose I could.”

“But this is the only work you care about?”

“It’s the most important work in the world,” Breden said with violence.

“It is, eh? Why?”

“Well . . . it’s obvious. After all, a uranium pile—”

“Just what’s the nature of your work, if you can tell me.”

“I can tell you some of it.” Breden did. Springfield waved his cigar impatiently.

“You sit around and look at dials. But the machines—those robot gadgets you mentioned—they’d take care of any trouble, wouldn’t they?”

“To a certain extent. They aren’t intelligent. Some emergencies might arise that would necessitate trained human reactions.”

“Well, let’s make some tests,” Springfield said, standing up. “Take off your shirt. Now—”

Finally he returned to his desk and made marks on a pad. Breden, zipping his open-necked shirt into place, watched the doctor anxiously.

Springfield said, “How’s your wife, Joe?”

“Fine. We’re expecting a child, you know.”

“Yes, Louis told me. I had three of my own. Don’t see ’em much nowadays; they’re all married. However, a normal home’s very useful therapy; it’s a good environment. Why don’t you take a long furlough from your work and stay with Margaret for a bit?”

Breden said, “No. They’d ask questions—there is something wrong, then?”

“You could call it that. Joe, I’m going to ask you something.”

“Well?”

“How would you feel about going to your own medics at your base and telling them everything you told me?”

Breden stood up quickly. “No. It would mean—”

“It would symbolize failure to you; I know that. But I’ve found something extremely important. More important than either of us. I want you to listen to me now.”

Breden said furiously, “I came here for help? This is confidential; you promised me—”

Springfield put his hand up to his forehead. He said, “Joe, please listen. You’ve been under—”

The televisior buzzed.

Automatically Breden glanced toward it. There was—

—something different about the room. A noise. A faint noise he remembered. The televisior was silent and blank. But Springfield lay where he had fallen across his desk. It must have been the noise of his body thudding softly down. That was it. Yes, that was it.

“Doc!” Breden said urgently. He caught the man by the shoulders and lifted him back into his chair. There was no sign of breathing. Breden scarcely waited to check the heartbeat; he went hastily into the outer office to find the nurse.

The auburn-haired woman was gone; there was a smart-looking girl with sleek black hair and orchid lipstick. She looked up inquiringly. Breden said. “The doctor—I think he’s dying.”

Being a nurse, she knew what to do, and did it efficiently. She even enlisted Breden’s aid to help her inject adrenalin directly into Springfield’s heart muscle. But the doctor was thoroughly dead.

Breden said helplessly, “He was sitting there talking to me—”

“I believe it must have been his heart,” the nurse said, studying the body with a practiced air. “He had angina, you know. The emergency medics will be here in a moment. I’ve called them.”

Breden drew a long breath.

V.

The Freak said plaintively, “I don’t want to think yet. I can’t. The sutures are still open. Must I?”

Ortega said, “You must.”

“Then turn the lights off. My head hurts.”

Ortega dimmed the glow and the Freak opened two of his eyes. He whined a little. “My head—”

Very carefully Ortega adjusted the flow through the tank that kept the Freak’s head moist in its saline solution. The Freak said, “When can I get out of this thing, Rod?”

“Perhaps never. Not in my lifetime, unless—”

“It isn’t worth it. It isn’t worth it. Let me die.”

“You don’t mean that. You know what chance you have.”

“It costs too much. That thing is coming up again.”

“Your rational periods are much more frequent now the pressure’s off and you’re in the right condition. You’d have died in the sanatorium. I couldn’t have tried these new methods there. Once you’re back to complete sanity, things should speed up tremendously. But we can’t wait till then.”

“Oh, I don’t care. My head aches.”

“Even you can’t wait. You’ll be dead before this chance comes again, unless we take advantage of it now. We can’t get what we need here. Equipment, yes, but not the power. We can’t tap enough of it. It’d be noticed.”

The Freak said wearily, “Well, what now?”

Ortega’s gentle hands adjusted the temperature in the tank. “That better? Good. We had to move fast in New York this morning. We covered up, but handling Breden will be more delicate than we expected—and we knew it would be delicate. He’s beginning to talk.”

“Oh. And?”

“That’s taken care of. However, Breden’s on duty tonight again, and then off for a week. I want to know if we can make him move tonight.”

The Freak stared into the darkness, considering. “No, we can’t. It would be fatal. He isn’t ready. The conditioning is incomplete. We must work on his conscious as well as his unconscious, and that takes time. The shadows are—”

“Easy!”

“Yes. All right. It will be necessary to— Opening my head to give my brain more room was necessary but it lets the shadows in and they are hungry today.”

“Easy. Stop thinking. Stop thinking.”

But the Freak had opened his third eye and the darkness was no barrier. He whined, “They only want my type of brain. It’s your fault. You didn’t have to work with atomic radiation and they’re chewing in fast reaching the—STOP THEM. STOP—”

Ortega snapped on a dim light and very quickly made a hypodermic injection. The echoing screams stopped. Sweat stood on Ortega’s forehead under the smooth gray hair. His mouth was tight.

The monster lay still now.

After a while Ortega said, “Relax. Don’t think. All right now?”

The Freak said, “Yes . . . yes. All right now, Dad.”

“Just checking on the safety threshold,” De Anza said, sticking a blue-headed pin in the map and making a note on a chart. “Let me get this reading, Joe. Five minutes, huh?”

“I’ll wise Margaret. Where—”

De Anza jerked his thumb toward a corner cubicle. Breden threaded his way through the lab and sat down before the screen. He had some trouble getting the Denver connection; there was a storm in the Rockies; but presently relays clicked over and a Medusalike wig appeared. Margaret’s voice said, “Don’t . . . oh, Joe! What a time to call me! June, where’s a towel or something, quick!”

Breden said, “You look gorgeous.”

She was winding an improvised turban around her head. “Not when I’m getting a permanent I don’t. There. I look a *little* better. Where are you, Joe?”

“Manhattan.”

“Oh. Business, I suppose. Do I see you today, or do I have to wait till tomorrow?”

Breden said, “I don’t know. If I can wind everything up today, I’ll be completely free this time next week. I’m up at Mike’s place now.”

“Say hello for me. Everything fine?”

“Fine. What about you?”

“A little pregnancy never hurt anybody,” Margaret said. But Breden looked at her closely. She seemed tired. He felt an intolerable aching desire to be with her, to ask for a furlough and forget everything but Margaret. Only he knew that while he could get the furlough, he couldn’t get forgetfulness. One thing modern technology hadn’t perfected was bottled Lethe.

“Well, don’t change your plans. I’m not sure if I can make it.”

“I haven’t any plans. I’m just being lazy. Oh, all right, June. Joe, my hair is being toasted by induction or something and June says it’ll fall out unless she works on it right away. I’ll be back at the lodge in an hour. Call me then—if you can?”

He said, “All right. I’ll see you.” The screen blanked, but Breden sat staring at it for a while. Then, moistening his lips, he went back to De Anza, who was gloating over his map.

“How’s Margaret?”

“Fine. She said hello. Did you figure out your thresholds?”

“Yeah,” De Anza said, yawning. “It’s only routine. Some big shot found a building site on Hilo and I had to make sure the radioactivity wouldn’t make the guy fall apart. The area’s shrinking, but he can’t build that close yet. I’ll have to tell him to wait fifty years. He’ll love that.”

Breden sat on the edge of the table. “Have you heard anything about some people called Neoculturalists?”

“Not a word. Who are they?”

“They’re in favor of interplanetary travel being reopened.”

“Oh, that gang. I remember. I get ’em mixed up with Logicians Plus. *They* want government by machines, as far as I can figure out. If it isn’t one pressure group, it’s another, these days. They don’t do any harm. They merely blow off steam. It’s a healthy symptom. What’s your interest in the Neoculturalists?”

“Louis mentioned them this morning. I’m not especially interested. I don’t suppose these groups are significant?”

“Not a bit. They’re harmless. After all, GPC—!”

They considered the paternal autocracy of GPC. De Anza yawned again.

“Anything new?”

“Idle speculation,” Breden said. “I’ve plenty of time for that. Ever heard of unconscious mutation?”

“What’s that?”

“Well—a mutant who doesn’t know he’s a mutant.”

“Few of ’em did, till mental and physiological tests showed they were variants from the norm. Of course it was easy to spot the failures. But if a guy is born with an especially efficient stomach, how could you tell unless he got a bellyache and had a GI series? Hell, that’s why they started to enforce the ten-year physio-mental check-ups.”

“That’s what I mean. Have those check-ups kept pace with the times? If I could prove to GPC that there’s a real need for new types of checks to be developed, they’d permit research on it.”

“Research!” De Anza said.

“Well, it’s done occasionally.”

“Not independent research, Joe. GPC controlled is all.”

Breden said doggedly, “Call it a bee in my bonnet. But suppose you’ve got a mutation that’s successful, but recessive in the unconscious. A Jekyll and Hyde business. The mutation remains latent until there’s a need for it. Like a bee’s stinger. It’s extruded only when the bee gets mad.”

De Anza said, “What sort of mutation would this be, anyhow?”

“I don’t know. It’s wonderful protective camouflage, though, isn’t it? The mutation simply doesn’t exist most of the time. Maybe not even the mutant himself is conscious that he’s a mutant. Only his unconscious mind knows.”

“An eerie theory,” De Anza commented. “It evokes strange pictures. Got any proof? I thought not. Somehow I have a feeling you’d never be able to convince GPC there was need for research on the subject. What got you started on this? Louis?”

“Louis knows he’s a mutant.”

“But he’s no freak. He simply has an abnormally high IQ. He’s got more potentialities than most of us. His maturation period took a long time, but he caught up fast.”

“Louis is fifty-two.”

“That’s a pity. If he were twenty years younger—” De Anza shrugged.

“Well, he isn’t. You’re no help.” Breden reached for a narco-cigarette, thought better of it, and moved his shoulders uneasily. Suddenly he felt that he was wasting time. He and De Anza had little in common any more—though, up to a few weeks ago, Breden had not felt that way. An intangible wall seemed to have built itself up around him, isolating him from everyone. If he could find out who was building that wall—

He left De Anza and went out in search of a public televisor booth.

Dr. Rodney Ortega said, “I told you not to call me, Ilsa.”

The girl on the screen wore a nurse’s uniform. She had sleek black hair and orchid lipstick. She said, “Breden’s found the weak link. He’s coming here.”

Ortega grimaced. “It was too risky. I knew that. But we had to move instantly to protect Breden when he saw Springfield. Ilsa, if we can just get him past tonight’s tests—”

“You’ve overstepped yourself. There’s only one answer now. Let me tell him the truth.”

“All of it?”

“Enough. He’s got to be satisfied, or the psych-detectors at the island will catch him. His mind has to be camouflaged.”

Ortega shook his head. “It would be too dangerous. If he should be caught, there’s scopolamin. And then where would we be—if GPC found out about us?”

Ilsa said. “It isn’t safe to let him go back to work tonight. He knows too much and too little. Tell him the answers; that’s the only way. But then seal his mouth.”

“How?”

“With his Control. Mnemonic erasure.”

“It’s risky,” Ortega said.

Ilsa said angrily, “You’re getting senile. There’s no other way. Unless the Freak knows the answers.”

Ortega said, “He doesn’t know, of course. But we can get the answers from him.”

The woman grimaced. “He’s a weapon we can’t use.”

“I think we can. I’m on the trail of what may be the right explanation. It will mean altering our plans—”

Ilsa said wearily, “Shall I go ahead, then?”

“I—suppose so. Yes. Get in touch with Breden’s Control. But be as careful as you can.”

She agreed and broke the beam.

He felt danger. He felt it in the commonplace familiarity of this apartment, like a thousand others in the city; he felt it in the too-ordinary attitude of the girl, her relaxed posture on the couch opposite him, her dark, friendly eyes, her quiet competence. She had struck the first false note. Why should someone like this work in the suburbs for an ill-paid physician like Springfield?

He asked her that.

“Suppose you tell me what’s on your mind?” she said. “You sounded a little incoherent over the visor.”

“I don’t think Dr. Springfield died a natural death. I . . . I think I may have killed him.”

Now her eyes widened in real surprise. Breden didn’t look at her. His glance shifted up to the television screen above her head.

“I’m thinking of latent mutation,” he said, and went on to explain the theory he had discussed with De Anza. But this time he gave it a personal application. Was it possible that he, himself, might be a latent mutant? And that the mutation could become dominant under certain conditions—and use supranormal powers?

“Springfield was trying to tell me something when he died. Miss Carter, what happened to the nurse who let me into the office today? She was gone when I left, and you’d taken over. I don’t know why that seems surprising to me. It’s the whole combination of unlikely factors, I suppose. I want you to tell me—”

“Why didn’t you go to the police?” she asked.

Breden made an abortive gesture. Ilsa Carter leaned back, looking steadily at him.

She said, “You’d have found out that Springfield’s nurse had had an accident on the Ways. She was killed. It’s unfortunate, but we had to move rapidly, and couldn’t maneuver her out of the way fast enough. She saw us kill Springfield.”

Curiously, the first emotion he felt was relief. *They* had murdered Springfield—whoever they were. That was better than—

He stood up. Ilsa Carter raised her hand; there was a shining silver disk, like a compact, in her palm. A tiny lens watched him like an eye. She said, “Sit down, Breden. I’m going to explain. But I could paralyze or kill you with this—it’s what killed Springfield.”

Breden sat down. “You’ll kill me anyway,” he said.

“No. We need you. We chose you because you’re perhaps the only man in the world who’s in a position to help us. And you’re the right man. That combination may not occur again for a long while. Now . . . here it is. We’re an underground organization dedicated to a certain purpose.”

“You’re the Neoculturalists?”

She smiled. “Oh, no. We’ve never bothered with names. The Neoculturalists and all the other groups are harmless—so far. Harmless to GPC, I mean. But we’re not. We want to overthrow GPC.”

He leaned forward slightly. Ilsa Carter turned the disk so that the lens flashed glitteringly. Breden relaxed.

“There aren’t many of us,” she went on. “But so far we’ve managed to keep our existence a secret.”

“I don’t believe you,” Breden said. “GPC—well, you can’t keep secrets from GPC.”

“You are,” Ilsa said. “They don’t know about your dreams, do they?”

The earth moved beneath him. That shivering instability came up again, mingled with the heartbeat of a machine six thousand miles away. He wondered if the mind, too, could reach critical mass, and whether it could survive that level. He didn’t think so. He looked at the visor screen and thought of Margaret. That was an anchor to sanity.

Ilsa said, “We want to overthrow GPC because we think that’s the only solution.”

“Solution to *what*? The world’s safe—”

“So is a patient in cataleptic stupor,” she said. “Do you know what has stopped civilization in its tracks? It was an omission. It was something that didn’t happen, but should have happened, for the sake of the world.”

“What?”

“The Third World War,” she told him flatly. “It should have happened, a hundred years ago. But, since it didn’t, we intend to make it happen now.”

It was obscene. He sat there and looked at her. There was nothing he could say. His conditioning had never covered stark insanity. She seemed rational. But she wasn’t. She couldn’t be.

She sounded rational.

“I’ll tell you about myself later,” she said. “I’m a malcontent, naturally. That isn’t important, except that all of us, in the organization, are malcontents. We have to be, or we’d never have formed it or joined it. It’s our way of keeping a balance, staying sane.”

“Sane!” Breden said.

“I hope you don’t think you’re sane,” she remarked. “Oh, you’re well adjusted to this world, but—it’s a psychopathic world! The only satisfied people on earth now are the drudges. Like your friend Carolyn Kohl, at the island. She’s satisfied to watch lights and push buttons. But her type of technician is in the minority. A man doesn’t take up technology, usually, unless he’s got an itch. And that’s a hard itch to scratch satisfactorily—impossible, under this set-up. The result is stagnation.”

“But safety,” Breden said, vaguely surprised to find himself arguing. “An atomic war—”

“Would be a tangible we could analyze. One thing GPC has overlooked, Breden. This planet isn’t isolated. It isn’t safe. It is now, I suppose, but eventually—GPC may be surprised to find it isn’t alone in time and space. We’ve reached the planets, yes. But what’s beyond? Do you suppose there’s no life, no civilization, equal to ours in the entire Galaxy?”

“They’d have communicated—”

“The Galaxy’s big,” Ilsa said. “Time and space are big. One day a ship may come in from outside, and—under this set-up—we’d have to attack it to maintain our isolation. That might be just too bad for us. Personally, I’d be glad to see that day come. But I don’t want to wait for visitors from interstellar space. A race can die of dry rot, too. A race can go mad. Since GPC took over, humans have been forced into an alien social and psychological pattern, and most of the race is insane. It isn’t recognized, because it’s become the norm. It isn’t incurable. But shock therapy must be used by this time. All progress has stopped. You can say that the *status quo* can be Utopia, but that ignores the fact that men grow. No one can be sane unless he uses his full potentialities. Even a moron must do that.”

Breden said, “But you’re the one who’s insane. Don’t you realize what an atomic war would mean?”

Ilsa looked at him oddly. “Yes, Breden. I do. Because I’ve seen it, and seen its results.” She frowned a little. “There was a mutant born, apparently insane—dementia praecox. Hard radiations had mixed up his genes plenty. By rights he shouldn’t have been viable at all; he was premature, and reared in an incubator for months. His father is one of our leaders. Eventually we discovered that this freak has a certain mutated power, a natural talent, that had been born into him. It’s rather an unknown factor even now. Call it prescience, though it isn’t exactly that. He can see into what seems to be the future, and in his rational periods he can tell us what he sees. That’s how we got this weapon”—she raised the shining disk—“and other things. We have certain televisor attachments that enable us to keep underground. The Freak has described to us what he sees in this future world—if that’s what it is. And—it’s closer to Utopia than our world. We’ve called it Omega, for definitive purposes. Though it’s a beginning rather than an end.”

Breden said cautiously, “If that’s the future, what can you do to change it? If you act now, you may be warping the future away from your—Omega pattern.”

“Or our actions may have brought about that pattern,” she said. “I don’t know. There are variables we don’t understand; the Freak has told us things that don’t fit at all—but one thing is clear. There’ll be a Third World War. The result will come very quickly. It will be blitz, with modern technologies. There’ll be an atomic holocaust, the nations will decentralize immediately, and there’ll be bacteriological warfare. Not many people will remain alive on the planet. But research will be given the greatest impetus since World War Two. In Omega, Breden, the life span is two hundred years. And there are very few pathologies—the people are healthy. They live to their fullest potentiality. Scientists, artists, farmers—the boundaries are removed for them. They are reaching out to the stars. For their great men don’t die as soon as they’ve achieved mastery of their professions. Their mutants—well, maturation’s slower with mutants, and in this time-era they simply don’t have time to reach their peak. But in Omega there’s no senility at the age of seventy. And there’s no obsolescence through disuse!”

“Yes,” Breden said. “I see your point. I don’t agree with it. You can’t survive without GPC.”

“Conditioning!” Ilsa snapped. “You’ve been made to believe that! Why do you suppose we’ve been giving you that recurrent dream?”

“You . . . *what did you say?*”

“Dr. Springfield was about to tell you about that,” Ilsa said. “He’d discovered you’d been under hypnosis—posthypnotic suggestion. You see, you’ve been conditioned too well. We could never hypnotize you into setting off the uranium pile. But we could make you dream you were doing that, as long as you *knew* you were dreaming. It was a preparation of your unconscious for what your conscious mind wouldn’t accept without groundwork. We can convince your conscious that we’re right—but we couldn’t have done it two months ago. If we hadn’t begun to change your ideas and your thinking already, you wouldn’t be sitting here now. Two months ago you’d have reacted instantly by jumping at my throat.”

Breden kept the tight control on his mind and body. He said, “You can never set off the pile. There are too many safeguards.”

“You could set it off, though. As one of the nuclear physicists in charge, you could make an opportunity.”

“I could. But I wouldn’t. You couldn’t hypnotize me into doing that.”

Ilsa said slowly, “Of all the key physicists in the world, you’re the only one who *can* be convinced. We did a lot of checking before we decided on you. Psychologically you’re the right subject. Here’s what you’re going to do. Return to the island tonight, stand your guard duty, and then, tomorrow morning, begin your furlough. During that furlough, we’ll convince you that you must set off the uranium pile. When you go back on your job—you’ll do that.”

Breden said, “Unfortunately I’ll be eliminated as soon as I take the psych-tests tonight. The psychologists—Medical Administration—will find out all you’ve been telling me, even if I wanted to keep it secret, which I don’t.”

“They won’t find it out. I had to tell you this, because you’d begun to suspect too much. There were too many questions in your mind—unanswered questions. The psych tests would have detected something haywire if you’d gone back to the island without getting your questions answered. But now you know the truth; you realize you’re not a mutant, and the danger is one you feel able to understand and cope with. As for your talking—you won’t talk. You’ll forget all this, until tomorrow, when your Control tells you to remember. That will protect you and us, when you’re at the island.”

“My Control?”

“The one who hypnotized you. Who suggested your dreams. The one who gave you mnemonic amnesia, through the televisor, in Springfield’s office when I had to kill him. You see, Breden, we’re quite ruthless. We prefer not to be, but we will take no chances. It may be a risk letting you go back to the island tonight, but it’s a risk we must take, for we need you, and we need you in your present job. So you’ll forget this interview. Your mind will be at ease, but you won’t remember that your questions have been answered. I don’t think any psych tests can get through the hypnosis your Control will work on you.”

She had turned her hand so that the lens wasn’t visible. Breden edged forward slightly. He drew one leg back a little.

He said, “My wife’s having a child soon. I don’t want to have him born into a world of atomic warfare. You may be perfectly convinced you’re right, but I say you’re insane. So—”

“Unless your son—or daughter—is a moron, he or she will be insane, growing up in this GPC-controlled culture. Wouldn’t you rather have your child growing up in a world where he’d have freedom from disease, mental freedom as well, and a life expectancy of two hundred years? Breden, if GPC hadn’t choked off the Third World War before it started,

medical research would be a thousand years ahead now. Disease would be almost unknown
—”

The voice came from the television screen. For a blinding second Bredden didn't believe what he heard. Then a glance showed him what his mind could not accept: the face of Margaret, his wife.

She said, "I'm sorry, darling. It's something I had to do. I stopped arguing with myself a long time ago?"

Bredden looked at her. "You're my . . . Control? You hypnotized me?"

"Yes, Joe."

"And you're in this . . . this organization of criminal lunatics?"

"Yes, Joe. But you'll have to learn more about these—lunatics before you make your decision. They're the only people in the world today who have transcended their barriers. They're limited, of course—it's hard for them to tap power-sources without detection. But in physics, chemistry, medicine, bacteriology, they know things this civilization doesn't."

His mouth moved stiffly. "Margaret—" he said.

Her eyes were steady. "For example . . . no, I want to tell you this, dear—"

Ilsa said warningly, "Now?"

"Yes. Listen, Joe. Medical Biology gave me a clean bill of health. As far as they were concerned, I was perfectly healthy. But our—organization of lunatics—has tests and reagents GPC never heard of. It will be years before it will show enough for Medical Biology to find it, but . . . but I—"

Ilsa sat stiffly, her eyes hard and bright. Bredden stood up abruptly. He walked toward the television.

"What is it, Margaret?" he asked.

"Carcinoma."

Bredden said, "Cancer . . . *they're lying!*"

"No. They're not lying."

"This early—it's curable—"

"Not with today's medical science. No germ or virus research is permitted. You know that. On the Omega future-world, cancer can be cured. But the Freak can't tell us how. The techniques are beyond him. He can't look through a microscope there and tell us how to culture an antibody. The cure must be found here on earth, in our time. I'll be dead, probably, before that, but our child will inherit a propensity for cancer. I'd like to know, before I die, that even carcinomatosis, no matter how virulent, can be cured."

"Margaret," he said, and stopped. She nodded slowly.

"There's the child, Joe. And there's the idea that you might have had cancer yourself—or something else that's incurable so far. I'd give you euthanasia if you needed it, you know. So I can't hesitate now. It's because—"

If she finished, Bredden never knew it. The world drowned for him in white silence.

The whiteness and the silence receded suddenly.

He was on the jet plane, heading westward, far above the Pacific.

The ship shot in pursuit of the setting sun. Bredden wondered idly how he had spent his time after leaving De Anza. But he did not wonder for long. Memories of a theater, of dinner, floated up from somewhere in his mind.

He thought: *After tonight's stint, my furlough. I'll spend it with Margaret. Maybe I'll get away from those dreams.*

I mustn't let Medical Administration find out about my dreams!

Ortega said irritably to the televisor, "I'm extremely busy, Ilsa. There's a new development with the Freak. I don't know what to make of it."

"This won't take long. It's important. Breden's brother, Louis, and a physicist named De Anza—they compared notes today and started asking questions. They're coming up to see me. We can't kill them, you know. It would cause too much uproar. There'd be an investigation. We couldn't cover."

"We'd have to kill them."

"Ortega, they'd fit in Omega. Both of them. With a lot of reconditioning—but they're brilliant men, especially Breden's brother. He's a mutant, you know. If there's any other way possible, I think we should avoid killing them."

"We can't afford investigation at this point. Breden must stay at Uranium Pile One."

Ilsa said, "Well, his Control hypnotized him, and he went back to the island. He's still worried about losing his job. So he won't talk about his dreams. As for the rest, he's forgotten it. It'll have a chance to germinate in his unconscious. Tomorrow he'll remember, at the right time, but by then we'll have him under our wing. It won't be as easy as we expected to convince the man. There's intense rivalry, of course, between Breden and his brother—" She paused. "Wait a minute. I've an idea. I wonder if there isn't some way we could play on that rivalry to push Breden in the right direction?"

"That isn't the strongest card we hold."

"He knows his wife has cancer," Ilsa said. "That emotional appeal may turn the trick in itself. Or it may not; I don't know. But we've got to win him to our way of thinking before his furlough's up. When he goes back to the island, he must set off the uranium pile."

Ortega said nervously, "Ilsa, please do the best you can. I'm on the trail of something completely new with the Freak."

"You're curing him?"

"It isn't that. It's . . . I'll tell you later, when I've found out more. But—the Freak's mutated talent isn't prescience. It isn't the future he sees."

Ilsa stared. "Omega isn't our future world?"

"I don't know what it is," Ortega said. "But I suspect we're going to find out."

Six hours later Ortega was still working on the mechanism. He didn't know what it was. He followed the Freak's orders. The Freak lay motionless with all his eyes closed, moving a little occasionally in his tank, and sometimes merely resting passive, saying nothing. The rational period was unusually long. It was wearing, however, and twice the Freak, nearly sick with nervous exhaustion, began to cry.

But the mechanism grew nevertheless.

This had never happened before. The Freak had described what he saw in Omega—and sometimes what he saw was completely paradoxical—but he had never dictated a blueprint to his father. He seemed to be watching a similar machine being constructed somewhere—on Omega?—and describing its progress, so that Ortega could duplicate it step by step.

"Power," the Freak said, after a long pause. "Give it power."

Ortega made a connection and moved a rheostat. The Freak said, "More."

Presently—“More. Much more.”

Then: “More than that.”

Ortega said, “I don’t dare. We’re tapping too much as it is. We’ll be detected.”

“It takes more. He’s trying—”

Ortega moved the rheostat again. The Freak said, “It’s different now. Funny. Savages, they look like. They’re chasing a . . . it looks like a bison.”

“Savages?”

“Wait. I’ve got the machine again. More power. More—he keeps motioning for more.”

Ortega clenched his teeth, and, with an apprehensive upward glance, threw in another switch.

Suddenly a voice boomed through the room.

“Hello. Hello. Can you hear me? Can you hear me? Hello!”

Ortega said, “I can hear you. Where are you?”

“Can you hear me? Hello?”

The Freak muttered, “Shadows are coming. I can’t . . . no, I can’t—”

“Hello! Your mechanism is incomplete. Or it needs readjustment. I can’t get in contact with the rapport mind now—”

“Shadows. Eating. I want—”

“—trying to reach you. We can help you. We know some of your problems—we’ve learned them through your rapport mind—the mutant. We have atomic power—it’s controlled, and we want to—”

“Shadows coming . . . I don’t want . . . my brain is open . . . no, no, I don’t want—”

Sweat showed on Ortega’s cheeks. He glanced from the monster to the machine, and back again.

The voice roared out: “Some adjustment necessary before we can talk—I can’t hear you. What’s wrong with your rapport mutant? He isn’t reaching us.”

“The shadows—”

“*We have atomic power. We can help—*”

“All right now. I can see Omega again. Or . . . no . . . it isn’t—”

“—*atomic power—*”

“WHERE THE EARTH SHOULD BE . . . WHITE, WHITE, BLAZING . . . LIKE A SUN. IT WAS THE CHAIN REACTION—IT MUST HAVE BEEN—”

“—*help you release atomic power—*”

“—IT WAS THE EARTH ONCE! IT WAS THE EARTH!”

TO BE CONCLUDED.

Second of two parts. Setting off a minor atomic war would normally be considered more than mildly antisocial. But in the world of the GPC, an atomic war was better than peace!

Joseph Breden knew it was a dream when he shot his co-guardian, Carolyn Kohl, through the head. It was a recurrent dream. And it wasn’t a safe dream to have, when you were one of the nuclear physicists chosen to be a guardian at Uranium Pile Number One, the key-spot of a civilization that existed a hundred years after Hiroshima.

There was more to the dream—the nightmare sensation of going down into the very heart of the great sunken ziggurat under the Pacific island, and removing the boron dampers so that

the atomic pile approached—and reached!—critical mass.

Breden was off beam, and knew it, and knew that the next psych check would betray him to the medical board. Then he'd lose his job, because the guardians at the island had to be perfectly balanced psychologically. His job was vital to him, partly because of Margaret, his wife; partly because of his brother Louis. Louis was one of the mutants born after atomic blasts—there were a number of these. They weren't supermen. They were merely humans extended.

Still, GPC—Global Peace Commission—ruled the world. After World War II, World War III started—abortively. While it lasted, blind, insane fury raved across the earth. The nations suddenly felt panic. Only in GPC was there any chance of safety—so GPC was able to take over and to rule for a hundred years.

It ruled and kept atomic power under control by maintaining the status quo. Research had to be licensed—as Louis Breden, a bacteriologist, had learned, rather to his regret. He liked research. But GPC said no.

Troubled, Joseph Breden went to New York to see Louis. He had managed to evade the psychological traps of Dr. Hoag, chief medic at Uranium Pile Number One; but he had not evaded his own worry. Louis couldn't help. He talked about new social movements like the Neoculturalists, who wanted interplanetary travel—banned by GPC—and that was all. Breden looked up Sam Springfield, his old G. P. doctor.

He told Springfield about his recurrent dream. The doctor made exhaustive tests, and advised Breden to go to his own medics at the uranium base. And—

Something happened.

Suddenly Springfield was dead. The nurse suggested angina. Breden faced a stone wall again.

(In an underground hideout were a man and a monster. The man's name was Ortega; the monster was his son, a mutant—called the Freak. Most of the time the Freak was sane. But not all the time.)

Breden saw his friend Mike de Anza, physicist, and asked questions about unconscious mutation. What he thought was: "Am I a mutant without knowing it? Was that what Dr. Springfield was trying to tell me? Did I kill Springfield? The nurse—Springfield's nurse—there was something funny there. What was it?"

He remembered. While he was in Springfield's office, there had been a substitution of nurses. It was the first clue he had found.

(Ortega said on the televisor; "I know you had to kill Springfield. But now Breden's conscious mind is suspicious. You've got to tell him the truth. Satisfy him. Then erase that part of his memory—using his Control.)

So the nurse, who wasn't really a nurse, saw Breden in her apartment and told him the truth.

"I'm Ilsa Carter," she said. "I'm a member of an underground organization dedicated to overthrowing GPC. We've been using you because you're the only man who can help us at this time. You're in the right position and you're psychologically amenable to our treatment. The world's in cataleptic stupor now. Stasis. Status quo. World War III was merely a gesture; it was too abortive. What we want is to make World War III come—now."

He wasn't conditioned to this. Her words sounded obscene. All he could think of was his wife, Margaret, and their unborn child. Until now he had felt that their child would be born into a safe world. But—

Ilsa talked about the Freak, and his peculiar power—perhaps prescience. The Freak could see into another world, perhaps a future world. A world Ilsa called Omega. In that world, World War III had run its destined course—and had become Utopian.

“We’ve been conditioning your unconscious,” Ilsa said, “through those recurrent dreams. Now we must convince your conscious mind that we’re right. You must detonate the uranium pile. But first—well, you’ve got to go back to your job and avoid rousing suspicion. I’ve told you enough to answer your questions. Now your Control will erase this memory for a while.”

Breden saw his wife’s face appear on the television screen.

“Yes,” she said. “I’m your Control. I’m a member of the organization. Because research is forbidden in this world, and I don’t want our child to have cancer—as I have.”

He felt the shock of that knowledge before the hypnosis blanked him out.

(Ortega was building a mechanism, under the Freak’s directions. This was a completely new development. A voice suddenly spoke in English through the machine. “—trying to reach you . . . we have atomic power . . . we can help you—”

The Freak said, “I can’t see . . . yes, I can see Omega now . . . or no, it isn’t—”

The voice from Omega roared: “—atomic power—”

The Freak screamed: “Where the earth should be—white, white, blazing—like a sun—it was the chain reaction, it must have been—”

“—help you release atomic power—”

“IT WAS THE EARTH ONCE! IT WAS THE EARTH!”

PART II

The face on the television screen was fat and placid. It was also semi-Oriental. Philip Jeng's father had been a Tibetan, and he had probably inherited a touch of Himalayan serenity along with a mind as tortuous as the Cretan labyrinth. He was a big, globular man, whose particular field was logic, though he did not specialize much these days. As a member of the organization, he devoted himself to odd jobs, and to working out the complicated probabilities of the various plans that were suggested. He had a smattering of knowledge in many fields, and now he was talking psychiatry to Ilsa Carter.

"I got there as fast as I could," he said. "When Ortega didn't answer any visor calls, we figured GPC had detected the hideout. I went there with an expendable member and sent him in. But it wasn't GPC. Things have got completely out of control, Ilsa."

The woman turned from the screen to glance at the two motionless figures sitting across the room. She said, "Integrate this, Jeng. You got my report on Michael De Anza and Louis Breden?"

"I got it."

"They came to my apartment five hours ago. They weren't too suspicious, but they figured something was wrong with Joseph Breden. They'd found out he visited Dr. Springfield, and that Springfield was dead. They want to know all about it. I didn't dare tell them. I fed them the new anaesthetic—you know?—and they're cataleptic. I've been waiting till I could get through to you or Ortega."

Jeng's small eyes blinked. "All right, Ilsa. I've cointegrated that factor. Bring the two men to Ortega's hideout."

"But they'll—"

"It's the nearest. Travel's going to be restricted for a bit. Those Neoculturalists have been talking too loudly. GPC's just banned them. The lid goes on automatically—checking of visas, no interstate commerce without passes—the regular routine. It's been three years since the last embargo of that sort. And it's too bad it had to happen right now. The Neoculturalists are perfectly harmless to GPC, but I suppose the membership was getting too large. If GPC only knew it, those useless groups make fine safety valves for the malcontents."

"If there's an embargo, I can't transport them under anaesthesia, even to Ortega's."

"I've just sent you faked identification. Use Plan Sub-Fourteen-Five. Remember?"

"Oh, the . . . all right. But what's happened to Ortega?"

Jeng said, "I don't know, exactly. I'm trying to smuggle in one of our technicians to find out. But it's going to be difficult. There aren't any near enough. And we can't run risks at this point. Ilsa, when I reached the hideout, I found Ortega hysterical, the Freak in stupor, and some sort of gadget rigged up and talking. It's one-way communication. The man, whoever he is, can talk to us, but we can't talk to him. I think he's talking from Omega."

"But . . . Jeng, what's *happened*?"

"As nearly as I could figure out," Jeng said carefully, "Ortega built the machine, though I don't know how, since he's no technician. Probably the Freak dictated it. Then something happened. Ortega had a mental explosion and attacked the Freak."

"His son?"

“It’s a familiar pattern,” Jeng said. “I won’t go into subconscious motives. Ortega had a temporary aberration, brought on by strain and shock. I’ve given him sedatives, but I’m worried about him. He isn’t insane, though. It’s temporary. Only . . . well, the Freak had a shock too, I suppose when his father attacked him. He’s gone into some sort of protective stupor. He won’t talk or listen or open his eyes. And that mechanism keeps yelling at us—”

“What does it say?”

“It wants us to finish the machine. But it can’t tell us how. Apparently it’s had only fragmentary glimpses of our world, and there aren’t enough common denominators. There are words we don’t understand—scientific terminology. I gather it’s been communicating through the Freak, and now it can’t.”

Isa said, “It’s a new factor. You’re in charge now, Jeng, aren’t you?”

“I suppose so,” he said. “I’m not a man of action. I just work out things. On paper. But now—well, I’ll do the best I can.”

“What about Joseph Breden . . . tomorrow?”

“Oh . . . I’ll have him picked up. That’ll be difficult.”

“Do it through his Control.”

“Good idea. As soon as you get the stuff, bring De Anza and Louis Breden here. The plan’s risky, but—”

“There’ll be the guards.”

The fat cheeks quivered as Jeng shook his head.

“I hope you make it, Isa,” he said. “We can’t afford to lose you, too.”

When the plastic disks came, she went to the window and looked out. The two killers were across the street, waiting. They would follow her all the way now, their weapons ready. If trouble developed, they would kill. Isa, and De Anza and Louis, and then themselves. No one could be left alive to talk. There would be suspicion on the part of GPC, but no certainty, and a subsidiary plan, involving misdirection, would instantly go into operation. But that would all be very risky, and, the way things were going now, the slightest error could, conceivably, spoil everything.

She examined the two figures sitting rigidly upright in their chairs. Then she moved about the room, straightening, checking. She studied her memory of the apartment as it had looked at the moment the men had been anaesthetized. There must be no false notes. They would waken with no knowledge that time had passed.

Their watches—that would be awkward. Presently she lifted De Anza’s wrist and moved his watch’s hands ahead to the correct time, leaving Louis Breden’s as it was. Then she went back to her chair, placing the plastic disks in a drawer beside her, and touched a concealed stud. It was a light switch. She flickered it on and off, with regular pauses, several times. This time it was unnecessary to hold her breath. The neutralizing gas, odorless and tasteless, flooded the room.

The men stirred. Louis, finishing a sentence, said, “—must have made some notes.”

Irrationally she felt panic. She had forgotten what Louis had been talking about five hours ago. She studied her hands, telling herself: *It’s easy to get out of this one—quite easy. A dozen ways—*

De Anza was looking past her shoulder. Did he see something amiss? Had something changed during the five-hour period? *Distract his attention!*

She reached toward the table beside her, changed her mind, looked at Louis, and drew her arm back. It knocked over a flower vase on the table. Water spouted on her slacks.

The material was waterproof, but chivalry was an old habit. By the time the two men had finished making repairs, De Anza's attention had been successfully distracted, and Louis had begun talking with a clearer antecedent.

The television sounded. On the screen a face began to appear. It was a man everyone in the world had heard of; one of the higher members of GPC. His eyes studied the room.

"We've received word, Ilsa," he said—and his voice, too, was familiar. "Bring these men. But it must be top secret."

The screen blanked.

No one would have spotted the image as a fake, because it wasn't a fake. It was a series of photographed images of the man, taken from television shots, arranged in such order that the lip-movement corresponded with the voice. It was the right voice, too, but the sonic vibrations had been rearranged to create these particular words. In the organization's files were dozens of similar rigged visor-messages, ready for various emergencies; this particular one fitted Plan Sub-Fourteen-Five.

And Ilsa saw that De Anza and Louis were impressed.

She let herself smile. "That does it," she said in a different voice. "I'm sorry, but I couldn't have spoken before this. Against orders."

De Anza blinked. "But—I don't get it. What's going on? Is GPC—"

Ilsa took out the identification plastics from the drawer and tossed them across. "I'm a police member. You heard him say it was top secret. Well—it is. GPC needs you two men to do some top secret work. Are you willing?"

Both men nodded automatically. "Of course, but—we're in different fields," Louis said. "Are you sure—"

"You'll find out," Ilsa said. Her instructions carried her only as far as Ortega's hideout; from there on, it was up to Jeng. She said, "We can go now, if you're ready."

They got up, rather baffled, but conditioned to obey. The three of them took the dropper to the street. Ilsa hailed a monocab.

The two killers, she saw, were following, not too closely.

Eventually she breathed again. They were going to succeed. Under a clump of trees along the country lane she dropped belladonna in the men's eyes—surer than blindfolds—and led them the rest of the way. The camouflaged entrance opened as she neared it. And, underground, she left an expendable neutralizing the belladonna with pilocarpine, and went to find Philip Jeng.

"Well, I've got them here," she said, when he had emerged to sit with her in one of the cramped rooms, with a cigarette and a mild drink. Quarters were not spacious underground; there was too much danger of detection. The real danger, however, lay in the possibility that GPC might sometime grow suspicious and trace a tapped power leak.

Philip Jeng sat back like the Laughing Buddha, though his expression was placidly blank. He sipped his drink in silence.

"Well?" Ilsa asked after a while.

"Oh," Jeng said. "Yes. Sorry. I'm trying to juggle several dozen things in my head at once, intangibles I can't even set down on paper. It's a little difficult to keep track of reality."

Concentration does that. I'm beginning to understand how the lamas could spend their days contemplating Nirvana. I'm not really the best man for this job, Ilsa."

"You're the best one we have," she told him. "You're certainly not an expendable."

"If it comes to that, we're all expendables. Perhaps not at the moment, but when the plan goes into operation. However—De Anza and Louis Breden. They're here, eh?"

"Yes. We're understaffed, Philip. Perhaps it would be best to kill them."

"I think not. No, Ilsa, that's not moral cowardice—I know killing's necessary often enough. We bring not peace but a sword. I'm thinking of waste. Those men have valuable brains."

"Valuable to us or to GPC?"

"We've converted others. I don't want to kill them without first making certain they can't be persuaded to join us."

"I haven't got time to argue with them," Ilsa said practically. "And it would take a lot of argument, too."

"I haven't time either—nobody here has, just now. But later when we can make time. Keep them under narcotics; that's safe. I'm thinking they might be latent malcontents, Louis Breden especially—he's a mutant, isn't he? Perhaps we could bring psychological pressure to bear. Get hold of their files, if we have access to them. But they're not important now that they're here. The big trouble is with the Freak and that machine Ortega made."

"Figured out anything yet?"

Jeng said slowly, "A little. I have no proof. I can't even use empirical logic. But my theory is that the voice that speaks to us from Ortega's machine is speaking from Omega—and Omega isn't the future, as we imagined."

"Another planet?"

"It's this planet. It's the Earth, the same Earth we're—*not*—standing on." His placidity dissolved into a faint smile.

Ilsa stared.

"It's the Earth that might have been," he said. "And to the people of Omega . . . *this*"—he tapped his foot—"this is the Earth that might have been. It's a probability variant. It's the Earth that took a different route from ours, made a different decision, at a crossroads long ago. I know this: in Omega, according to that voice, there was a World War III, and it wasn't abortive like ours. I haven't talked to that voice, not yet; but it's talked to me. I'm correlating and integrating. The most important thing I've learned so far is that atomic power isn't as dangerous as we've been conditioned to believe. No chain reaction could destroy this planet. So we can expand our plans. At worst, we'll blow a big hole in things—but that's all."

There was a voice in Louis Breden's head. It didn't make sense. He ignored it. He was busy fighting.

De Anza was already unconscious; they had managed to stick the hypodermic needle in him. But Louis kept on fighting, in spite of the odds. He knew this outbreak had been a mistake, but when De Anza had started it, with a roundhouse swing at one of the guards, there was nothing to do but ride along.

Louis had to keep his distance from the four men. At close quarters their needles were dangerous. He danced back, searching for a weapon, and saw a door in the wall open. Ilsa Carter stood there. A huge, sleepy-eyed Oriental was behind her.

His momentary distraction was an error. The men closed in; he struck out, and at the same moment he felt the prick of the needle. Instantly faces wavered and swam like water. His muscles dissolved. He was riding down an elevator—

But in his mind was a new cool, keen clarity. That voice came back, bringing pictures with it. It was screaming in panic.

“Tell them . . . must tell them. . . . IT WAS THE EARTH ONCE! THE CHAIN REACTION—”

Then the narcotic drowned his senses.

The moment a man is born—in fact, the moment he is conceived—he is at war. Metabolism fights catabolism; his mind is a battlefield; there is a perpetual struggle with orientation and adjustment to the arbitrary norm. Some men adjust fairly well to their environment, but no man is ever entirely at peace. Death brings the only armistice.

But for Joseph Breden there was a brief truce that night. It was not a solution, except purely temporarily; the hypnotic treatment would eventually have worn off. It could have been renewed, but that would have been a negative triumph, the triumph of passivity. To forget problems is not to solve them, or alcohol and narcotics would be more often prescribed.

He had made a truce. His memory was not gone; there was only a selective amnesia. He could not remember Ilsa Carter, or the circumstances of his investigation that afternoon. He had even forgotten the recurrent dreams. But little else had been forgotten. There was still his faint dissatisfaction, focused, somehow, on Louis, but even that didn't seem so rankling now. A well in his mind brimmed Lethe, and it overflowed a little, giving Joseph Breden, on his night of truce, a peace he had not known since childhood.

The routine checking-in psych tests had been passed without trouble. He sat with Carolyn Kohl at the chessboards, ignoring the visio-recorders focused on him as he ignored the monster chained beneath him in the ziggurat's heart. Perhaps he didn't completely ignore the recorders; unconsciously he felt a little warmed by the knowledge that he, one of the guardians, was being guarded, safely protected by those invisible monitors. Here, under earth and sea, in the sunken ziggurat, was the very womb of security, the truest symbol of GPC that was the world's guardian. Under his feet, chained like the Midgard Serpent, was the foundation-stone of GPS—Uranium Pile Number One.

Midgard Serpent. While he waited for Carolyn to move, he followed out that concept, very conscious, somehow, of the vast, complicated social organization that GPC controlled. What was it that had finally fettered the Snake? A chain made from rather unlikely things, like the spittle of birds—was that it? Yet the chain had been stronger than forged steel. Well, steel alone could not chain the uranium piles. Nor could boron. It had to be made of certain intangibles as well, social conscience, and a will toward peace, and trust, and a strong, powerful technology—held always *status quo* lest it expand and snap a link in the chain. But the Snake was fettered—this Midgard Serpent that coiled around the earth—

“Check.” Carolyn said, “and you'd better concede. Our shift's nearly over.”

“Wait,” Breden said. He studied the boards while she rose, made a round of the instrument panels, and returned to her chair.

“Baby's still asleep,” she said. “Did you move? Well, how in the world!”

“I moved, all right,” Breden said maliciously, and Carolyn sadly removed her queen from the danger area. Breden put out his hand, shifted a castle, and said, “Check.”

Carolyn hastily nodded toward the wall indicators. “We won’t have time to finish. Here’s our relief.”

But Breden swung out a camera and snapped a color-photograph of the boards. “We can finish it next time,” he observed.

She sniffed. “That won’t be for a week. I’ll find the right move by then, though.”

“Consult an expert, Carrie,” Breden suggested.

“I do very well on my own. Well, let’s go. How’s Margaret?”

“Fine. I’ll be spending my furlough with her. Wait a minute; something’s—”

A voice from the wall told Breden to report to M.A.

He obeyed cheerfully enough.

Dr. Hoag, the chief psychiatrist, was still smiling. He was alone in his office. “Just routine,” he said. “We’re not calling out the Board tonight. Here, stick your head in this gadget.” He adjusted electrodes. “Now relax, have a cigarette, and we’ll get this finished fast.”

“What’s the program now?” Breden asked.

“Word-associations will do, won’t they?” Hoag touched a switch, and a wall panel lighted. A pulsating red line showed across a graph, moving as the guiding drum turned. Beside it, overlapping at times, was a blue line, an earlier encephalograph reading of Breden’s brain. Hoag, perched on the edge of his desk, picked up a blue paper and examined it. “This the right one? Yes. All right. Let’s go. Bread.”

“Butter.”

Reaction time showed on the screen. The blue and red lines overlapped. Hoag said:

“Man.”

“Woman.”

“Five-six-eighty-six.”

“Stable lanthanum.”

“Secret.”

“Keep.”

“Coal.”

“Carrie.”

So it went. Finally Hoag put down the paper and went over to remove the helmet. “Fair enough,” he said. “There’s some variation, but that’s normal. You get about the same reactions you got six months ago from this list.”

“All through?”

“Almost. This is routine. Sodium pentothal surrogate. Not strictly necessary, but you know regulations. Roll up your sleeve. Stick your arm in the shot-box.”

Breden did. Unseen by him, within the box, ultraviolet made his skin aseptic, a photoelectric found a vein, anaesthetized the area, and completed an injection.

“All right, take your arm out. Now.” Hoag found another list and asked more questions. He was easily satisfied.

“That does it,” he said finally. “Stick your arm in again for the antidote. I’ve got to rush off. There’s some new candidates coming up. Can you finish up by yourself?”

Breden didn’t answer. His head moved jerkily. Hoag grunted and went out, and Breden abruptly pulled his arm out of the box so that the needle missed him entirely.

One thought surged up in his brain and pounded against the threshold of consciousness. Realization hesitated on the brink. A word, a shape, a Zodiacal sign, a letter, C—

Why had he evaded the neutralizing shot? Impulse? The pentothal surrogate would wear off soon by itself, but in the meantime, under its stimulus, he might be able to capture this agonizingly evasive, vital thought—

He stood up and went out. Leaving the ziggurat was a robot-guided, automatic process. He was in the jet plane, heading for New York, before he understood the memory.

In Dr. Hoag's office the telltale mechanisms, connected with the shot-box, punched symbols in a plate and fed it into a screening device. Eventually there was on record the following message, to be integrated and investigated:

5:34 a.m. Tuesday July 7, 2051. Neutralizing surrogate for pentothal test was not administered to Guardian Joseph Breden. Shot-box Eighteen to be sent to Analytical Repairs for check on operation of mechanism.

Cancer.

That was the elusive memory. Now that he had it, the other thronging, shadowy memories came back too. They had been too transparent to see clearly before, but now they could be seen.

Alone in the robot-piloted jet plane, Breden lay back against the cushions, his eyes closed, and called up phantom after phantom of memory.

Now he knew. Now he remembered. Ilsa Carter. All of it.

But it was hard to think. The memories were fading as fast as they came. The drug was wearing off, and, with it, his memories dissolved.

Ilsa Carter—New York. She was waiting for him there. If he fell into her hands—hers, and the hands of the organization behind her—

Margaret?

But—she was his Control! It was Margaret who had hypnotized him, his own wife—

Cancer.

A bell rang. A message flashed on in the ceiling. APPROACHING NEW YORK.

Hoag—he'd have to tell Hoag. He reached for the visor, but didn't complete the gesture. He pressed his temples hard with his palms.

What would happen to Margaret if GPC found out?

But he couldn't keep this secret. It was unthinkable.

This secret—what secret? He had to focus hard to remember. As fast as he concentrated on one factor, another slipped away. It was becoming impossible to integrate his memories. The drug was wearing off; his Control's hypnosis was returning in full strength.

He needed time.

Hastily he snatched up the visor switchboard. "Reroute me to . . . to San Francisco," he said, because it was the first place-name that came to his mind.

Then his new-found memories dissolved utterly.

It took Ilsa Carter only ten minutes to discover what had happened—in so far as she could. All she knew, of course, was that Joseph Breden had not landed at the New York airport. It wasn't difficult to ascertain that the jet plane had been rerouted to the West Coast, but it was troubling not to be able to understand why. All she could do, then, was to put in a secret,

coded call to a San Francisco member of the underground. She issued instructions and then vided Jeng. She explained.

“Too bad,” he said. “We’ll keep our fingers crossed. Breden will be brought to me when he’s located?”

“If that’s possible. GPC’s embargo still holds. The Neoculturalists are soap-boxing. Interstate transportation’s going to be difficult. Still, a key man like Breden can manage it all right. We’ll do our best.”

“You can always use his Control,” Jeng suggested. “Don’t risk your own life, though, Ilsa. You’re not expendable—not yet, anyway.”

She said, “We’ve laid a false trail to cover the disappearance of De Anza and Louis Breden. Investigation will show that they rented a copter and were caught in that storm off Carolina last night and carried out to sea. Anything new on them?”

“Nothing yet. We’re still too understaffed, Ilsa. We’ve had to keep them unconscious. As soon as there’s time—and a man to spare—I want to wake ’em up and talk to them, but I’ve had to send most of our staff out on jobs. We’ve got to draw in our horns now. We were spread out more than I’d thought, so we’re a little vulnerable to investigation—and GPC’s investigating the Neoculturalists. The boys are covering as fast as they can. If you could come down here—I can’t let just anybody handle De Anza and Louis Breden. But you’re a good semanticist.”

“I’ll try,” she said. “But remember that Joseph Breden’s the big stake now.”

“Right,” Jeng said. “I wish I could talk to Ortega, but he’s in bad shape.”

“Psychopathology?”

“No. It was ordinary hysteria first, but—well, he’s an old man, Ilsa. His heart isn’t good. There’s something wrong, and I don’t know what it is. I’m not physician enough to say. I’ve got one of our medicos checking on him now. In fact, here he comes. I’ll see you later, Ilsa.”

Jeng touched the stud and the screen blanked. He turned to the medico who had just come in.

“Well?” Jeng said.

The doctor said furiously, “If GPC hadn’t outlawed research, I might be able to help Ortega. But I don’t think I can, now. There’s a virus that’s got into his system—latent till he collapsed yesterday. It’s running wild.”

“What kind of virus?”

“It may have been coryza once,” the medico said. “The specific for the common cold was found eighty or ninety years ago—GPC authorized *that* research, perhaps because GPC wasn’t so sure of its power in those days. But in ninety years a virus can mutate. The old coryza specific’s no good at all against this variant form. Coryza’s evolved, that’s all—and it’s evolved into something deadly. At least, it’s deadly without an antitoxin, and *I* haven’t got an antitoxin.”

Jeng said, “I knew there were germ mutations, of course, but I hadn’t known about this—coryza? Is there much of it around?”

“Virus, not germ,” the doctor snapped. “It’s a masquerader. Adaptable as the devil. You could easily mistake it for a similar pathology—atypical pneumonia, say—and that’s what’s been happening. A man dies of something *like* atypical pneumonia, and his attending physician writes that down—because he’s been conditioned by GPC. He may suspect the truth, but his conscious mind won’t let him ask questions.”

“What about Ortega?” Jeng asked. “There’s no antitoxin?”

“Well, I’m working on something. I’ve been working on it for months. But how the devil can I accomplish much? I have to do my research in secret, and I’ve got to live my public life too. I just don’t have the time or the facilities. I’ll do what I can with Ortega, but I’m not making any prognosis.” The doctor said violently, “It’s only by a miracle that none of these bugs has evolved yet into a real plague.”

Jeng said calmly, “Do your best. If we succeed with our plan, there’ll be medical research. There’ll have to be. How about the Freak?”

“That isn’t even a human pathology. The Freak’s in shock. He’s got something like aphasia ataxic. He can’t articulate words. There’s no cortical lesion, apparently, but there’s another factor—he can’t write any more than he can talk. It’s a rather rare form. Amnesic partly. The Freak’s a mutant, Jeng; remember that. He can’t be cured as easily as a normal pathology. But obviously he’s had a shock and locked himself into his own mind. He can’t communicate with us.”

“But can he think rationally?”

“How do I know?” the doctor asked.

The drug held Louis Breden.

But he could see the pictures and hear the silent, urgent, half-articulate voice in his mind.

“Tell them, tell them . . . always cut off. Since I was born. Since I began to understand. This world, green fields, blue sky, never for me . . . and now paralyzed, can’t, write or speak . . . if they wouldn’t always look away when they talk to me! . . . is Father? . . . he couldn’t wipe out the words by killing me. . . . He must have wanted to kill me for years, unconsciously. . . . I’ve been his incubus . . . our Father Which art in heaven . . . kingdom come . . . but they don’t know . . . that white shining horror in the sky . . . tell them, tell them, tell them . . . before—”

Louis Breden groaned and stirred. Dimly he felt the prick of the needle. He sank back again into deeper unconsciousness.

Jeng sat before the gadget, making notes on a pad. The great booming voice had been filtered down, by jury-rigging a transformer, but it was as clear as ever.

It said, “I don’t know the trouble. I’ll give you the list again.” It dictated rapidly. Jeng’s stylus point checked down a long list. The stylus reached the bottom and came back to one phrase.

The technician behind Jeng said, “That’s the trouble. We’ve got no equivalent on this world.”

“What is it?”

“Well—it seems to call for an electron beam deflection plate maintained at 150,000 volts with no positive connection. But it must be more than that, or it wouldn’t work at all without the positive hookup.”

“Can’t you rig up some substitute?”

“Sure,” the technician said morosely, “*if* I had a beta ray emitting radioisotope. Just give me an atomic pile and I’ll deliver your isotope—but not immediately, because it takes time. On Omega they’ve got the technologies. They’ve got their uranium piles working, and stockpiles of the necessary isotopes. They must have. But we don’t. We haven’t got the facilities or the time. I could build a piano in the Sahara, provided I had a year to do the mining and smelting and stuff. I *could* rig a deflection plate or some substitute, but it would

help if I had a graphite supply and a ceramics plant and a uranium pile and all the power I needed. And a few other things. I'm trying to play Beethoven on two keys! Still, maybe I can think of something. I doubt it, though."

"Keep trying," Jeng said, and the technician snorted and went out.

The voice from the machine said, "It would be much easier if you could talk to me. I don't know what has happened to my rapportee."

"The Freak?" Jeng asked silently.

"I can't get in touch with him. Well, let's go over the list again. You're approaching your world crisis, and unless I help you—Let's try the list. First, the basic circuit—"

More explanations.

"Got that? I think you have those materials—could it be the current? Can you hear me? I can't even be sure of that now. Perhaps I'd better try to advise you—the trouble is, I've been out of touch with your world since yesterday. I don't know how events may have changed. GPC may have discovered Breden's tie-in. I may be talking to GPC now, if they've discovered. . . . I'll have to risk it. I can't come into your world any more than you can come into mine."

"Why not?" Jeng asked, silently again, but apparently thought processes ran similarly in Omega. The voice said:

"Did I tell you the reason for that? Varying energy potentials. Too much difference in voltage between your continuum and mine. It's a matter of entropy; in some probability universes, things happen that speed up entropy—creation of a nova can do that—and a million volts difference in potential can wipe out a planet, if it's channeled across. The same principle as lightning—leveling energy potential. The lightning can cause a good deal of damage. But this audible communication is possible without channeling. It's simply a matter of resonance, finding the tonic—the purpose of the instrument I had you build. When you've finished the transmitter, it will be tuned to my receiver here, and the vibratory principle will do the rest. But the Freak was my first contact, Ortega—"

The voice stopped. Jeng's great body surged forward, as though by mere physical effort he could somehow break through the barriers stronger than time or space.

"Ortega," the voice repeated. "Is this Ortega? Are *you* Ortega?"

And then, after another, longer pause:

"I said that for all I knew I might be talking to GPC, but I suppose unconsciously I assumed that that hadn't happened. Now I've realized more clearly. . . . I explained all this once, carefully, when I first made contact through the machine. The machine Ortega made, at my instructions, transmitted by the Freak. But I don't know what's happened on your world since then. Something must have happened, or the Freak wouldn't be out of rapport. There are two main possibilities. One, that I'm talking to GPC; second, that I'm talking to another member of Ortega's underground organization.

"In the first case, my words can't make matters worse than they've become already, and they may plant doubt in GPC's mind. Which would be something! In the second case—well, I'm trying to help you, as I tried to help Ortega. I'll repeat what I told him, then. Listen carefully."

Jeng made sure that a recorder was switched on.

"I am John Van Buren, a descendant of President Van Buren—"

John Van Buren summarized the story of Omega—whose history was the history of Jeng's own probability world up to the crossroads, sometime in 1946, over a hundred years ago.

Translated to newspaper headlines, it could be summarized thus:
August 11, 1945:

IT'S OFFICIAL: JAPS GIVE
UP!

BEDLAM BUSTS LOOSE AT
7 PLUS 1 AS CITY BUILDS
BIGGEST HANGOVER
CONGRESS CALLED
SEPTEMBER 5 TO
START SHIFT
TO PEACE

August 20, 1945:

JAP ENVOYS' QUIZ
RESUMED

FORMER POWERS MODEL
DIES IN 11-STORY PLUNGE

GIRL STRIPPED, SLAIN
IN JERSEY

CUBS WIN 2 FROM GIANTS;
DODGERS, YANKEES SPLIT
RUPTURED? STOP WORRY
WITH THIS AMAZING
INVENTION (Advt.)

February 5, 1946.

U. N. CONFERENCE
STALLED

March 12, 1946:

RUSSIA, POLAND
WITHDRAW FROM
U. N.

July 20, 1946:

BLACK MARKET CRISIS
BEFORE CONGRESS
RUPTURED? STOP WORRY
WITH THIS AMAZING
INVENTION (Advt.)

August 3, 1946:

LABOR UNREST RISES

LYNCHINGS IN MISSOURI
AND CALIFORNIA

September 10, 1946:

ATTEMPT TO REVIVE
UNITED NATIONS

March 5, 1947:

GERMANY DEMANDS
REPARATIONS
LOWERED

September 29, 1948:

RIOTS IN AFRICAN
COLONIES

July 5, 1949:

REVIVED U. N. DEMANDS
NATIONS DISARM

June 29, 1950:

STOCKS RISE SHARPLY

RUPTURED? STOP WORRY
WITH THIS AMAZING
INVENTION (Advt.)

June 30, 1950:

U. S. AT WAR!

ATOM BOMBS BLAST
CITIES

MacARTHUR DIRECTS
COUNTERATTACK

July 10, 1950:

ALL CITIES EVACUATED

August 12, 1950:

GERM WARFARE BEGINS

John Van Buren said, “I suppose the main answer came when our world, as a whole, realized that there were two parts to freedom—first, freedom *from*, and, after that, freedom *to*. If we hadn’t had the second point to consider, the anarchy would have continued indefinitely. A drastic cure—but the world was sick and insane after 1945. Consider all the chances we’ve

had. And yet there was the same amount of political corruption, the same social and racial antagonisms, the same grab-and-to-hell-with-the-other-guy spirit. You can find plenty of places to put the blame—England’s policy in India and Palestine, Russia’s secrecy, China’s civil wars—and the United States couldn’t cast stones, of course. Outside of a few countries like Sweden, we were the only democracy on earth, but all we had was freedom from, not freedom to. We were groping like everyone else, and so eventually World War III started, and wasn’t abortive like yours.

“Who started it? An atomic bomb dropped. *That* started it. And then the cities were evacuated, and there was decentralization. And the way to fight them was with biological weapons. So the plagues came. There was something called the New Bubonic, for example. We perfected that. We immunized ourselves and spread the germs, and *they* spread—and then they mutated and attacked us. Eventually there had to be peace. After the population was decimated.

“We forged a sword, and it turned in our hand and struck us. For ten years after the undeclared armistice everyone worked with one goal; it was a war to conquer the little, mutated bugs before they killed us all. In the end we won. And by then we’d found some new ideas—notably a method of increasing the life span.

“I’m ninety-four years old and in the prime of life. I’ll live to be two hundred or more. My brain won’t fail until I’m within a decade of that mark. Till then, I’ll be assimilating knowledge, learning, utilizing what I know—and applying it. Perhaps that’s why I was able to get in contact with your world in the first place. I had knowledge and time enough to use it. Your race starts to decay before you’re seventy.

“We haven’t a Utopia. We don’t want one. But we’re prolonging our life span all the time, and we’re beginning—only beginning. Our ships go to the stars! If there’s another war, it may decimate us again, but it won’t destroy us. We’re not a perfect planet. There are still diseases. But there are none of the old diseases that existed a hundred years ago. We found specifics for them. New mutations keep arising, but we can hold those in check; our research laboratories are as efficient as we can make them. Medicine is one of the most honored sciences on our planet. Funds for it are available always. I don’t know if it happened on your world, but it did on ours—a hundred years ago Congress refused to grant a million dollar fund for cancer research, though there was evidence even then that with such resources cancer could be cured.

“After what Congress had already spent!

“We’re not perfect by any means. But we’re a lot better off than you are. Your world is in a psychopathic state. You’ve been in the straitjacket of GPC since 1950. It’s retarded adolescence. Only your organization had sense enough to realize that and to do something about it.

“I was working on telepathic research. That was how I reached the Freak. It took me three years to get in close enough contact to make him understand, and that happened only a few days ago. But all the while I was tapping his brain, getting through him a picture of your world—and filtering it out from his imaginary pictures.

“I tell you: GPC must be destroyed, or your world will die. I’ll do what I can for you. But if you expect me to tell you how to build a death ray, you expect too much. It wouldn’t work. A machine like this communicator, based on resonance, will work in both our worlds, but remember the main point: for a hundred years or so we’ve moved along different probability lines, and our entropic rate has been different. The energy potential of your continuum is different from ours, billions of volts apart. We have had to change many of our ancient

equations—even the Einsteinian mass-energy formula has variations now. But, as I say, it's possible to build a machine that will produce certain vibrations in our world—and when you do that, I can hear your voice.

“As for the Freak—I don't know frankly, why I can touch his mind. He can perceive probabilities. He needs no machine to do that; his mind is all the colloid machine necessary. It was a latent talent born in him. He was a mutant. And rather an improbable one himself. We still don't know too much about the laws of probability; the Heisenberg uncertainty factor enters into it, and when we get down to atomics and working with the genes themselves—we simply don't know all the answers. Perhaps probabilities shifted when the Freak was born. Perhaps he's a crossroads himself. It was improbable that he should ever have been conceived, and at a locus of probabilities the illogical may happen. At any rate, he can perceive probabilities.”

“Not prescience, then,” Jeng said to himself. “But according to Ortega's records, his visions didn't always check with Van Buren's world—and Van Buren mentions the Freak's ‘imaginary pictures.’ Other lines of probability? Or—after all—prescience?”

The voice from Omega went on.

“One thing: the atomic blast isn't as dangerous as you have imagined. Don't worry about the earth exploding. It won't. And as long as the planet itself survives, mankind and civilization will survive. You may have to take a long step back in order to go forward, but we did that—and perhaps our main success was in escaping from the old bugbears that held man back for hundreds of thousands of years. Almost at any time after the industrial revolution ailments like early senility and the diseases—cardiac, for example—could have been conquered, if a genuine attempt had been made. But it never was made. Habit patterns of our ancient social culture held us back. Not until 1958 was there any real investigation of cerebral infarcts. That was the first step toward conquering early senility—studying the tiny progressive hemorrhages within the brain. Alvarez had studied it before then, but he said it was apparently incurable. We've cured it.

“Remember, before you can get freedom *to* you must get freedom *from*. That's where the rank and file usually break down. Back in the days after World War Two it was commonly accepted that technology had advanced tremendously, and that a fraction of the money spent on the war, had it been devoted to research, would have paid off. But—it would have been a precedent. Congress hesitated, and everyone hesitated.

“Atomic research had been merely sporadic before 1941—but a precedent was made then, because the nations had to do research or die.

“Your world faces death now. You must get your freedom from GPC. You're trying to plug a dyke that's leaking at a thousand points.

“Smash the dyke. Follow your plan. Get Breden to explode the uranium pile.

“That will wreck GPC. It may wreck mankind a little, too. But man will survive. GPC won't. Your first and vital step is to destroy Uranium Pile Number One. Until you do that, you're doomed to fail. The uranium piles are the psychological foundation stones that keep GPC in power. Once the symbol goes—the reality can be attacked.”

The voice stopped. Jeng was silent, placidly watching the machine before him, his sharp brain trying to integrate what he had just heard with the incredibly complicated possibilities already filed in his mind. The organization of the world was not simple. And the problematical factors, the variant possibilities, added infinite complications.

He put up his hand and rubbed his forehead gently. He had a slight, dull headache. He felt unreasonable irritation. There could be machines to do this integrating; such machines were quite within the realms of engineering possibility. But, of course, such machines could not be built under GPC.

So his brain would have to serve as such a machine. And, being human—and not being a hundred years old, with all the knowledge and training that age implied—Jeng knew that he was fallible. One lapse of memory might mean complete failure.

Nor could he delegate power to subordinates. He hadn't enough capable men available, with GPC's new embargo limiting transportation. The organization was lamed, half crippled. But it had to stumble on somehow. If it could only reach the immediate goal—Breden, Uranium Pile Number One, the atomic blast—then the balance would shift from failure toward success.

Had Ilsa's San Francisco man located Joseph Breden yet?

He had not. Breden hadn't reached San Francisco.

From a jet plane, traveling at sonic speeds, one does little sightseeing, and Breden didn't know he was bound for the West Coast until the telltale flashed upon the ceiling. He had only the vaguest memory of redirecting the plane from New York, and no memory at all of why he had done so. Realizing that it might be difficult to secure an immediate return reservation from San Francisco, now that he was on furlough time—he had spent the last half hour listening to the newscast, and had learned of the Neoculturalist investigation and the interstate embargo—he picked up the visor mike and demanded a rerouting to Denver. The jet plane made a gigantic curve and rose as it turned its nose from west to east.

So he landed at the Denver port, while Ilsa Carter's San Francisco expendable was waiting for the quarry that didn't arrive. He located a copter and set its controls, using the visor to call his wife. But Margaret didn't answer; the automatic butler said she'd be in shortly.

He sat back and tried to analyze the slight confusion in his mind. That complete relaxation of last night had not returned. There was a vague, disturbing sense of something wrong, something forgotten, too obscure to be analyzable. But he thought it was somehow connected with Margaret.

A symbol, a word, a sign—what?

He dismissed it, or tried to, and looked forward to a week's relaxation in Margaret's company. The prospect was a pleasant one.

And it was pleasant—up to the period when he looked into Margaret's eyes and felt his senses blank out.

He made the return trip by stages, under posthypnotic control. Afterward there were flashes of memory—finding himself in Missouri, Ohio, Pennsylvania, knowing the vital urgency of arranging another stage in the journey and the equal urgency of communicating with Margaret by visor.

Each stage was a unit in itself, beyond which he could not look or think. And eventually, under hypnosis and the personal guidance of an expendable, he reached the hideout.

What happened after that was vague and strange.

He remained passive. He was not called upon to do anything, except listen, learn, and understand. The time for decision was not yet. Like a man in a dream—which he was—he allowed himself to be led through the underground rooms and corridors and laboratories,

listening, watching, not questioning anything, though much of what he saw had come to this world from Omega and was unlike anything he had ever known before.

The hypnotic control played him like a delicate instrument, lessening and increasing the intensity as it was needed. His stolen memories returned—memories of what Ilsa Carter had told him in her apartment, and the meaning of the Zodiacal symbol— He remained a witness, while all around him a flurry of high-tension activity went on.

There was no attempt to keep any further secrets from him. On the contrary, Jeng and the others made every effort to acquaint him with the whole history, aim and purpose of the underground organization. With Jeng, he listened to the playbacks of the voice from Omega. With Ilsa Carter, he watched De Anza and Louis being given the sedative shots. He saw the Freak, motionless as a monstrous image in his tank.

Meanwhile the man from Omega spoke further, and Breden listened to that, too.

In a way, it was rather pleasant. All responsibility was taken from him. He was fed, clothed, housed; he had only to watch and listen. He watched as an abstract critic, so that it was only abstractedly that what he learned conflicted with his psychic conditioning. But though he did not know it, the forces within him were unconsciously building up to the decision he would eventually have to make.

And when the opportunity came, habit made him react as he did.

Jeng, in his endless integrations, had forgotten one factor. Joseph Breden was not an ordinary man. The organization had searched for a long time before they found the one individual who fitted their needs by virtue of his psychological background and his social position. There had been other possibilities, eventually discarded, who were guardians connected with the uranium piles, and who would be malleable to psych-pressure.

But only Breden, it seemed, had combined another factor: something not quite analyzable, a certain latent positivism—*je ne sais quois*, in fact, which had almost eluded the organization's skillful, trained searchers. The basis of their report could be divided into three parts:

- 1) Joseph Breden had access to Uranium Pile Number One
- 2) Joseph Breden was vulnerable to psychological pressure
- 3) Joseph Breden could become very active indeed, once he had made a decision.

Slowly, as the days passed, Breden began to realize that a spark had kindled in his mind. He thought it had always been there, deep down. But now it was being fanned brighter, and its glow was strangely reassuring. As he sat before the televisor, waiting for the face of his Control—Margaret's face—to check in, the strange, small, cold spark grew brighter in his mind.

He became conscious that a synapse existed—that the spark was an extension of himself. So might a man who had never opened his eyes be conscious of gradations of light striking through his lids. He tested the extension a little. He found he could bridge the synapse.

Three times he hauled himself out of the passive depths of hypnosis, only to let himself drop back into it, for this was not yet the time.

Meanwhile he waited and listened, while curious things happened in his brain.

GPC's embargo clamped down harder and harder. The Neoculturalists, who had been harmless fanatics until now, stirred into rebellion under pressure. Had that been GPC's motive all along—or did their suspicions strike deeper, closer to home? Jeng didn't know; Ilsa didn't

know; all they knew was that the constriction drew tighter, and the skeleton staff of the hideout diminished.

Too many members of the organization had to play their public lives in detail, not daring to steal time to follow Jeng's orders. So the brunt fell on others, and one day the hideout was badly undermanned.

Breden was drowsing somnambulistically on a couch when Ilsa came in.

"Follow me, Joe," she said. "Stand up and follow me. We're getting another message from Omega."

He rose slowly. And then his mind made contact with the bright spark. His arm brushed the little rod-weapon that Ilsa carried at her belt and tore it from its clasp. It tinkled to the floor. The girl jerked back, looking at him, but Breden stood motionless, staring blankly, waiting.

Ilsa bent to recover the rod. Breden brought down the edge of his palm across her nape. She fell soundlessly, cushioned by Breden's out-thrust leg. He picked her up, laid her on the couch, and took the weapon. He had never used it before, but that did not matter. Something far stronger than logic controlled him now—or he controlled it. There was some difficulty in deciding which was true.

He stepped toward a blank wall. He had never seen the lock system that opened the door here, but his hand moved in a quick, intricate gesture before the concealed photoelectric. The door opened. The expendable standing there confirmed his expendability by going down instantly under the impact of the silent, searing energy that leaped from the rod-weapon. Breden had never used this before, either, but he made it work.

He stepped into the next room. He went along a passage, opened another door, and took two quick steps in which proved to be exactly the right direction. The energy bolt of another guard missed him, but Breden's weapon did not miss.

Then he was alone with the drugged bodies of De Anza and his brother.

There was a cabinet in the corner. Breden opened it and let his gaze move swiftly across the rows and shelves of equipment. He reached for a bottle and took a hypodermic syringe from its sterilized case. Deftly—he had never done this before, either—he administered neutralizing shots to the two prisoners.

"Let's get out of here," he said when they had wakened.

De Anza wanted to ask questions, but Louis was silent as they retraced their steps. They recovered the weapons from the dead guards, and Breden showed his companions how the mechanism worked. He said softly, "We'd better kill Jeng first. If he escapes, it'll be unfortunate. Even GPC may have some trouble picking him up. Come on."

"What the devil's going on?" De Anza asked blankly.

"*Sh-h*. Come on."

Louis, fingering his weapon, frowned and looked under his brows at his brother. He seemed oddly puzzled. "Joe," he said softly, "this gadget—it's a killing weapon?"

"It is now. You can stun with it too, if you want."

"How?"

Impatiently, with two quick motions, Breden showed him. "Come on," he said, nodding toward the wall. They took the straight corridor that led to Jeng, and presently came out in the big room where the Freak lay motionless in his tank, and the voice from Omega spoke clearly

through Ortega's gadget. Jeng and his technician were together. Breden moved his rod-weapon slightly and killed the technician.

Jeng swung round in his chair. The voice spoke on from behind him, but no one listened to it now. Jeng put his hands on his knees and looked at Joseph Breden.

"Then we've failed," he said quietly. "We didn't convince you, after all."

Breden said, "Convince me of what?"

"That what we're doing is right and necessary."

Breden said over his shoulder, "Mike, back up a little. Keep your weapon on this man Jeng. Got it? Kill him if he makes a move." Then he turned so quickly that Louis Breden's gesture was arrested abortively. "Drop your weapon, Louis," Joseph Breden said, "or I'll kill you, now."

Louis didn't obey. "Wait a minute, Joe," he said. "Will you answer a question? Do you intend to kill the Freak?"

De Anza hadn't glanced away from his quarry, but he made a puzzled interrogative sound. Breden said, "Yes, of course. But—how much did Ilsa Carter tell you?"

"Practically nothing. I learned in . . . in other ways."

"Just now you intended to knock me out. Watch Jeng, Mike."

Louis said, "Yes. You see, I . . . will you listen?"

Breden said, "I don't quite . . . I don't know whether to kill you or not. I knew the answers before. But—"

Louis said, "I've been in telepathic rapport with the Freak's mind. I know the answers myself now—more of them than you know, probably, unless we've got the same mutation, Joe."

Breden started to say, "I'm not a mutant—" but then something stopped the words in his mouth and a thought like a bright light burst into sudden radiance in his mind. Imperceptibly, while the thought blazed, he hesitated. Then it died down again and he went on uncertainly, "But . . . what was it, then? What is it? I could bring myself out of hypnosis . . . I knew exactly what I wanted to do—"

Inside his brain a voice was reminding him of many small things whose sum he could not yet read. What the doctor had been about to say when he died—had he guessed then something more than the simple fact of hypnosis? The altered genes in the bodies of Breden's parents—the constant assurances he had accepted for so long, that he at least was no mutation

Louis said, "Maybe I can tell you the answer, Joe. There's one probability world where instinct has become the dominant. Instinct riding on the back of intelligence and guiding it. Instinct . . . well, that's our word for whatever the thing may be. Inadequate, of course. Something away beyond the tropisms and the taxis that rule plants and insects, but—"

"And I've got it?" Breden asked impatiently.

"I think so. It's never happened here, but the latent factors were always present. You're a mutant after all, Joe—but it was a latent mutation, until now."

"How do you know?"

"I don't. I'm guessing. But I've got premises to guess from that nobody else knows about. I've been seeing these other worlds—"

Jeng was watching and listening, his round face impassive, his eyes bright. De Anza, looking stubborn and bewildered, held his weapon unwavering. Breden's grip on his own

weapon was firm, but there was a note almost of pleading in his voice as he said, “Go on, Louis. If this is instinct—”

“Actually it’s something a lot more subtle, a sort of higher reasoning, from the evidences of senses below the threshold of conscious perception. They know something about it, but not all, in that world where it’s dominant. Maybe it’s clairvoyance, or prescience, or psychokinetic deductions, or—I don’t know, Joe! Whatever it is, something’s made it dominant in you. Maybe the hypnosis, or the psychological stresses. All I can say is that now you need it, you’ve got it. What’s really important is what you do with it.”

Breden said, half to himself, “I knew just what to do—I still know—” And he leveled his rod-weapon at Louis.

“That’s self-preservation,” Louis said quickly. “What about the other angle—preservation of the species? Will killing me solve that problem too?”

Breden said, “Talk, Louis. Let’s have it fast.”

Louis let his rod fall to the floor. He took a step back and leaned against the wall.

“Jeng,” he said, “you listen, too. I know more about what you want to do than you know. The Freak can see and understand a good deal, but he hasn’t had the experience to perform a screening process. I’ve been in rapport with his mind all the time I’ve been here, unconscious. His memories, his vision—Omega, and the other worlds. The world where instinct’s dominant—and that worked out very successfully. But it took controlled eugenics to bring it about. The worlds of war, and of Nirvana, and the worlds that died. I don’t know how many there are. Some are too far away to see clearly. There must be many further still. But—here it is: I’m a mutant, and the Freak’s a mutant. He’s never been in contact with another mutant before this, has he?”

“Your brother,” Jeng said. “If he is one.”

“Perhaps telepathy isn’t one of Joe’s traits,” Louis said. “Apparently it is one of mine. All the while you’ve kept me under drugs I’ve been in close contact with the Freak’s mind. I’ll tell you what threw him into shock. His father attacked him. And what set Ortega off was something the Freak said. The Freak can see probability variants. He can’t see backward and forward in time, but he can see across the probability track where it intersects the other worlds along the NOW-line. In one of those tracks the earth doesn’t exist. A chain reaction destroyed it.”

Through the underground room a ripple of panic moved silently.

Louis went on.

“The time-tracks branch, all through the past. Whenever a crisis occurred, there was usually a crossroads, and the result was two probability futures instead of one. Some have spread out too far to be visible now, even through the Freak’s eyes, or with the interprobability machine Van Buren made in Omega. But others can be seen. There were a good many crossroads a hundred years or so ago. Some were war tracks, others were peace tracks—like ours. In one the United States gave the UN a year to work, and propagandized Russia’s spheres of influence. That branched too: in one probability we conquered Russia, in another Russia sovietized the world. And *that* branched too. In one NOW, Russia still rules; in another the rising tide of mysticism and passive resistance from India and China have disrupted Russia from within.

“But only in two worlds is GPC in control. Alpha and—we’ll call it Beta. It’s very close to us; the crossroads occurred not ten years ago. It hasn’t gone very far away from us yet. Except that ten years ago a new germ mutation occurred in Beta. There were no research facilities

there, either. Beta is dying—of plague,” Louis ended quietly, “because it was too late to do the necessary research to save it.”

The monologue had gone beyond De Anza. He merely watched and listened. But Breden and Jeng were intent.

Jeng said, “In one probability there was a chain reaction—a fatal one? But Van Buren says that’s impossible.”

“Van Buren, in Omega, depends on a mechanical scanner. The Freak’s brain has a wider scope. He can see further across the probability lines. Van Buren doesn’t know. I’ve seen his world through the Freak’s mind—” Louis turned to his brother. “Joe, listen to me. We can communicate with Van Buren. I know how to do that. I’ve picked up that knowledge from the Freak’s brain—Jeng couldn’t, because the symbols he got from Van Buren were arbitrary and oral. But I *saw* the machine Van Buren built, as the Freak saw it. One part is missing. We can’t make that part—a deflection plate—without a radioisotope, but we don’t need to. Van Buren used that sort of plate because he had it available. He could have used a less efficient, more complicated hookup, but he didn’t need to. We do. I can tell a technician how to rig it. At least, I can sketch it out.”

“Technician?” Jeng said, looking at the body on the floor.

“De Anza could do it. Joe, you could do it. But—you’ve got to make your decision. I’ve made mine. I’ve always been a freak in this world, myself. I know that now. There was no freedom—intellectual freedom. I mean. I was rusting, playing with kid’s toys. So were you. What does guarding Uranium Pile One mean? Upholding the *status quo*—but I saw the result of that in Beta!”

Breden hadn’t lowered his weapon. “Destroying the Uranium Pile would mean . . . might mean destruction of the planet.”

“It happened only once, in another probability. Why didn’t it happen in any of the other probabilities? Why not in Omega, where they’ve harnessed atomics for years? What does your instinct tell you about that?”

Jeng said suddenly, “It seems to me that your brother must make a choice between two drives—self-preservation and preservation of the species. If he chooses the first he’ll kill me—and you too, Louis. But if he chooses the second—”

“He’ll choose the second,” Louis said, “if his instinct is the same one I saw working on that other world. It wouldn’t have become dominant there and succeeded unless it perpetuated the species.”

Breden said. “Louis. In Omega—have they really cured cancer?”

“I saw no cases there,” Louis told him. “And that’s rather my field. I don’t know, of course. But through the Freak’s brain I saw their medical technologies and—I think they have.”

De Anza cried out suddenly.

“Joe! What is it they want you to do?”

No one answered. Perhaps it was conditioning that lifted De Anza’s weapon and aimed it at Jeng. For Mike De Anza fitted in this world, in the *status quo*, and his mind had already crystallized, though he was younger than Louis or Joseph Breden.

Perhaps it was conditioning that made him try to kill Philip Jeng.

But it was instinct that kept Breden silent, though he knew that behind him Ilsa Carter had come quietly in, until her energy weapon smashed home into De Anza’s brain.

Crossing that blast, a beam shot out from Bredden's rod toward her. But it was a beam to stun, not to kill, and it struck only her wrist above the weapon. Ilsa's rod tinkled to the floor with a sharp, clear sound above the sliding and the thud of De Anza's body. She stood staring at them, clutching her paralyzed wrist.

Bredren said, "Wait, Ilsa. Louis—wait. I've made my decision. I let you kill De Anza, didn't I?"

"But you didn't see me," she said. "Your back was toward me."

"I didn't need to see you. I knew how hard I'd struck you. I knew exactly when you'd wake up and what you'd do. I could tell . . . instinct, I suppose. It's useful, sometimes. And—I liked Mike, too. He's luckier than we are, at that—not having to face the reorganization that's coming."

Jeng was impassive. Louis said, "Then it's preservation of the species, after all?"

Bredren said, "I don't know. I really don't know. Perhaps it's the unconscious conditioning I've been having for months—the recurrent dreams—you don't know about those. I only know that, somehow, I'm working on the other side now. My job was never really important to me, though I thought it was. I never had a chance to . . . to—"

Louis smiled. "To surpass me?"

"Yes," Bredren said. "That was it, of course."

His brother nodded. "I was trying to surpass somebody too. Somebody I thought didn't exist. The man I might have been, given intellectual freedom, in a different set-up. Maybe I can accomplish some of that now, but I'm afraid too much of me may have got stultified—even if we prolong longevity here and I live for two hundred years. Go on and try to surpass me, Joe—and good luck. I'll be trying the same game. Trying to surpass the man I might have been—" His gaze went to the machine behind Jeng. "John Van Buren," he said. "If I'd been born in Omega—or if this world's past had been different—"

Bredren was looking down at De Anza's body. "Intelligence and instinct—or whatever-it-is," he said. "But what about emotion? There's no time now. We've got to find a way to talk to Van Buren. Louis, what about that hookup you said you could explain?"

They began to work.

They succeeded.

Oral communication between two cultures must be handicapped semantically. But now there was visual communication as well, with Louis using the Freak's brain as a library. Van Buren still could not touch the Freak's mind, in shock as it was, but Louis could touch it and read the memories. Basically it was a reference library for him. As for the two-way communicator, Joseph Bredren was technician enough to make sense out of Louis' charts and explanations. So, in the end—

Communication was opened, and they talked together—Omega and Alpha.

"Your world is Alpha, then," Van Buren said. "To use arbitrary symbols. My world is Omega. Those two diverged not quite a hundred years ago. There are apparently a great many other probability-variant earths, but only two of them are close to yours—Alpha. Beta-earth diverged from yours ten years ago, when the germ-mutations got out of hand. I can't reach them, because there's no Freak to establish the initial rapport. Then there's Gamma-earth,

which diverged from yours thirty-five years ago, when a uranium pile accidentally reached crucial mass.”

“I saw it,” Louis said, but Jeng leaned forward.

“Was that the earth that was destroyed by the chain reaction?”

“Oh, no. Gamma’s still very much in existence. A uranium pile can blow off without wrecking a planet. There was a hundred-mile radius explosion on Gamma, that’s all. The important thing is that there was a social explosion too. The various rebellious elements like the Neoculturalists—they existed on Gamma, too—began to rebel. GPC’s superiority had depended on *status quo*, the stability of the uranium piles. People assume that a policeman has authority and will protect them, but if the policeman’s gun is proved not only useless but dangerous to innocent victims—well, there was chaos on Gamma, and then anarchy. GPC fought for its life and lost. It was dog eat dog. GPC had moral superiority and weapons; the first vanished when the uranium pile blew up, and it isn’t hard to make weapons. So there was atomic warfare again, decentralization—as on our world, long ago—and then germ warfare. Now they’re beginning to rebuild on Gamma. They’ll have time. They’ve already extended their life span considerably, and that means their research men will get a lot better as they acquire more experience—hundreds of years of experience, probably.”

“Have they cured cancer?” Breden asked.

“Some forms. It mutates, you know. We—”

“Have you a cure?”

“Yes. Whether or not our mutated strains are the same as yours—”

Louis asked quick questions, and emerged with a doubtful frown. “We might be able to do it,” he said.

Van Buren said, “Cancer isn’t incurable. Given a research fund and skilled men, you can find a cure fairly easily.”

“Wait a minute, Joe,” Louis said. “Don’t count too much on this yet. I said we *might*—but not yet.”

“Why not?”

“Time and equipment. It takes months to grow penicillin, and you need power and equipment—X ray, ultraviolet, and so on. Insulin’s a specific for diabetes, but you need an industrial plant to get it from the pancreatic glands of dead animals. Look. Omega’s a hundred years or more ahead of us, and it’s got the time and the facilities for these things. GPC has some of the facilities, but won’t permit research, and I think GPC’s time is running out. Research depends on stability.”

“GPC’s got stability,” Breden said doubtfully. Jeng glanced at him.

“Has it?” he asked.

“You can use a magic wand,” Louis said, “but first you’ve got to make the wand. We’ll be able to cure cancer, but Van Buren’s specific won’t be any help till we can produce it.”

And, after a time—

“But one earth was destroyed by the chain reaction, Van Buren,” Jeng said. “What about that?”

“I’ve been considering that since you told me. I hadn’t seen that particular probability before. But—”

Louis broke in, and there was a period of technical discussion, from which one factor emerged triumphant. Van Buren said, “Yes. I believe that must be it. In some probability earths there have been artificial radioelements created—there are plenty besides the uranium

isotopes, of course. In some of the worlds I've seen—right, Louis?—they work with radioelements we've never created on Omega. On that destroyed planet they must have created an element so powerful and unstable that the chain reaction could and did vaporize their world. But here in Omega we work daily with all the radioactive elements you have available, and the safety factor on all of them is known. Destroying your Uranium Pile Number One will make a big noise—but not big enough to do more than smash GPC.”

“If I can get near Number One,” Breden said.

Louis studied him. “You’ve got a new weapon, Joe. Your instinct, or super-logic, or—whatever it is. You’ve enough motive, enough drive, to keep it in operation. You’ll instinctively know the right thing to do.”

“Yes,” Breden said, “I’ll *know*, all right—but what about physical limitations? I’m not a superman.”

Isa said, “Van Buren, can’t you explode Uranium Pile Number One from your world?”

“Yes,” the voice from Omega said, “I could. But it would destroy both our planets. That’s why I can never visit your world, or you mine. I told you the energy potentials of our continua are too different. If a channel were opened, they’d equalize—and the difference in voltage is rather inconceivable. The higher-voltage continuum would drain into the lower one instantly, and at the point of contact—there’d be neither Alpha nor Omega. Even a few volts difference would mean a big bang—a release of energy that would make quite a noise—and there’s more than a few volts difference between your universe and mine. I think it depends on Joseph Breden.”

Breden looked at his watch.

There was no need for hypnosis now. His new-found recessive talent, become dominant, guided him. The spark in his brain, the infallible instinct, pulled him through the psych tests.

It was not easy. It was gruelling. All the while Dr. Hoag and the others worked with him, he was thinking of Carolyn Kohl, and wondering if that part of his dream would come true. He wouldn’t shoot her; he had no weapon. But he would have to silence her in some way.

Automatically, instinctively, he reacted properly to the tests.

“Why did you pull your arm out of the shot box before the neutralizing agent was administered?”

“I didn’t. I felt the shot.” He knew that was the right answer to give.

Hoag talked to the others. “Suggestion? After all, there’s the booster dermal anaesthetic. He was expecting to feel the needle . . . no, not pain, simply the tactile sensation—”

Margaret. They were on the same side now, fighting together, and that was as it should be. He hadn’t seen her; he’d gone directly to New York, and thence to the island where the sunken ziggurat was, guarding its monstrous treasure. Beneath him he could sense the silent, thundering pulse of the thing. Uranium Pile Number One.

He had not touched a damper yet. But as he moved steadily through the psych tests, he felt the energy-level rising toward critical mass. Not really; it would not register on any instrument. Yet when he reached the Thing—

It throbbed!

Bridging the synapse between brain and monster, the illusory sensation leaped.

It pulsed!

And then, suddenly and unexpectedly, Dr. Hoag was saying, “Well, Breden, I guess that’s all. Take over.”

Breden smiled. “*Summa cum laude?*”

“Sure,” Hoag said. “Better get along, or you’ll be late.” He settled back in his chair, and Breden, nodding at the other members of the Board, got up and went out. He walked along the blank corridor and stepped into the elevator.

He touched the control. His mind was moving very swiftly, not planning ahead—he would depend on instinct for that—but weighing possibilities. He wondered how the instinct would direct him—that infallible instinct that was his own mutation. And Carrie? He hoped he wouldn’t have to kill her, as, really, he’d killed Mike De Anza. But she was like Mike, after all, one of the people, without drive, a person to fill a routine job capably, but never one who should be trusted to guide or plan new things. She had crystallized; she was satisfied. The fact that nuclear physics was her field didn’t indicate that she was imaginative; routine nuclear physics was no longer an adventure. But other adventures existed—

Instinct warned him. The elevator was moving up, not down. Suddenly Breden’s hands flashed across the controls, deftly disconnecting, rewiring, plugging—

And, as suddenly, the instinct failed.

The panel slid open. He saw a bare, blank corridor ahead. He walked along it, slowly, watchfully.

And stepped into the cabin of a helicopter. Behind him the plane’s door shut. He stood there, waiting, as the copter began to rise.

He listened to the voice of his new instinct.

Dr. Hoag suspected something.

The psych tests had made the Board suspect. Not all, but enough. There was no way to outwit them—no way at all. The fight’s lost. They maneuvered you out of the ziggurat cleverly. From the moment you entered Hoag’s office, your path to the uranium pile was blocked and barred. They took that precaution. If you’d passed the tests—but, after all, you didn’t. Instinct can do only so much. This world is based on reason, not instinct. And when you’re up against a machine that’s simply too big for you, you fail.

So they suspect you now. You’ll never be allowed on the island again. You’ll be investigated, checked—made to talk. You will talk, under drugs. Instinct won’t help you then—if that’s what this wild talent is. Because compromise will be logical, since GPC will infallibly win. The underground movement depended on you, and you failed. So the future will be GPC’s. Compromise is the answer. It will preserve your life and the lives of Margaret and your child. GPC will question you, find the truth—and cure you, condition you until you are a GPC man again.

In the probability-world where instinct, or whatever-it-was, had been eugenically bred into the race and the planet molded to fit that, you’d have fitted too. But not here. Not in Alpha. You’d be marked out, a freak, and a dangerous one, to be eliminated. This—instinct—proves that the only answer for you now is—the instinct must become recessive again, instead of dominant.

And the instinct—became recessive.

But it was not infallible. It worked on the logics of one probability plane only. An hour later John Van Buren’s voice said over the transmitter:

“He’s in Chancery now. They’re beginning to question him. He’s under drug-hypnosis.”

Ilsa, Jeng, and Louis Breden were listening. Behind them, in the tank, the Freak floated without a movement. Ilsa stood up and began to march back and forth.

“If we could act—!” she said.

Jeng said, “While the uranium piles remain below critical mass, we can’t hope to accomplish a thing. I think we’d better disperse, for a bit.”

Ilsa said, “A suicide plane, diving at the ziggurat—”

Louis said, “You know that’s no good. A plane would be detected and shot down. Besides, even if you hit the ziggurat, it wouldn’t do any damage. Don’t you know how the thing’s constructed?”

Jeng said, “My integrations are finished, until a new factor enters. Our Plan Z-15 is ready, but it depended on Breden’s destroying the uranium pile. The cells of our organization are ready to act. They can’t hope to conquer, but they could have triggered the anarchic movement. Except—Breden didn’t succeed.”

There was silence. Van Buren said, “GPC is making him talk. Under hypnosis, he’s vulnerable.”

“What about that instinct of his?” Ilsa asked sharply. “Doesn’t that tell him he’d better keep quiet?”

“Instinct, precience, super-logic—perhaps it’s wiser than we are,” Jeng said. The girl turned toward the door.

“I’m going to have a try, anyway,” she said. “What else is there to do?”

“Have you any bombs?” Jeng asked. “Well, then. It’s futile.”

“So you’re giving up?”

“No,” the Tibetan said with placid patience.

Louis said, “Van Buren, can’t you see any way out? Isn’t there anything we can do?”

Van Buren said, “I’m sorry. Your world is psychopathic. Perhaps no psychopathic patient can ever really cure himself. The cure must be administered from outside—but I can’t come into your world, and my weapons wouldn’t work in your continuum anyway.”

Ilsa said violently, “Then open the channel between Alpha and Omega! It’s better to destroy our earth than have it work out the way it did on Gamma.”

“That would destroy my world too,” Van Buren said.

“Well—open the channel between us and Gamma,” Ilsa said. “This whole planet’s become expendable by now. Nothing can cure us—you can’t, and we can’t—”

Louis Breden said abruptly, “Van Buren! What about that? Could you bridge the gap between Alpha and Gamma?”

“Yes.”

“At any geographical point on either earth?”

“Yes.”

“What’s the voltage differential between Alpha and Gamma?”

“Too much to be safe. The two earths diverged thirty-five years ago—”

Jeng said softly, “What is the difference in energy potential between our world and Beta? That divergence occurred only ten years ago.”

“Two volts, perhaps,” the voice from Omega said. “There have been equalizing factors that maintained a fair balance. Exactly. I could channel the potential between Alpha—your earth—and Beta, and it would make a big noise. Not big enough to destroy a planet, or even an island, but—”

“Channel the energy potential between somewhere on Beta, and Uranium Pile Number One here,” Louis said. “Then?”

“Then critical mass would not be reached,” Van Buren said. “But I could destroy the controls—which would do as well! That would be safe—except for the danger area about that island. Very well. It will take me an hour, perhaps. Make your plans, Jeng. I’ll begin the work.”

It pulsed!

The monster’s heart beat thudded rhythmically through the sunken ziggurat, undetected and unnoticed.

Carolyn Kohl and her new co-guardian played tri-di chess, glancing occasionally at the gauges that told them nothing.

That was on Alpha.

On Beta, the virus- and germ-mutations raged unchecked, scourging a world falling into chaos, where GPC clutched vainly at the reins rotting in its grasp.

On Omega, John Van Buren jury-rigged his machine.

On Alpha, in Chancery, GPC’s best-qualified men were questioning Joseph Breden and moving the precision machinery of their police controls into swift action against the underground.

And in the ziggurat the monster crouched like a cancer, a tumor that could have been benignant, but had instead grown into a malignant sarcoma in a hundred years. Like the two tumors within the body of Margaret Breden—the benignant one in her womb, and the latent, malignant cancer filtering through her blood.

The psychopathic world lay waiting, unsuspecting, while Van Buren prepared his electric shock therapy.

No patient can cure himself. But a shock from outside—

Van Buren made the last movement necessary.

The channel opened between Alpha and Beta. The energy potentials of two probability-continua, no longer insulated from each other, met—and leveled.

Only two volts difference—but enough to bring Uranium Pile Number One to critical mass.

In his tank, the Freak opened his mouth and screamed.

Six weeks later Louis Breden sat before the transmitter, talking to Van Buren. Now, more than ever, the organization needed Van Buren’s advice. Too much had happened—more than they had expected; but the man in Omega seemed unperturbed.

“Things are working out,” he said. “We have the other probability world for purposes of comparison. You say that germ warfare is already beginning; that’s the natural progression.”

“I hope we survive it,” Louis said.

“Enough of you will. Drastic ills . . . enough of you will.”

“Ortega didn’t.”

“But already you’ve found a specific for his coryza-variant virus,” Van Buren said. “You could cure him now, if he were alive. And you’re curing others.”

It was true enough. Some died, but others would survive, sometimes the unexpected ones. The Freak had not only survived, but had been cured, brought out of his shock stupor and into complete rationality. He had somehow sensed or felt the atomic blast at the island, and had realized that this world, at any rate, was not doomed to destruction by the chain reaction. There was another earth that had been so destroyed, but apparently through use of a different,

unstable artificial element or isotope. The Freak was cured, and was proving extremely useful, though he was still bound to his tank.

Yet Ortega was dead, a victim of the mutated coryza virus. And the world was in chaotic anarchy. Decentralization had happened weeks ago. GPC was now only one of a dozen groups that strove for power. And through the struggle weaved the forces of the underground, not yet ready to reintegrate, deftly turning the kaleidoscope whenever it showed a tendency to settle into the wrong pattern.

Ilsa Carter was still alive and useful. And Joseph Breden was alive too—in the confusion, it hadn't been impossible to arrange his escape from the Chancery of the bewildered GPC. He, too, was helping, finding some release for his talents, though not until peace came would they find their full scope. And Margaret was alive also, in a hideaway in the Rocky Mountains, nursing a baby girl who seemed perfectly normal and nonmutant.

The shock treatment had worked. Now, perhaps, it was the stage of pentothal narcosynthesis—the patient was undergoing katharsis.

"I'm on the trail of that longevity thing," Louis said. "We don't have the facilities yet, but we'll get them. However, the main thing for us now is to find protection against the coming biological attacks."

"Being able to see the other probability-worlds will help," Van Buren repeated, and Louis, eying the blank wires of the transmitter, nodded. He was trying to visualize Van Buren's face as he had seen it in the Freak's mind. It was a face much like his own, but there were differences. Within the last month, rather oddly, Louis' expression had changed so that the resemblance was very marked—to the few who could make the comparison. Yet a basic difference would always remain. For Louis it would always be a little too late. He had a chance now to catch up, and there might be more of a chance later, if the longevity genes could be maneuvered satisfactorily.

The Freak called Louis telepathically. Both Van Buren and Louis slipped into the Freak's mind, and saw, with his strange, intra-probability vision, an earth they had not glimpsed before, far beyond the scope of Van Buren's mechanical scanner.

"A nice world," Louis said inadequately. "So will ours be, some day. That one took the right route at some crossroads—I wonder when?"

"There are so many crossroads, Louis," Van Buren said. "There are the major ones and the minor. I think our major one was in 1945—we'd probably never have dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima if the Jap kamikaze fleet hadn't destroyed Washington."

Louis said, "We might have. We've always been a sentimental nation—but we might have done it, just the same."

"I hope not. We needed destruction in our own country to be able to understand it. You can't convey war to a nation through words or pictures. And we needed that bombing—or we'd never have respected atomic power enough to keep it under control. We had to make a decision and stick to it, not keep on compromising with politics and anachronistic social shibboleths. There were plenty of probability crossroads a hundred years ago, but I think the most important one was the Washington-bombing factor. There were earths where Washington wasn't bombed!"

"Yes," Louis said, his thought escaping unfinished in the blaze of an incandescent memory that would always be blinding, no matter how often it returned to him. *It was the earth once.*

Van Buren said, "We can tell, now, what happened to some of those earths, and what roads they took. Well, some of them haven't turned out to be failures. For others—it's too late. It

was too late for them a hundred years ago.”

Louis forced his mind away from the shining horror of a memory. “*All our yesterdays—*” he said.

“. . . *Have lighted fools the way to dusty death,*” Van Buren finished the quotation. “No, Louis—not all. The ones that did—well, they stood at their crossroads and were given a fair choice. And they committed suicide. So forget about them—they’re not important now.”

Louis said, “Man got used to being given another chance. But there’s no second chance with atomic power, is there? The failures—”

“It’s already too late,” Van Buren repeated. “They don’t matter any more.”

THE END.

[The end of *Tomorrow and Tomorrow* by Henry Kuttner (as Lewis Padgett)]