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TIME WAS

It was the first faster-than-light ship to be designed. There was no reason on Earth why it shouldn't succeed. Elsewhere, there were other opinions . . .

[PROLOGUE

It was a natural step that men should build ships to reach other planets -other stars. Project 13 was such a rocket -a space-ship efficient, self-contained, and larger than any built before. Nick Riordan was a man to whom the ship meant much -it was the first step in Mankind's expansion to the stars. He desperately wanted it to be successful. Others planned that it should fail- for their own reasons.

Space and time can be strange factors when trips are made that encompass uncountable vastnesses of space, as Nick soon found. Einstein's theory that no object can exceed the speed of light--- 186,000 miles per second- was right ... yet wrong in an astonishing way which made of Project 13 a hulk that must never reach space.

Through the adventures that befell, Nick carried always a gift from his grandfather. Henry Riordan. Only at last did he learn its secret, and realise Henry Riordan's wisdom.]

High buildings and wide, busy streets baked under the evening sun. Beyond the city boundary, a shining spear upthrust at the sky, gleamed a vessel that overtopped even the green and cream buildings. Nick Riordan withdrew from the window and put on his tie. There had never been a vessel like the Project 13, he thought - could never be another like her, for she was the first of her kind. Little ships had made their tiny journeys to the other planets in the system, but Project 13 used molecular combustion and should reach other galaxies. She was the trail-maker. The others - for there would be others, he was sure - would only follow.

"Still dreaming, Nick ?"

He turned from the mirror and put on his jacket. His wife smiled wistfully, her eyes turned down. Her chin was level with his shoulder and he lifted it.

"Who doesn't, when he's making history, Niora ? Project 13 can take men out of this system. Doesn't that thrill you ?"

Niora lifted thin, pencilled brows. "Perhaps. Things like that mean less in a woman's

life. The inventor of gunpowder created history, too."

Nick examined her, a deep wrinkle of concentration on his forehead. Her judgment was usually sound; her face had a purposeful look and could be stubborn, despite her beauty, but was abruptly illuminated by a smile.

"You'll be late to see Alfred Somers, Nick," she reminded him. "It'll take you an hour to reach his place."

"It will," he agreed. "Changed your mind ?"

"No, Nick. I won't come. When men talk shop about things women don't understand we're better out of it."

Nick rode the lift three floors down to street level and got his saloon from the basement garage. Alf Somers was one of the three men he counted as friends. Soon the streets were far behind and he sped east along the radial road, and through the green belt surrounding the city. At an intersection he turned off and his lean, high-boned face slipped momentarily into a wry grin. This was not the shortest way - but it took him by the Project 13 site, and his gaze sought ahead. [He remembered his grandfather, old Henry Riordan, and the excitement with which he had first seen the ship.]

Sun shone on the upper part of the long vessel; the lower half was in shadow. She stood squarely upon her stern fins, from which radiated the railway lines along which equipment was brought. Four trucks and a locomotive rolled slowly from sight behind the ship's base, and Nick slowed involuntarily. The vessel's sheer mightiness was beautiful, he thought. There was arrogance in the way she pointed like a threatening spear at the evening sky. She showed men sought new worlds among the stars.

The sun was going from the hills beyond the city, and Nick turned into a second-class road, wondering about Alf Somers, his expression bleak. They had grown from boys together. Alf would never play the traitor, Nick thought. That was not his way. But no other explanation fitted, yet.

The saloon wound down behind the hills and Nick looked across the valley for the little white and red house where Alf lived. Alf had been wholly a friend, Nick thought as he drove rapidly. Even when both had wanted to marry Niora there had been no misunderstanding between them. He tried to decide how to introduce what troubled him. "Alf," he could say, "only you and I have ever seen or used the completed astrocompass of the Project 13 ship. And I haven't talked " It would not be easy to say.

He parked at the end of the gravel drive before the square white and red house and rang the bell. "We're honest men, Alf," he would say. "Let's talk this over quietly.

There's an explanation, and I want to believe it "

There was no reply; he rang again, puzzled. He had phoned through about ten minutes before leaving - that would be about an hour and a quarter before, he calculated. Alf had answered, his voice not sounding wholly natural, and Nick tried to recall their exact words. "I'd like to call - to talk something over, Alf." Alf had said: "Not to-night, I'm working," then hung up. That itself had been odd and not like Alf, Nick reflected as he walked round the house. He had wanted to say some things were too important to wait.

The brick building Alf called his workshop in obvious under-statement was at the end of the garden away from the road. No lights shone from its frosted windows. Nick tried the door, found it locked, and after hesitating turned the small steel dial set above the knob. "I'm half deaf when working," Alf had once said, and told him the combination. "Come in any time you like. I fixed this lock after leaving my keys in town one day."

The workshop, three-roomed, high and airy, was empty. Machine tools stood silent, and in the second room electronic instruments filled the shelves and littered a long bench. Nick crossed it, feet soundless on the insulated floor, and pushed open the door into what Alf called the reference room.

Chairs stood round the central table, littered with books from the shelves lining the walls. A strange sense of something wrong crept over Nick as a sixth sense whispered of danger of an odd, unknown kind. Walking stiffly, eyes alert, he moved to the table. Behind it lay a man in a blue overall with red hair brushed back, and quite still. Nick went round quickly and knelt by the body. Alf Somers did not move. His light blue eyes gazed up unseeingly and an inexplicable expression seemed locked for ever on his face. His heart did not beat.

Nick rose and went to the phone, but he halted without touching it. Better not, he decided. There might be prints.

He went quickly back through the workshops and locked the door, wondering how this tied up with leakage from the project site. He had started the car and was backing to turn when the house door opened and a man in a blue overall came down the step to him. Nick found himself gazing up into light blue eyes in a mobile face topped by red hair, and his brain oscillated like a plucked spring: Alf Somers was back there in the reference room, motionless and cold. Yet, against all the dictates of sanity, Alf Somers was now looking in on him through the saloon window, frowning.

"Thought I told you not to come, Nick. I was busy," he said.

Nick met the blue eyes and felt the unease that had first caught his nerves in the reference room return intensely. Every wrinkle, every shade of hair and eye were Alf

's. The voice was his ; so was the hand on the open window. And yet Nick knew he had made no mistake. Alf Somers lay behind the- table ...

The eyes seemd to change hue and Nick knew his hesitation was noted. The hand - Alf's, yet not Alf's - reached for the saloon door handle.

Nick let in the clutch jerkily . . . Only when he had negotiated the curving drive and his tyres thrummed the main road did his panic subside and his colour begin to return. His hastened breathing subsided; he lit a cigarette with trembling fingers, slowing the saloon to a safe speed. When he had reached the intersection to the green belt his full self-control had returned. He shuddered once, recalling the eyes that had looked into his. That second man who had come from the house was not Alf. Beyond that paradox Nick could not go.

[He wished that his grandfather was still alive. Henry Riordan had been wise. His advice was good. White-haired, kindly, he had always had time to listen. Once, he had placed a box in Nick's hands, It was sealed.

"Open it - one day," he had said.

Nick had been curious. "When? How shall I know when?"

Henry Riordan had patted his shoulder. "You'll know- when the time comes, lad. Keep it -always. If you doubt that the time to open it has come -don't open it. Only when you know - when you're sure - do as I say."

Nick had turned the box about. It would go in a pocket. There was no lock -only a golden band holding the lid tightly closed.

His grandfather had smiled. "When the time comes -you'll know, lad," he had said. "Then, and only then, open it."

Nick carried the box always.]

Judge Henson leaned back heavily in his wide chair and puffed cigar smoke at the ceiling. Through it his gaze returned keenly to Nick.

"So you reported the death from a call-box, then came right here ?"

Nick nodded. Judge Henson was the second of the three men he counted as truly friend - and Niora's father. Sixty, shrewd, he could be relied upon.

"Yes. You're on the way back - and I wanted to talk. There were things I couldn't leave unsaid "

"So I've gathered," Judge Henson commented drily from behind the haze. "You're sure Alfred Somers was dead ?"

"Absolutely." Nick knew the judge's tone only concealed his intense, critical interest. "Men don't look like that when they're alive."

Judge Henson nodded quietly to himself so that the swivel chair behind the desk creaked. The desk lamp left his face in shadow. "What did the police think ?" he asked abruptly.

"They're sending an ambulance and surgeon immediately, and asked me to go back."

"Yet you did not. That could look suspicious."

The odd timbre of the words arrested Nick. A shock radiated down his spine and his breathing momentarily halted. The voice suddenly seemed only an imitation of Judge Henson's - an indefinable something had been lost. It had been like that when the second Alf Somers had spoken through the saloon window, and the tiny, inexplicable oddness had made him engage the clutch with a jerk. Now his hands grew tight on the chair arms and his muscles tensed. He wished the judge was not in shadows, and the room not so hazed with cigar smoke drifting in the brilliant disc of light cast on the desk.

"Suspicious ?" Nick murmured, and congratulated himself that his voice betrayed nothing.

"The person who finds the body must always be suspect." The other drew on his cigar and exhaled smoke-rings towards the ceiling. Nick watched, fascinated. He had often seen Judge Henson do exactly that; yet this was different. Confused, he thought the other seemed no longer to be the man he had known, and was somehow dangerous, even as he smiled in the dimness, his round cheeks rising and his eyes on Nick. "I went to see Alfred and apparently left only an hour or so before you called. He was alive and well."

The statement held no accusation, but Nick felt his nerves tighten and he got up. His host swivelled round in his chair and came round the desk heavily, still in semi-shadow.

"You were - at Alf's ?" Nick asked, his throat contracted.

"Certainly. He wanted me to check some legal papers."

That could be, Nick thought. Yet why did some intuitive sense scream that here was

danger he did not understand; that the other, standing with one hand on the desk watching him, was not Niora's father, and was not deceived . . .

"I see." Nick made his voice casual. He felt that an acute intelligence was deciding what should be done, and preparing to act. "I mentioned to the police I'd be coming here, so perhaps I'd better hurry."

He wondered if the lie would pass. The thickly lidded eyes did not waver ; the sensation of sharp personal danger grew, but to the face came a smile which could have been Henson's, and reserved for an admired son-in-law.

"Very well, Nick." He indicated the door ponderously. "I'll let you out."

[Nick was silent. Two friends had become - strangers.]

Nick drove with one hand, mopping his face. The perspiration was cold and he knew that his forehead and cheeks were white. Two friends had become - strangers. But so subtle was the change an acquaintance would never know. Alf Somers was a solitary, quiet man, and lived alone. Judge Henson had retired two years before; his wife was dead; Niora was his only daughter, and he rarely kept company. The choice had been good, Nick thought. The two had few close friends to notice . . . He frowned to himself. What did he mean - the choice had been good ?

Orange globes ahead marked the green belt. Two searchlights illuminated the Project 13 vessel, topped by red lights as an aircraft warning. On impulse Nick turned in through the main gate, showed his pass, and stopped outside the long offices. His third friend would be here . . .

He went into the outer office. A girl was drinking coffee and yawning behind the reception desk.

"Sam Cordy here ?" he asked.

She blinked herself awake and smiled. "Yes, Mr. Riordan. In the outside bay."

"Thanks."

He let himself out and went across to buildings opposite. Trucks rolled past; men came and went, and in the machine shops tools whined. Nick felt his nerves tightening again as he approached the bay where Sam would be. Alf Somers had been the first; old Judge Henson his second friend . . . With a shock he realised Sam, too, did not love society. He was unmarried, and almost lived on the site, immersed wholeheartedly in the project.

A man was coming towards him among the piles of stores and crated and labelled equipment, and Nick halted. This was Sam. The eyes, twinkling and with tiny wrinkles; the slightly humorous uptilt to the corners of the mouth; the good-humoured face, a trifle round and boyish for a man of forty - all were Sam, and Nick felt as if a ponderous load had been removed from his shoulders. [He had felt like that when seeing his grandfather.]

" 'Low, Nick." Sam slapped his back. "Come to see nobody's stolen our little rocket ?"

Nick smiled faintly; Sam's jokes were always deplorably weak. They went out into the night air, away from the voices and activity in the bay, and Nick looked up. Almost overhead Ursa Major shone brightly; north, just visible, was the Cassiopeia group, and west, rising above the outline of Project 13, the Lyra and Hercules constellations.

"Have you ever felt how big the cosmos is, Nick ?" Sam murmured. "That's where we're going. To the stars. Man is a wonderful thing, supreme, always conquering "

"Time was when the giant saurians thought that - if they thought." Nick wondered how to begin. "When a life-form expands out of its own environment it must expect to come into conflict with things perhaps its superiors."

Sam Cordy seemed to be pondering. A light from the building threw their shadows long across the concrete. "Meaning what ?" he asked at last.

"That the cosmos is big, as you say. That Project 13 constitutes a threat to everything out there." Nick indicated the heavens. "It will give man the power to impose himself on other worlds. That other worlds may not care to be imposed upon is a point we seldom consider. Mars and Venus are like Earth - pebbles in the same puddle. Out there may be planets and worlds quite different. Project 13 is a stepping-stone to those worlds. Time was when mankind was the greatest thing men knew; when he could build his stepping-stones how and when he wished. But I've often wondered whether that will always be so. Why should man be top-dog, in all that ?" He expressively indicated the sky from horizon to horizon.

Sam Cordy grinned in the light of a passing lorry. "Romancer," he said. "Dreamer. How about a drink ?"

They drank in the tiny bar at the end of the office buildings. When Nick left, he knew he had mentioned not one of the things which had brought him to see Sam. It had been too difficult to begin. Could he be certain he had not made a mistake ? It seemed impossible to say. He got into the saloon, frowning.

Niora was waiting and from her face he knew that the police had phoned. "They're annoyed, Nick," she said.

He hung up his hat, avoiding her clear, golden eyes. Annoyed, he thought. That meant they had found no body, either in the reference room or elsewhere. Quite likely Alf - the second Alf - had been waiting for them when they called.

"It was a silly mistake, dear." She had followed him into the living-room, her low voice puzzled. "They expect you to make a full statement first thing to-morrow." '

Nick felt she needed some apparently logical explanation. He pulled a face. "Guess it does look silly, Niora. I suppose Alf was laid out with some kind of attack and I panicked."

He hoped she believed what he knew was a lie: Alf had been dead. Dead, with eyes glazed, heart still, and breathing halted for ever.

He went to the window and looked out over the glowing city, not wanting to talk, or add further excuses. To talk of what he had seen would bring in Niora's father, and he preferred she should not know that there, too, some- thing he could not pretend to understand had happened.

A man was loitering in the street below. He looked up, counting the lighted windows as if to find one he knew, and an abrupt chill ran through Nick. He tensed, his gaze turned down to follow the man, now going on slowly. He had been big, with a dark hat and slightly rolling step Nick would always remember.

"What is it, Nick ?"

He felt Niora's hand on his arm, and turned away. No use to say that her father seemed to be watching below, he decided.

"It's nothing." He saw that his explanation about Alf had convinced her and he withdrew from the window, not wanting her to see - whatever it was that watched below. "I'll be working late to-night. There are points I need to check."

He went into his study and locked the communicating door on the inside. The watcher outside could mean only one thing. He was now on the list of the hunted. To be with Niora endangered her, and her talking hindered thought.

[He wondered if it was time to open the box. No, he thought]

He got a drink from his cupboard and examined the room. The window was fastened, and there was no balcony or ledge outside. One door went into their living-room; the other into the corridor common to all the suites, and both were locked. He put out the light and stood near the window. After a long time the figure came back, looked up,

crossed the road, and disappeared below, going towards the entrance to the flats. Nick felt the hair on his neck crisp. Niora was playing the radio; music floated through into the study, and an abrupt announcement from a music-hall show, as she tuned in. He considered phoning the police, but decided they could not help him. What could he say ? That Judge Henson, Noira's father and his lifelong friend, intended to kill him - was not really Judge Henson at all, any longer ? It would not pass.

A soft knock brushed the panels of the outer door. Nick started, crossed and dropped a hand on the knob.

"Who is it ?" His palms were moist.

"Judge Henson."

The words were breathed as if not to disturb Niora. Nick hesitated, then snapped on the light and unlocked the door. The newcomer pushed himself silently in, walking heavily and looking at Nick under thick lids.

"I admire your courage, Riordan," he said. "But not your wisdom."

Nick locked the door and put the key in his pocket. Niora had turned the radio a little louder, and he was glad.

"Why my courage, Judge ?" he asked, and sat down. There was no other name he could use.

"Because you know I am not Judge Henson."

The other lowered himself into the second chair and leaned back heavily. He took out a cigar and began to cut the end. Nick felt admiration, and used it to hide the fear he could not dispel.

"You do it - very well," he murmured.

The other nodded, dropping one eyelid in a mannerism which had been Henson's. "When big things are at stake the agents chosen are naturally very competent, Riordan," he said drily. "That is why I do not admire your wisdom. You should not have admitted me."

"Perhaps I prefer to get things over; perhaps you under-estimate me." [You may think me unprepared - but I'm tough.]

"The former I admit could be so. The latter, I doubt. Reliable agents do not under-estimate an enemy." He exhaled smoke at the ceiling, fattening his round

cheeks. Nick switched on the overhead light and watched him keenly.

"I had not imagined Project 13 was in danger from anyone on Earth," he said. "We are united. It will benefit all, causing danger or loss to no one. I can't think why anybody on Earth should wish to sabotage it . . ."

"You follow developments quickly." A smile was on the round face, but it lacked the essential quality which could have made it kindly. "You reason well. Nor can I think of any reason why anyone on Earth should wish to sabotage it, as you say."

Nick experienced a shock, though he knew that it had been this thought which had been creeping uncalled into his mind.

"You are - not of this Earth ?" he breathed.

"Obviously."

They looked at each other through the thin blue smoke, and Nick knew the other was more than human, if judged by standards he knew. Here was no mere disguise - the newcomer was a duplicate of Henson, and so perfect was that duplication it was unlikely anyone except himself and Niora would ever notice the difference. A new thought struck him coldly.

"What of Judge Henson ?"

A steady hand deposited ash carefully in a tray. "His disposal was regrettable, but necessary. Individuals cannot be allowed to stand between us and our aim."

The eyes, cold as blue ice, settled on Nick. He felt that behind them was an intellect of extreme potential, whose reasoning processes were advanced beyond those of Earthmen, so that the unexpected was likely, bringing dangerous developments in quite unanticipated ways. The hand crushed out the cigar.

"Earth has reached a little too far towards the stars."

He got up heavily, his eyes not leaving Nick. Nick's flesh crept; he grated back his chair, remembering how Alf Somers had lain. There was a moment's silence in the radio programme and he hoped his visitor would not speak. Niora was safe only so long as she did not know. Those who knew had to be eliminated. Music began again and the heavy form advanced.

"We do not wish to complicate matters by unnecessary deaths, Riordan."

Nick caught up his chair by its back and struck. It rebounded off an upraised forearm

and the second arm lapped round his neck. He felt himself borne over backwards, and the chair was wrenched from his fingers. Two round eyes no longer like Henson's stared down into his, and the weight of the heavy body settled like a sack of grain on his chest. He wriggled violently, and his fingers closed round the neck overhanging him.

At the touch a nervous shock ran down through him. The neck was not like his own, but took on a feeling of unyielding toughness with which he knew it useless to grapple. The muscles were strong and resistant, so that his grip seemed puny and helpless. He tore at the imprisoning arms. They, too, were so strong they felt like moulded steel, and one hand closed round his throat,- squeezing, while the other poised a shining instrument over his one arm. The face began to lose its resemblance to Judge Henson, as if the imitative deception could not be maintained. The cheeks grew lean, the eyes calculating, and the mouth lost its fullness.

Nick kicked, freed a hand, and got one foot up and on the waistcoat. Using all his strength he flung the body up and away, and scrambled back, jumping to his feet, panting.

The radio had stopped. Niora's voice came through the door: "Is that you, Nick ?"

Nick saw that his door-key was in the other's muscular hands. With an odd rolling gait he reached the door, opened it quickly, and disappeared down the corridor. Nick went to the window, rubbing his throat . . .

Judge Henson came out of the entrance to the block, and disappeared briskly down the street.

"Anything the matter, Nick ?"

He realised that Niora was rapping loudly on the door. He controlled his breathing, making his voice level -

"Nothing, dear. I was only moving the furniture."

"Silly time to do it."

The radio began again. Nick locked the door and sat down, trembling from reaction. So that was the manner of being they were up against, he thought. His visitor had certainly been higher on the evolutionary scale than himself. Had been physically superior, adaptive, intelligent, and could have ended the struggle effectively had he wished. He had gone away so that Niora should not know, not because he was beaten.

Nick recalled his words to Sam Cordy, and shivered as he poured himself a stiff drink.

[The universe was big. Mankind might not be top-dog any longer.]

He went out early, agreed he had been hasty in assuming his friend dead, made his statement and signed it. He learned that Somers had said he had been unwell. Bluff , Nick thought as he went into the street. They did not want the police to make troublesome investigations, preferring to play the game their own way. The fewer who suspected, the better: it would be fewer to eliminate. Nick had thought of that angle all night, and an old .208, relic of a war in which his father had served, rested heavily in his pocket. The elimination of undesirable elements could work both ways, he decided. [His father had once used almost that expression]

The blonde co-ordination clerk told him Alf Somers had come early and was in the astrogation cabin.

"Sam Cordy here ?" he asked.

She looked at a card file and shook her head. "No, Mr. Riordan; he won't be in until noon."

He thanked her and got on a truck loaded with stores.

Project 13 was a high, silvery pillar pointing at grey morning skies. He left the truck at its base and entered the lift-cage, which whirred slowly up taut cables to the circular entrance lock. He paused on the narrow platform, looking down at the vehicles below and at the lines which radiated to the distant buildings; then, thin-lipped, he went into the vessel's interior.

It was a miracle of craftsmanship, he thought, as he rode up in the central lift. Engines filled nearly one-third of the ship's bulk, and stores a second third. The remainder housed living quarters and apparatus - mostly the latter. Project 13 was a self-contained laboratory, equipped to locate and examine the planets which circled distant suns. Once out there in the mighty vastness of space she would have to be self-supporting, and her designers intended that she should make a round trip through the heavens, with reserve power for several planetary landings.

The new Alf Somers was sitting on a mushroom stool before an instrument panel, and got up as he entered.

"How do, Nick ?" The mobile face grinned.

Nick entered stiffly and saw that a wireman was working on cables under a panel near the door.

"You're here early, Alf," he said, his face bleak as he eyed the other across the six feet

of free floor space.

The light blue eyes mocked him. "Another mistake like last night, Nick, and you'll find yourself sent down for psychopathical adjustment."

True, thought Nick. And the words were a threat: the alien knew who held the superior position. Nick had no proof - if he made an accusation it would appear mere insanity. He smiled, his limbs like ice and his grip on the old .208 in his pocket so hard it hurt.

"I should scarcely make the same mistake twice," he murmured.

The wireman came from under the panel, gave them a passing glance, and went out. Nick closed the door and stood with his back to it. His expression changed to hate ; his eyes snapped.

"What did you do with Alf ?"

The expression on the mobile face was characteristic still. The red hair was brushed back exactly as Alf would have done it. Nick reminded himself of what he had seen in the reference room, almost imagining that he had dreamed up the whole thing. But the other shrugged

"Need you know what we did with him ?"

"Perhaps it doesn't matter." Nick was glad pretence had ceased. "Remember I know. Alf didn't."

"What makes you think he didn't ?"

Nick shivered. He had told no one because they would not believe. He had supposed his friend had not known. It was unnerving to realise that Alf might have suspected something, and kept it to himself for that same reason. The thought chilled and only the hard feel of the .208 in his pocket quietened his panic.

"I could kill you," he said thinly.

"You could try."

"Then why aren't you afraid ?"

"It should be obvious the agents of a whole galaxy are not going to allow their lives to depend upon such a slender chance " The other got off the stool. "Our preparations were in no way incomplete."

Nick's finger squeezed the trigger; once, twice, and a third time. The weapon kicked. Three holes appeared in the breast of the blue overall and three bullets shattered apparatus behind. The face so like Alf's only twitched, and Nick's grip on his weapon relaxed.

"Do not always evaluate more advanced life forms by your own poor biological standards." There was reproach in the words and tone.

Nick jumped back through the door and ran; he trembled as he rode down in the lift, and knew he was white as he reached the circular lock and took the external cage to ground level. There, he gained full control of himself and went on one of the trucks to the office buildings. In the co-ordination office the girl stopped him.

"The Chairman of the Board will want to speak to you, Mr. Riordan." "Why ?" he snapped.

"Mr. Somers has reported that while showing him a souvenir in the astrogation cabin you damaged some of the instruments."

She looked at him queerly, and Nick shrugged. The phone call from Project 13 had apparently preceded him by several minutes.

"Quite an accident," he said.

He saw that he would have to be doubly careful; things like this, after reporting Somers dead, gave a bad impression. He went on into a call-booth and dialled Sam Cordy's number. After a long interval Sam's voice came over the line.

"Listen," Nick pleaded. "I want to talk. Can I come round ?"

Sam seemed to be considering. "I'm on at noon, Nick," he said at last. "It's ten-thirty now."

"That gives us an hour !"

"Not so fast ! I've got a journey out of town first. I don't think I can make it."

Nick felt sweat on his palms. "Sam, this is important !"

"So is my trip, Nick. Alf asked me to slip down to his place to bring up some charts he left there last night."

Nick found himself staring at a dead phone, and he replaced it automatically. Sam's

statement might mean exactly what it said. Again, it might not . . .

Nick came out from the Board meeting with his ears red. It had been in session when his action was reported and he had hurriedly been added to the agenda. The Chairman had been stern and fully aware of his enormous responsibility.

"We feel you are aware of the vessel's importance too, Riordan," he concluded. "For the first time men will travel more than mere planetary distances. You realise no thoughtlessness must be allowed to jeopardise this vast undertaking [and that we should regret having to withdraw your official pass.] ?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. We hope nothing further of this nature will arise."

Nick had left under the eagle scrutiny of the twenty directors. By the office clock he saw that he had been delayed an hour, and the clerk at the entrance desk stopped him.

"Mr. Cordy tried to phone you, Mr. Riordan. Said it was urgent. I said you were being interviewed and the Board left strict orders there be no interruption."

Nick swore to himself. "Did he leave a message ?"

"No, Mr. Riordan. He seemed anxious, and said we must realise we had to fight for survival." She looked puzzled. "I thought perhaps you would understand."

So Sam knew, Nick thought with excitement. He could mean only that.

"Where was the call from ?" he asked quickly.

"Mr. Somers' house, sir."

"I see."

He went out, irritated that the call had to come when he was before the Board. He would have given ten years of his life to have been there to answer Sam, he decided. If he had ten years . . . He wondered exactly how much Sam knew. It was galling to have missed him; yet wonderful to know he did not stand alone any longer.

He went home and ate. When they were drinking the coffee Niora looked across the table at him, her golden eyes puzzled.

"I rang up dad this morning."

Nick felt his muscles tense. He put his cup down slowly.

"Yes ?" Those who did not know were safe, he thought. Did Niora know ?

"He seemed a trifle odd, Nick." She frowned. "Nothing I could really put a finger on."

"Odd ?" He tested the extent of her suspicion, hoping she knew nothing.

"Yes, Nick. He was coming round this evening and I wanted to ask what time. But he says now he isn't coming."

Nick felt relief like cool water through his veins. Apparently the being who had become Judge Henson did not want Niora to suspect: those who suspected had to be eliminated, and too many eliminations might cause enquiries. The smaller the circle was, the greater were chances of success. It would not require much deduction to decide that he would never tell Niora what he knew.

"Perhaps he was busy," Nick breathed, and wondered how long the deception could continue. A time would come when the truth would out.

After the meal he rang up the project site and asked for Sam Cordy. He heard a connection put through to the co-ordination clerk.

"He's not back, Mr. Riordan," she said. "He reported urgent personal business but left no number where he might be contacted."

Nick bit his lips. "Thanks. If he appears, have him ring me."

"Certainly, Mr. Riordan."

He sat in silence, wondering whether Sam was following some line on his own. His eyes strayed to the clock. The new Alf Somers would be going off duty within the hour. That left time, Nick decided. He would go down to the little white and red house and investigate . . .

Cool evening wind came down off the blue hills. The sun was gone, and the white and red house had drawn shadows closely about itself. Nick stopped the saloon behind thick elms and looked down across the slopes at the unlit windows. No smoke rose from the chimney; nor was there move- ment inside or in the garden, or on the gravel drive that came out to the road. It was lonely, he thought, not moving. Time was, when men had hastened to congregate in populous cities; but Alf Somers had preferred solitude - and that well suited those who had come.

He got out and went down along the road and quietly into the end of the gravel drive.

Abruptly he wondered at the odd stillness. The air itself seemed to have become a vacuum that conducted no sound, and when he stepped through the gate his shoes on the gravel were like steel on crackling ice. Under the beeches soft turf cushioned his feet, and he went in a long curve towards the still house.

It was silent ; seemed empty. Behind the garden sloped down to a narrow strip of grass, ending in willows and a stream. He went under the willows, listening, and stopped. Below, gleaming in the water, was a pile of canisters. Looking down, he knew them to contain food. They were unopened and the manufacturer's name gleamed up golden through the water. A tiny fear crept into being on his back; he looked behind, but the garden was empty. His gaze returned to the canisters. A little way below, sodden in the water, were three loaves. He bent down to stare, and tiny fish flicked from them away into reeds.

He straightened, and knew that his face was white. The grocer who had supplied Alf Somers made his deliveries as usual - but those who had come did not need such food. Bent plants showed where the new Alf Somers had passed down from the house, carrying the unwanted food to the stream.

Chilled, Nick went slowly among the trees towards the house. He remembered what Sam Cordy had phoned so urgently. The time had come when man must again fight for survival. Man was no longer the creature best adapted and superior. Time was, when he had been that. But things had changed. And how few knew, Nick thought uneasily; so insidious was the enemy, people did not know, nor would believe, that an enemy had indeed come.

He halted in cover, looking across at the house. The evening sky was dark and the wind hushed. A tremor born of some indefinable but extreme unease passed through his body. The sky was dark: was deep purple - except for one point immediately over the house. A faint golden disc glowed there, radiating thin streamers that seemed to flow from it up into the heavens. Faint as a sunbeam, it floated silently, and as Nick looked through it he seemed to be looking into a tube that gave a view of the star-pricked, empty backdrop of space, and of a vessel awesomely large, circular, flattened and spinning slowly on its axis as it moved against the stars. He went cautiously nearer, scarcely breathing, and the view snapped from vision. He halted and stepped back. It reappeared. In the distance of a single pace it came and went from view and mid-way, moving his head cautiously, he found a spot where the golden disc seemed to break up into a wildly spinning toothed wheel, beyond which moved triangular segments of the saucer-shaped vessel. Only at one spot was there a clear view where by some odd chance a focus arose between his own world of three-dimensional space, and the unknown and incomprehensible time-space continuum in which the alien vessel existed. Voices sounded, growing louder, and passed as three men went along the road, cycling quickly and momentarily visible between the trees. They could see nothing, Nick decided. The golden disc was visible

only from this one point.

He went cautiously towards the house, keeping from view, and reached the wall near a back window which he knew had no fastening. Alf had taken the broken latch off two weeks before and never replaced it. He pushed it open cautiously and looked through, then vaulted inside. A faint humming came from somewhere upstairs and he crept up, listening at every step. The humming came from behind a partly-open door. With infinite caution he opened it and looked in.

A compact apparatus, lifted from its case, rested on a chair and hummed and sang softly like taut wires in the wind. A radiance rose from it towards the ceiling, where the plaster and old-fashioned beams trembled before his eyes as if seen through rippling water. Nick thought of the shimmering golden disc above the house, and his tense attention quickened. For a long time he studied the apparatus, dropping to his knees to peer closely into its intricate interior, but not touching it. When at last he rose a deep ridge stood between his brows, but his eyes shone with inner light. He had an excellent memory for technicalities and the principal circuits were engraved on his mind.

Niora Riordan frowned at the litter of equipment on the lounge table, as if annoyed that their room had become a workshop. Nick wiped his brow and sat back, sighing. His coat hung on the chair, and he saw that he had worked for three hours without pausing. Niora looked at the shining chassis, with its countless connections and components.

"What does it do, Nick ?"

"I don't know, Niora. I can only guess." He switched off the table lamp. He could be wrong - and explanations would lead to knowledge dangerous to Niora herself. "It's just a copy of a unit I saw somewhere."

"Not anything to do with the project ?"

He shook his head. "Such work wouldn't be done like this."

He was not sure whether she was satisfied, and knew better than to underestimate her. Niora had a habit of worrying at a problem until she found a solution ; this time he hoped that she did not even suspect there was a problem.

"The vessel's really finished ?" she asked.

Nick wondered whether this was a continuation of her original subject. "Project 13 ? Yes, except for a few finishing touches of no great importance."

"She will travel faster than light ?"

"If you care to express it like that. We prefer to say that she will cease to exist in this time-space continuum. Without that, her crew would need half a lifetime to make the trip.,"

His gaze flickered to the apparatus he was building, which he had mentally classified in the bedroom when he had seen its original and his first puzzlement changed slowly to comprehension. Though obviously designed by a race whose technological knowledge exceeded Earth levels, it embodied no completely new technique. It was the unification of known techniques in a new and unexpected manner.

He tidied up and put the uncompleted space-continuum distorter into a large suitcase. The phone rang as he finished, and he took it up.

"Is that Sam Cordy ?"

He regretted his words immediately and wondered whether he had been unwise as a level voice said: "No, Alf here."

Alf, Nick thought bitterly. Not Alf, but . . .

"Yes," he said, and saw Niora was listening. "Oh, Alf, what is it ?"

"I'd like to see you."

How well it was done, Nick thought. His fingers tightened imperceptibly on the phone. "I can call any time you like, Alf." That let Niora know where he was going, without needing to say anything and so make a point of it so that she asked questions. If anything - happened - it might be useful for her to know.

"Right, I'll be at the site in half an hour." He hung up.

The light-blue eyes met Nick's. "So you see your continued interference cannot be permitted. It is unfortunate, but necessary."

A group of wiremen were talking by the bar; others sat at the small tables, drinking coffee and smoking. Nick felt a cold finger pass up and down his spine.

"It will be arranged in such a way as to cause no suspicion," the other said.

Nick looked at him. Behind the eyes was an expression which would never have appeared in Alf's face. Except for that he might have been with Alf.

"We have never harmed you," Nick pointed out evenly.

The other emptied his glass smoothly. "You would do so. No, not purposely, but because it is your nature. A century ago you reached adjacent planets and civilised them. Very well, they benefited in some ways. But we are not anxious to be victims of the same process. You merely want to travel farther and faster; build higher and bigger. The only time you approach contentment is when you are striving to attain some ideal - which is in itself a form of discontent." He filled his glass, pushed it to one side, and leaned forwards, pointing a finger at Nick. "We are content, wishing only to remain as we are. Project 13 gives you the means to reach our worlds. We do not wish to be colonised. We do not want a senseless, useless trade as you scratch our planets for the metals you term valuable, or pick our brains for processes you can apply to your own industries."

Nick felt his spirits sinking. "I cannot believe Project 13 is such a threat to you."

"It is. We have ways of knowing."

Nick did not argue. Everything he had so far seen indicated the other was a member of a race technically far advanced beyond Earth level. He did not doubt that they had - ways of knowing.

"As your superiors, we are not prepared to let you undermine our stable society," the other said quietly, his gaze now upon the table. "Man, repre- sented by you and your fellows, is not high in the evolutionary scale. We have superior intellects, and superior bodies, both obtained through selective genetical control, with some surgical intervention. Your bodies depend upon each individual part. We have arranged that ours do not."

"I could disclose what you are !" Nick interrupted.

The blue eyes passed over the tables and bar. "Try, if you wish."

Nick knew his statement had been bluff. No one would believe him; no one would even bother to examine the man so apparently Alf Somers.

"No ordinary examination would reveal that we are different." The other seemed to have followed his thoughts. "You would find it very difficult to convince anyone."

"So you will smash Project 13 ?" Nick said thinly.

"Yes, but not so obviously as you suggest. Preliminary tests will make it apparent that the vessel is unworkable, and that the design is not practicable."

Nick nodded slowly. That was the way they would do it. "Why tell me all this ?" he asked.

"Because the fewer who suspect our presence, the fewer unnecessary deaths will arise." He leaned forwards and his gaze locked with Nick's. "Have you told anyone of your suspicions ? Acquaintances, or your wife ?"

The eyes held latent power and Nick knew that concealment would have been impossible. No one could have passed this scrutiny. Luckily, he did not need to lie

"I've told no one," he said. [Take my word for that.]

"Good." Nick saw how confident of his ability to remain undeceived the other had been. "That's all, Riordan. Goodbye."

Nick rose stiffly, wondering what had been planned. It would be some- thing quite unexpected, and likely to cause the minimum amount of suspicion. The beings from the circular ship did not want curiosity aroused.

He went through the crowd to the door, suddenly awake to the danger which had always surrounded him, but which now had a different meaning. Death was a thing that happened to other folk, it had seemed, until now . . . Lorries were backing into a yard adjoining the offices and he waited until they had gone, his hair prickling and his hands damp in his pockets. A track-rod could break, or a driver accelerate carelessly . . .

He gained the door of his own small private office, and looked back across the concrete square. The second Alf Somers was watching him from outside the refreshment room. Nick shivered involuntarily, entered his office and locked the door. He seated himself, his plan crystallising, and reached for the control switch of his tape-recorder. Sam Cordy suspected, he thought. He could put everything he knew on the tape and have it passed on to Sam . . .

His finger stopped an inch from the switch - insulation could break down; shorts could arise. It would not be the first time a man had been electrocuted like that.

He depressed the switch with a rubber eraser and the recorder began to run. He relaxed imperceptibly and began to talk into the desk mike, marshalling his facts. Those who had come intended to make Project 13 look a failure. The new Alf Somers and Judge Henson were spies of a kind never fought before . . .

When he had finished he saw that almost an hour had gone. He ran back the tape on to an empty spool, placed it in a large envelope, and tied it. The less important it appeared, the better, he decided, and wrote on it: "For Sam Cordy," and, in brackets:

"Remember our party, Sam ?" That should do, he thought. But Sam would be curious, and play the tape.

The phone rang. He picked it up and found the site gatekeeper had been put through.

"A man here keeps saying he must see you, sir."

Nick frowned. "Who is he ?"

"A Mr. Sanedrin."

Nick's frown deepened. The name was familiar, yet one he did not completely recognise.

"Shall I send him away, sir ?" The gatekeeper sounded as if he had endured a long and tiring argument. "Or will you see him ?"

Nick considered quickly. Every step now seemed full of imminent personal danger. "Have him brought in," he decided at last. "Take the usual precautionary measures, of course."

He rang off and settled back to wait. The site was ringed by an electrified fence, as securely guarded as when top-secret military preparations were conducted in time of war. Sanedrin would be brought in under open guard. He repeated the name, and his brows suddenly rose. Niora's radio programme had included Sanedrin the Seer ! That was why the name was familiar.

Knocking vibrated the door, and he admitted a little man, dark and quick, who bowed as if to an audience. But a keen look of inner tension was in the black eyes, which flickered round the office and returned to Nick.

"I intrude, Mr. Riordan." He made an expressive gesture, hunching up his shoulders and raising his palms. "But I presume you would consider the intrusion justified."

Nick examined him as he closed the door. "I've heard you on the radio," he said. "Seen you on teleview, too, now I think of it."

Long, delicately white fingers flitted up to a silk bow-tie and Sanedrin's head bobbed as if he demonstrated some trick to an admiring audience. He produced a card as from nowhere, and Nick looked down at it.

Sanedrin looked momentarily uncomfortable. "One must live, Mr. Riordan. There are times when I have - felt things strongly. I employ trickery: I admit it to you. But there were times when I did not debase my powers to obtain definite results. Programme

managers expect such results."

Nick felt his interest quicken. He saw that the newcomer's manner, automatic in its showmanship, only half-concealed a grave inner tension. He nodded encouragingly.

"I had a dream, Mr. Riordan, a dream." Recalling it caused pain to flicker across the thin, dark face. "It resembled those I experienced before I had debased my art for money. There was a vision of the long, east road through the green belt; of a saloon, and a passenger vehicle, both crushed like paper. Of faces I knew - one I had seen in newscasts about this great vessel." He waved towards the project rocket, just visible through the window. " Your face, Mr. Riordan. The feeling was so strong I could not quell it. I had to tell you . . ."

He ended lamely and Nick saw how difficult it had been for him to make such a point of a thing most men would laugh into silence. Instinctively he pressed the other's shoulder.

"You've done a great service by telling me that - perhaps a greater service than you'll ever know."

When he was alone Nick sat pondering on the desk. He had planned to take the east road that evening, ending up at the little white and red house. There could be an accident . . . His saloon might be crushed like an egg- shell by one of the fast articulated passenger vehicles which swept along the arterial roads ... It seemed possible that the - newcomers to Earth could engineer just such an accident.

The suite was locked and Nick let himself in. A note was propped on the table and he opened it with sudden apprehension.

Gone round to see Daddy as you said you might be late. - Niora.

The paper trembled in Nick's fingers and he folded it automatically. This, he thought, he had dreaded yet expected. He gnawed a lip, then dialled Judge Henson's number. He rang twice, with no result, and hung up. He frowned, then asked the project site co-ordinating office for Sam Cordy. Sam had not been in.

Frustrated, he went down to the sub-level garage. One thing seemed clear. Everything centred on Alf's house, and that was where he would go. He had got into the saloon before he remembered his visitor at the office and his warning. Both had been crowded from his mind by his fear for Niora.

He swore to himself, slammed the door, and went up to street level. Articulated six-wheeled buses, roomy and silent, were on their evening routes through the green belt. He got a ticket from the slot-machine at a halt barrier. A vehicle which would

take him by Alf's was stopping, but he froze. Sanedrin had not said he was in the saloon ! The same accident could arise if he was a passenger in the articulated bus, and with fatal results.

He watched it leave, and turned back to the flat. Suddenly it seemed dangerous to be out at all. Possibly they had engineered the whole thing, beginning the plan with a call supposedly from Judge Henson, to take Niora away. It was not difficult to deduce that he would then phone Henson's number, get no reply, and decide to go to the white and red house where everything had begun.

He paced the flat in indecision, twice rang Henson's number, and twice asked for Sam Cordy, all without result. He wondered whether he should risk the drive out to Alf's. The clock chimed ten and he switched on the newscast, wondering if there had been an accident . . .

There had. A saloon had crashed into an articulated bus travelling east, and seven passengers had been killed on its near side as it mounted the path, sheared off two trees, and toppled down the embankment into a park. "Among the killed was the well-known universal network artist Sanedrin the Seer," the announcer said. "His death will give a feeling of personal loss to many of our listeners."

Nick struck off the radio and stared from the window, not seeing the city lights, his face suddenly like weathered brown stone. He always sat on the near side. Blue, gold, red and green were reflected on his concave cheeks and in his eyes as an advertiser's legend spelled itself along the building opposite. Immobile with thought, he stood outlined by the brilliance of the city below. All this, he thought, made by man for man, was in danger. And the eager people did not know. His gaze turned sideways. The beacon lights still burned on the point of Project 13. For a moment he had almost expected they might have been gone. He wondered whether he should go to Judge Henson's. That journey could be taken on foot, and should be safe.

He went down and through busy streets, where folk always hurried, but only to entertainment, at this hour. Every building blazed with lights; neons of every natural colour, plus some devised by man, zig-zagged their abrupt messages, then disappeared into momentary blackness. Cartoon figures bowed and gesticulated, comic-strips flashed through brief-lived sequences, and behind all was the sound of many vehicles and the voices of many people. Many laughed; most were gay. Only at Nick's heels did danger seem to walk and he often looked back quickly.

He went down side streets between high buildings, and came out upon a boulevard with fountains playing along its centre. He wondered whether Sam Cordy had received the tape. Probably. And Sam had suspected something himself, Nick felt sure. The knowledge that Sam knew, and would help, comforted him.

Judge Henson's house was beyond a second intersection. He crossed under the trees and slowed his step, eyes and ears alert. A man with a package under one arm was standing motionless outside Judge Henson's gate, his back to Nick. Nick felt excitement and relief. The little package might have been anything: but its size and shape suggested recorder tape. And the man, characteristically without a hat, was unmistakable. Nick's step quickened, a sudden fear coming into his mind. His hand fell upon the waiting man's arm

"Sam ! You haven't told Judge Henson what was on the tape ?"

The man jerked round; street lights shone on his bare, sandy head, and rounded, boyish face. A smile twitched the corners of his mouth.

"Nick ! This is a lucky chance. What brings you here ?"

Nick froze, his nails biting into his palms. His mind cried out, and his lips almost followed as hope died. Alf Somers; Judge Henson; now, outside Henson's house

["You're not Sam," he said thinly.] "What have you done with Sam ?" he said thinly.

Brows exactly like Sam's rose quizzically. How well you do it, Nick thought bitterly. The other transferred the package to a wide pocket.

"That's a question we prefer not to answer," he said.

Nick was glad there was no attempt to maintain the deception. He knew that perhaps everyone except himself would believe this man to be Sam Cordy, and only a sixth sense whispered he was not.

"Are there - scores of you ?" he asked, his lips tight.

The man who looked like Sam Cordy smiled. "That, again, is a question we prefer not to answer."

Nick felt baffled; his gaze turned to the house, but no lights illuminated the windows. His dismay became anger.

"What have you done with Niora ? She came here."

Shoulders rose and fell but the second Sam Cordy did not speak. Nick's blood ran hot in fury, then cold at the look in the other's eyes.

"You're - devils ," he said.

"The desire to survive is a hard taskmaster. Other things become secondary to it. I thought the matter very clearly put." He tapped his pocket where the package rested.

A light suddenly came on in the hall-way above and the door was opened from inside. A large man speaking with Judge Henson's voice stood momentarily outlined; a girl came past him, adjusting her hat and exchanging farewells. Nick's heart stood still: Niora ! By some miracle she had not noticed the change in her father; by the ultimate lucky chance was coming out now, unharmed - not in danger, because she did not suspect . . .

She came half-way down the steps, saw Nick, hesitated, then smiled. Her eyes turned to the second Sam Cordy and she nodded.

"Hello, Sam."

Nick, all his consciousness centred on her, felt new fear dawn in his mind. He stepped forward, looking up, his face white and abruptly aged.

"Niora ?"

"I'm coming home right now, Nick."

His fear became alive, crawling through his consciousness. Here were Niora's face and form; her voice and gestures. Yet though they were the colour, he knew the soft golden eyes looking into his were not his wife's.

"What have you done with Niora ?" he whispered, agonised.

The golden eyes turned upon the man like Sam Cordy, and the latter shrugged. Both stood, not speaking, looking at him, and something in Nick snapped. He turned and ran. His steps echoed from the residential buildings, and as he ran he knew, now, what form his accident would take. As far as the world knew, there would still be a Nick Riordan. That would make the circle complete - Alf, the Judge, Sam, Niora, and himself. Perhaps no other human would ever know . . .

He halted at the first junction, listening, but no steps followed. They had either decided it was unnecessary to give chase, or were following silently.

He thought of Niora, and a cold fury grew within him as he went on quickly, his face white and bleak in the street lights, not hearing the careless voices of the people in the wide street beyond the junction.

People must know, he thought. They could not overcome an enemy they did not realise existed. The newcomers had worked secretly, and obviously valued secrecy so much

they would go to any lengths to maintain it. The greatest weapon to turn against them would be mass publicity - and there was one man alone who could use that weapon most effectively and without delay. Nick's hurrying feet turned towards the city centre. That man was Marsh Wallace, of the universal network news syndicate.

Men came and went through the offices. In three-sided cubicles columnists and feature- writers snapped into tape-machines; youths hurried by with copy, and a continuous drone of activity filled all the long rooms. Nick knew he had only been admitted because Project 13 was always news, and because his name, like that of the others who held important positions in the project site offices, was known. He passed through a frosted door lettered "Marsh Wallace" and quiet came as it closed behind him. From his broad circular desk a man with a wide, brown face looked up. He made a sign of recognition, drew a file towards him from a side swivel, and leaned back, staring at Nick from under his eye-shield. He indicated a chair.

"I was told you wanted an appointment, Riordan." His voice was clipped, staccato and clear above the quiet hum filtering from the outer offices.

Nick sat down. He knew his face showed the heavy strain he was enduring and the look that had been in the golden eyes so like Niora's still remained in his memory.

"You've always covered the news relating to the project," he said.

Marsh Wallace nodded, his gaze keenly appraising. "I have. No project site item is used until it has passed through my hands."

He was abrupt and impersonal and Nick wished he knew Wallace better - that would make things easier, and more certain. But their acquaintance was slight and Wallace had already looked quickly at the clock, where a red second hand turned relentlessly.

"The project is being sabotaged," Nick said quietly. "There is real danger to the ship."

He would have to choose his words carefully; any appearance of panic would only hinder him. Wallace's face was slightly down-turned, his eyes hidden behind the eye-shield as he leafed the pages of the file.

"There have been other reports of that, in the past," he said without modulation to reveal his thoughts. "All proved unfounded - were mere suspicion or rumour."

"This is not rumour !"

Wallace nodded, not looking up. "So you say. I should need proof before I passed a story. Universal network news does not favour sensationalism. No story goes from this office without my permission, and I pass no story until I am satisfied it is based on

truth."

He glanced up quickly and Nick found himself meeting dark, cool eyes. He had heard that Wallace was a man of inhuman efficiency, and knew that without his aid the story he wished to tell would lie unpublished. If Wallace decided against it, no one would ever know . . .

The cool, dark eyes strayed again to the clock with momentary impatience. "Tell me the facts as you believe them."

Nick hesitated, searching for words and realising just how unconvincing his story could appear. Wallace must have listened to many fake sensationalists in his long, busy life; must indeed have shown many protesting to the door.

Wallace leaned back as Nick finished. "An odd story, Riordan."

Nick tried to read the expression in the cool, dark eyes, and failed.

"It's true !"

"So you have said." Wallace consulted the file silently and his gaze flicked up. "I see you had reported the death of a co-worker, Alfred Somers, but that he was later found well."

"I've explained that !" Nick felt his spirits sink again. "The person everyone believes to be Alf is really one of them !"

"You say the similarity is exact ?"

"Yes."

"Then you can offer no proof ?"

Nick was silent. There was no proof, he thought. He knew. That was all. Just knowing was not enough for Wallace.

"It might be possible for you to see the alien vessel above Alf's house," he decided at last.

Wallace appeared to consider. "You can guarantee I should see it ?" he asked finally.

Nick hesitated. "No."

"Then I can hardly come. I want the promise of definite proof - proof." He closed the

file with a snap. "Proof, not rumour. Fact, not possibility. If I ran a story like this and it was faked, I should be out. Out. Yes, even I. The universal network does not encourage mistakes."

Nick saw that his interview was closed. He leaned over the desk, his eyes agonised and his face set.

"You ask for proof while Earth is jeopardised !"

Marsh Wallace pressed a stud on his desk and nodded at the door, as it opened to disclose a youth in shirtsleeves.

"Show Mr. Riordan out," he said.

Nick looked back from the door. "At least promise you'll not forget what I have said !"

Wallace was jotting something on a slip of paper. He made a tiny motion with his head, but Nick did not know whether it was in assent or curt dismissal, and he went out through the offices and into the street. The midnight sky was high and clear, and passing vehicles and people reduced to a fraction of their earlier volume. Many windows were dark; only from the great news syndicate building glared unbroken rows of lights, showing dawn would see material ready to pour through the thousand channels afforded by radio, television and the press. That news would contain no item of the threat from outside, Nick thought bitterly. Marsh Wallace would spike it, waiting for proof when none could be found.

Nick felt exhausted when he reached his rooms. Someone was moving inside, humming quietly in a voice which sounded like Niora's. His face thin and his lips compressed, he let himself into the study and locked the door. Niora's voice did not come, calling him, and he did not speak, but dropped the couch end and lay down to rest. At last, after a long time, the voice that sounded so exactly like Niora's grew quiet and Nick strove to sleep, his mind and body demanding rest. He wondered what had happened to Niora and the others. There seemed only one possibility: they were dead. At last he slept uneasily.

He awoke after what seemed moments and heard the end of the early newscast coming from the next room. "The body has been identified as Alfred Somers, a technician at the Project 13 site. It is reported death appears to have taken place some days ago, though Somers has been seen recently."

The radio was silenced and footsteps went into the bedroom. Nick got up. So Alf was dead, he thought, and shivered, recalling the other three people who had been substituted.

As he went down to street level he decided the police would now wish to question him again. The discovery of Alf's body altered things. He won- dered whether those responsible for its disposal had made a mistake ; whether there was some purpose in this development, or if it would throw suspicion on himself. The police might assume he knew more than he said, and he might be held for questioning. There could even be a case against him, he thought, if evidence turned out that way.

He stopped at the exit to the flats. Judge Henson was down the road. Nick glanced the other way quickly. The new Sam Cordy was coming from the other direction, and as if the two were aware of each other's presence despite intervening traffic and distance, Henson began to come with his characteristic rolling gait, heavy yet purposeful, towards the flats. Nick started and ran back lightly to the lift. Only when he had got out at his floor did he realise that there was no safety here. Sounds of movement came from inside his rooms, and a voice like Niora's was singing softly to itself.

The indicator showed the lift was coming up. He sprinted for the stairway, and looked down. Judge Henson was mounting rapidly, and without breathlessness, despite his weight and the stiff climb. Nick turned the other corner and began to run up the stairs. There was only one lift and one stairway, and the building stood isolated from those around. They had come for him, and would apparently succeed.

He gained the flat roof with its tiny garden from which there would be no escape. From its edge he saw that something was happening in the streets below. People hurried, or talked in groups, and traffic seemed momentarily disorganised. A confused murmur drifted up; a news delivery van had stopped at a corner and the papers were passing quickly through the crowd. Somewhere a news reproducer was trumpeting, but the words echoed across the road and were unintelligible. Nick strained his eyes down from the corner of the building. Several minutes passed, then a tiny group came from the flat, walking quickly. The new Cordy, Henson, and Niora . . .

Nick went down into the top floor corridor. The lift was at ground level and would not rise. He took the stairway, reached his rooms and found them empty. He hesitated, wondering what had happened, and switched on to the news band.

"These startling revelations by Marsh Wallace were as unexpected as they were amazing." The announcer's voice seemed to hint at personal panic. "A report was made by two Project 13 operatives - Nick Riordan and Sam Cordy. Cordy's written report has only come to hand immediately before this bulletin, confirming Riordan's remarkable statement, made in person to Marsh Wallace late last night. Further confirmation arises in the fact that autopsy reveals Alfred Somers met his death over thirty hours ago, while many reliable witnesses state he was seen yesterday evening on the project site."

As he listened Nick thought of the enormous vessel he had seen above Alf's house, and

of the technological superiority of the beings who operated it, and a new unease replaced his momentary triumph. Anyone who knew was in danger: now, everyone knew ! Many further developments would certainly centre round Alf's little white and red house !

Much traffic was on the road and three military lorries passed Nick, the soldiers in them riding expressionlessly. He wondered if chance alone took them east with him. He drove fast, not thinking of individual danger, and the green belt slid away behind. The saloon mounted the hills effortlessly, sped into the top roads, and he came out upon the far hillside. His gaze flickered immediately across the valley.

A transparent dome centred on the little white and red house and enclosed a large part of the undulated slopes around, including a section of the nearby road. Nick braked quickly to a stop at the roadside, where other vehicles had parked, and gazed down over the wooded hillsides. The dome looked like glass with a faint yellowish hue. It was absolutely spherical, and seemed to have shorn through the trees and hedges at its perimeter. Inside the house and garden stood like minute toys in a huge bubble.

A police car came up the road, an urgent, amplified voice halting traffic and turning idle sightseers back. Nick drove the saloon quickly into an unused lane and got out. With the heavy suitcase he had brought in one hand, he set off tangentially across the fields towards the dome. He had expected things to happen, but scarcely this.

The military lorries had stopped high above him on the hills and the soldiers got out, staring down across the fields and talking. An officer in a radio-car came; they saluted, then all gazed again down into the valley.

Nick went along behind a high hedge, and through trees. A faint humming, almost inaudible, came from the dome - a sound he considered very like that which had come from the space-distorter. No one was visible inside, though he could hear a man shouting far away up on the hills behind him, and he drew near to the golden wall, which stretched high above the trees. It shimmered and moved so that it was difficult for his eyes to focus upon it, and he put down his heavy case and opened it.

The apparatus he had built was a replica of that he had seen in the bedroom. He suspected what it might do, but hesitated, thinking of Niora, Sam and Alf, before depressing the switch. Very slowly a humming that chimed and blended with that of the dome came from the case. An area of the dome immediately in front of him scintillated and abruptly vanished, the jagged edges drawing back, curling and twisting. Smoke began to rise from the suitcase and Nick sprinted for the gap. An abrupt, quick thunderclap of displaced air came at his heels, and he rolled upon the grass, looking back. The suitcase was burning brightly, its contents fused from the overload, and the interrupted edge of the dome had snapped back into existence. He got up slowly. High overhead the sky had an oddly different tint. In the centre, directly

over the house and dimly seen as behind mist, floated the huge, circular vessel Nick had glimpsed once before from the garden. As he gazed at it, his ears still ringing, powerful arms fastened themselves round him, pinioning him.

Inside the house the furniture had been hastily cleared from one room and a complex chair stood centrally under a powerful light. In it was strapped a man with a wide, brown face, his head in a curved rest, his eyes closed in unconsciousness. Around him moved three figures, their true features still concealed by a fading resemblance to those they had imitated. A man who had once appeared fat and aged but whose face was taking on youthful lines, delicately manipulated the controls on the headpiece above the chair. Probes scarcely more than a molecule in diameter sank down through skull and brain. Never hurrying, and with infinite care, he proceeded, not looking up, his thickly lidded eyes keenly on his apparatus.

From his chair Nick watched, eyes sometimes on the three and sometimes on the unconscious Marsh Wallace. He had ceased trying to struggle.

"This means one of us will have to stay behind as Marsh Wallace," one of the three said.

The heavy man by the headpiece sank another probe. "You believe it will be possible to kill this disclosure of our presence ?"

"Of course. Those who saw nothing will not believe in it. Even those who have seen the dome will begin to disbelieve their own senses. It can be dismissed as an illusion, an atmospheric phenomenon, or the result of some experiment being carried on in Somers' laboratory."

Nick tried once again to move, but could not. The use had not yet returned to his numbed muscles, which were frozen and useless from a drug he did not understand.

"It is unfortunate you needed to put on the continuum distorter," the big man said.

"It was necessary - we should have been over-run by police and soldiers. You think me most suited to take Wallace's position ?"

"We do."

"Very well."

The second donned a headpiece joined to that above the central chair and Nick watched it being adjusted. Apparatus began to murmur and Marsh Wallace's features twitched as if in sleep. Nick closed his eyes, trying to overcome the dizziness left by the hypnotic. It had all been too quick, he thought bitterly. The concussion of

returning space-distortion had scarcely echoed away before arms had locked round him and a needle slid into his arm. He wondered how long he had been unconscious; certainly he had no memory of being placed in the chair.

He opened his eyes again. There now seemed to be two Marsh Wallaces in the room: one, the real Wallace, was still unconscious in the complex chair. The second lifted off his headpiece and rose briskly.

"Universal network news will kill this story !" he stated crisply. "I'll see to it !"

The large man began to withdraw the probes which Nick assumed had drained thought patterns from the unconscious man's brain. "What do you plan ?" he asked.

Marsh Wallace's characteristic short laugh sounded in the room. "It won't be difficult ! When you're gone I shall be alone here - on the spot, and can issue an authoritative announcement that it is merely an unusual atmospheric phenomenon."

Nick shivered, and felt that his blood was stirring and his tongue less like wood in his mouth. He wondered how long it took these agents of a superior world to learn how to mould their features by conscious will.

[For a few moments he was still, wondering what he should do. He was conscious of the pressure of the box his grandfather had given him, in his pocket. Now, now was the time to open it, he thought. If he had the chance! Or was it . . ..? He bit a lip, There was an element of doubt. "Don't open it until you're sure," Henry Riordan had said. He wasn't sure, yet. That meant the time had not come! He opened his eyes.]

"Why don't you - leave us alone," he whispered hoarsely.

They all looked at him and brows fully as thick and bushy as Marsh Wallace's rose expressively.

"Would you leave a threat from an inferior life-form unchecked ?" he demanded coolly.

Nick knew that the question could receive only one answer. Time was, when men had been the superior, and he thought of the use men had made of that superiority. Mankind had made himself master by slaying or over-riding every other living thing. Now that was changed - man suddenly found himself lower down on the evolutionary scale, and did not like it. It was nice to be top-dog, he thought; but easier to see the other viewpoint when one became under-dog . . .

"If you go outside the dome you'll be arrested," he protested. "You can't touch the project rocket."

The man who looked like Marsh Wallace considered him gravely. "It would be a sound plan for a second Riordan to accompany me," he said, and his eyes went to the chair where his prototype still sat, white and unmoving. "We could find another volunteer willing to stay behind - as him ?"

They nodded. "Easily if necessary."

"Good. Alf Somers is officially dead. Sam Cordy can disappear. A second Nick Riordan and myself can remain here to clear things up."

Nick felt cold dismay run through him. They planned to leave a new Riordan who would speak, act and move as he did - who would be admitted into the Project 13 site without questioning. Whose very finger-prints would undoubtedly be his, by some imitative process these beings understood and controlled ! The new Riordan would speak with his lips, framing thoughts as he would express them, and no one would ever know . . .

"We must not forget Judge Henson and his daughter," the large man pointed out, swinging away the headpiece from over Wallace's head.

The new Marsh Wallace nodded. "I can see to that. A bathing accident can be reported. With strong tides bodies are easily lost, and both were frequent swimmers."

[Star Seekers only referred to Judge Henson in the above two paras, no mention of his daughter]

They took the inert form from the complicated chair and lifted Nick into it. He tried to struggle but his limbs were heavy and did not respond to his will, and bands were fixed round his legs and arms. His head was dragged back into the curved rest and a retaining semicircle of resilient steel drawn tightly round his forehead. A dark bandage was placed over his eyes.

"Mankind's way of dealing with opposition has often been quite ruthless," Marsh Wallace's voice pointed out. "You should feel no anger if we kill you."

There were sounds of preparation round Nick in the unseen room. A vivid fear burned in the centre of his mind, radiating outwards in a circle of apprehension.

"Can't you - leave Earth alone ?" he pleaded, his voice sounding unnatural even in his own ears.

Wallace's short laugh came without humour. "Mere distance through ordinary space is no safeguard for us. Second-stage space is different - a fact you and the others working on Project 13 have practically guessed. We don't wish to be subject to the old

troubles, or exposed to the old contagion. The people of your millennium have played their part, and it has been as important to us as the ape was to man. No one can reach the high stages without ascending from the lower. Higher life-forms may supplant the lower, but they could not arise if those from which they had sprung had never existed. We have no enmity for you, just as you probably have none for the ape. Nevertheless, you would not permit savages to tear down the civilisation you have so laboriously constructed. You would realise that your worth exceeds theirs. Similarly we, with our mental and physical stamina perfected by many millennia of culture and genetical control, know ourselves to be superior to you. Therefore we must safeguard ourselves from you."

A prick made Nick's arm tingle. He tried to speak but could find nothing to say. Time was, he thought, when man had always expected to be great; time was, when men supposed the race Would always go on, even though individuals were mortal. Mankind, he had always liked to think, was collectively immortal ...

"Like other savages, you are often noble, but often irrational," the voice murmured. "Often splendid, often great; but often weak, often self- seeking . . ."

The voice receded as if to a great distance, and Nick's consciousness ceased.

For a long time in a deep, central recess of his mind the knowledge of being continued to exist, though isolated from every sense. Feeling had ceased, as had all sense of passing time. Within remained the single spark of living mind, oppressed by strange fears and inarticulate dreads and expectations as a questing came through his brain, as if his memories and thoughts were being taken as a model. A murmuring began and continued intermittently - how long, he could not tell. He did not realise that he still sat unmoving in the complex chair with its intricate apparatus low over his head. He did not know when the headpiece was slowly raised by its lifting mechanism, and a replica of himself rose a trifle stiffly from the second chair, looking down at him, and smiling with his own slightly crooked smile.

"Time still is, when a man can make sacrifices for his fellows," the replica murmured, and went out. The others went with him, talking. Then with the second Marsh Wallace at his side the new Riordan went into Alf Somers' laboratory workshop. The door closed behind them.

Nick did not feel himself being lifted from the complex chair, or carried out into a small craft that had come down from the circular ship. He did not see the military massing on the hill, or realise that they could see no ship or craft rising quickly to it as they looked down across the slopes. He did not feel the acceleration of the circular ship. Nor did he hear the murmur that drifted all along the hills as the golden dome suddenly ceased to exist and two figures, immediately recognisable by many of the watching thousands as Marsh Wallace and Nick Riordan, came walking out from

behind the house, going up the slopes towards the high-ranking official who stepped forward, not without hesitation, to meet them.

His mind turned slowly like a sluggish wheel about an axis, and did not register the miracles of advanced technique with which the circular vessel was fitted. A thought grew, dimly at first. Somehow the race of mankind must survive. A species could not build so near the stars . . . then perish. Though individuals died, the race must continue. That alone gave purpose to living, and lifted individuals above futility.

Nick awoke slowly as if from a deep and relaxing sleep. Isolated phrases that had been incomprehensible when taken alone began to join up in his mind, developing new meaning. His level of mankind was essential, they had said, because the lower stages in any evolutionary process were essential to the attainment of the higher.

Feeling returned to his limbs, and he lifted himself slowly. He had lain upon a green couch, resilient and soft, with a pillow of similar spongy material under his head. The room was as clean and fresh as the inside of a polished plastic cube and only a faint humming showed he was in a vessel. The window was flush, apparently a transparency fused into the wall, and the light coming from the ceiling shone from no visible source. He got up and looked through the window, pain momentarily forgotten by wonderment at what he saw.

Far below was the Earth. Midday sun made white the clouds, and shone on the towns and hills seen between them, picking out the roads like long loops of tape. Pointing up like a silver finger was Project 13, reflections glancing off her near side like white, living fire.

"Man is a great building animal," a smooth voice said quietly.

Nick turned from the window, startled, and wondered if the man before him had been Judge Henson. If so, the resemblance had gone, as had the dark clothing. The newcomer wore a light, sparkling garment of plastic and his face was brown, lean, and noble. The eyes were kindly yet cautious, stern yet pleasant.

"Without his building ability, man would be nothing," he added, coming to the window. "Man is what he has made himself. Other creatures are merely what they have become. That is the essential difference, and why man is the greatest, noblest and most fine of creatures."

"And Project 13 ?" Nick asked, looking far below at the silver spear.

"She will never fly. It has been arranged."

Nick sighed. He had always felt the project rocket a great attainment in every way

symbolic of man's expansion. The other followed his gaze and nodded.

"One dare not leave half-understood power in a child's hands. For you, a few thousand years of progress have passed. Think, then, what men can become in the fullness of all futurity."

"There was something - odd in her drive," Nick said, suddenly understanding.

"Exactly." Keen eyes met his, then returned to the window. "In second-order space there is no time ; there can be none, since no sequence of events exists there. But you will leave your own system and colonise planets near other stars - when the right moment comes. That time is not yet."

The window blinked dark. Nick looked out, but the Earth had gone. No sun shone across the heavens; no stars burned distantly above. Instead was only empty blackness, surrounding the great circular ship like a void, and lacking any distinguishing feature.

"Here, there are no incidents to run concurrently, and consequently no time," his companion pointed out as if feeling an explanation was necessary.

Voices came outside the door, and Judge Henson, with Niora holding his arm. Nick quivered as from a shock, his eyes searching their startled faces, then a great relief came. It was all right. This was Niora. Her clear golden eyes lit up eagerly, and she ran from her father, who was breathing heavily from walking.

She clung to Nick. "Nick! Oh, I was afraid I'd be alone !"

Two voices were arguing outside the door. Sam Cordy came in, his eyes twinkling and a grin on his round face. Nick's gaze flickered past him. The other man was Marsh Wallace.

Light blinked on in the window and they looked through. An unfamiliar sun burned in an unknown heaven, and below was a planet very like Earth.

"Behind us exist almost uncountable millennia of technical knowledge and advancement in every branch of science and attainment," the man in sparkling plastic said.

Nick felt momentary doubt. "But Alf's death ?"

"An accident. He killed himself trying to escape. We could not explain, then. We dared not. We naturally regretted it." The other paused. "Time, like space, is not concurrent when the distances are vast and made through different orders of space. Back there,

your little corner of the cosmos is experiencing time in our past."

The strange sun shone on a splendid heritage built by men who had indeed reached the stars, Nick thought. Mankind's past was now far away. Time was, when man had struggled and won his way through to this. The cities below were not alien - only futuristic. He looked into the eyes of those who had gathered around him and who lived because his mankind had reached the stars, and felt proud. It had been worth while. The future men were right. Project 13 must never stumble across space and through millennia of time to this, man's most splendid heritage, once again introducing barbaric customs, greed, self-seeking trade, disease, and every seed of disaster. The first ship had come, in its due time, but had not been Project 13.

"You are descended from the old people of Earth," he said. "From the people of my day, through their sons, who first came out to new systems."

"Of course."

High, noble buildings glowed under the sun. Slender vehicles sped along busy streets and wide bridges that spanned from block to block. Far beyond the city boundary a spaceship glinted in a long arc, taking off for the heavens. Nick nodded to himself. This was what he had always dreamed of, for man.

[The invaders had not been an alien race, bent on conquering Earth. They had been men who had travelled through space and time, coming back to the old Earth to prevent the Project 13 rocket leaving because that was dangerous to them all.

But he and the others could never go back to old Earth, Nick knew. The people on old Earth must never know what had happened. He sighed, looking through the port.

His life was here, now- amid the stars and cities built by this new, superior branch of mankind.]