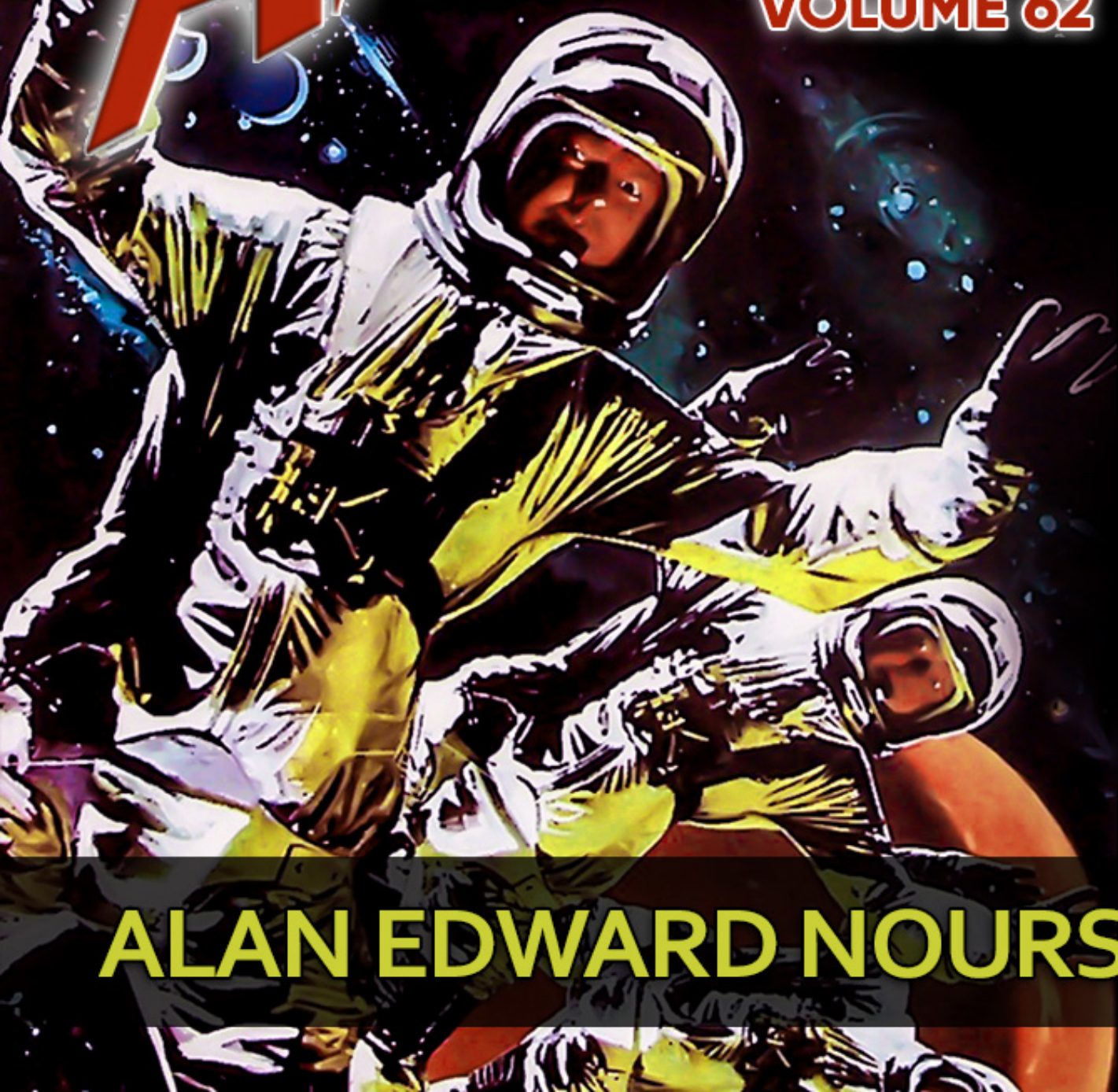


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VOLUME 62



ALAN EDWARD NOURSE

Amazing Stories

Volume 62

Alan Edward Nourse

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Infinite Intruder

When Roger Strang found that someone was killing his son—killing him horribly and often—he started investigating. He wasn't prepared to find the results of another investigation—this time about his own life.

It was the second time they tried that Roger Strang realized someone was trying to kill his son.

The first time there had been no particular question. Accidents happen. Even in those days, with all the Base safety regulations and strict speed-way lane laws, young boys would occasionally try to gun their monowheels out of the slow lanes into the terribly swift traffic; when they did, accidents did occur. The first time, when they brought David home in the Base ambulance, shaken but unhurt, with the twisted smashed remains of his monowheel, Roger and Ann Strang had breathed weakly, and decided between themselves that the boy should be scolded within an inch of his young life. And the fact that David maintained tenaciously that he had never swerved from the slow monowheel lane didn't bother his parents a bit. They were acquainted with another small-boy frailty. Small boys, on occasion, are inclined to fib.

But the second time, David was not fibbing. Roger Strang *saw* the *accident* the second time. He saw all the circumstances involved. And he realized, with horrible clarity, that someone, somehow, was trying to kill his son.



It had been late on a Saturday afternoon. The free weekends that the Barrier Base engineers had once enjoyed to take their families for picnics "outside," or to rest and relax, were things of the past, for the work on the Barrier was reaching a critical stage, demanding more and more of the technicians, scientists and engineers engaged in its development. Already diplomatic relations with the Eurasian Combine were becoming more and more impossible; the Barrier *had* to be built, and quickly, or another more terrible

New York City would be the result. Roger had never cleared from his mind the flaming picture of that night of horror, just five years before, when the mighty metropolis had burst into radioactive flame, to announce the beginning of the first Atomic War. The year 2078 was engraved in millions of minds as the year of the most horrible—and the shortest—war in all history, for an armistice had been signed not four days after the first bomb had been dropped. An armistice, but an uneasy peace, for neither of the great nations had really known what atomic war would be like until it had happened. And once upon them, they found that atomic war was not practical, for both mighty opponents would have been gutted in a matter of weeks. The armistice had stopped the bombs, but hostilities continued, until the combined scientific forces of one nation could succeed in preparing a defense.

That particular Saturday afternoon had been busy in the Main Labs on the Barrier Base. The problem of erecting a continent-long electronic Barrier to cover the coast of North America was a staggering proposition. Roger Strang was nearly finished and ready for home as dusk was falling. Leaving his work at the desk, he was slipping on his jacket when David came into the lab. He was small for twelve years, with tousled sand-brown hair standing up at odd angles about a sharp, intelligent face. "I came to get you, Daddy," he said.

Roger smiled. "You rode all the way down here—just to go home with me?"

"Maybe we could get some Icy-pops for supper on the way home," David remarked innocently.

Roger grinned broadly and slapped the boy on the back. "You'd sell your soul for an Icy-pop," he grinned.

The corridor was dark. The man and boy walked down to the elevator, and in a moment were swishing down to the dark and deserted lobby below.

David stepped first from the elevator when the men struck. One stood on either side of the door in the shadow. The boy screamed and reeled from the blow across the neck. Suddenly Roger heard the sharp pistol reports. David dropped with a groan, and Roger staggered against the wall from a powerful blow in the face. He shook his head groggily, catching a glimpse of the two men running through the door into the street below, as three or four people ran into the lobby, flushed out by the shots.

Roger shouted, pointing to the door, but the people were looking at the boy. Roger sank down beside his son, deft fingers loosening the blouse. The boy's small face was deathly white, fearful sobs choking his breath as he closed his eyes and shivered. Roger searched under his blouse, trying to find the bullet holes—and found to his chagrin that there weren't any bullet holes.

"Where did you feel the gun?"

David pointed vaguely at his lower ribs. "Right there," he said. "It hurt when they shoved the gun at me."

"But they couldn't have pulled the trigger, if the gun was pointed there—" He examined the unbroken skin on the boy's chest, fear tearing through his mind.

A Security man was there suddenly, asking about the accident, taking Roger's name, checking over the boy. Roger resented the tall man in the gray uniform, felt his temper rise at the slightly sarcastic tone of the questions. Finally the trooper stood up, shaking his head. "The boy must have been mistaken," he said. "Kids always have wild stories to

tell. Whoever it was may have been after *somebody*, but they weren't aiming for the boy."

Roger scowled. "This boy is no liar," he snapped. "I saw them shoot—"

The trooper shrugged. "Well, he isn't hurt. Why don't you go on home?"

Roger helped the boy up, angrily. "You're not going to do anything about this?"

"What can I do? Nobody saw who the men were."

Roger grabbed the boy's hand, helped him to his feet, and turned angrily to the door. In the failing light outside the improbability of the attack struck through him strongly. He turned to the boy, his face dark. "David," he said evenly, "you wouldn't be making up stories about feeling that gun in your ribs, would you?"

David shook his head vigorously, eyes still wide with fear. "Honest, dad. I told you the truth."

"But they *couldn't* have shot you in the chest without breaking the skin—" He glanced down at the boy's blouse and jacket, and stopped suddenly, seeing the blackened holes in the ripped cloth. He stooped down and sniffed the holes suspiciously, and shivered suddenly in the cold evening air.

The burned holes smelled like gunpowder.

"Strang, you must have been wrong." The large man settled back in his chair, his graying hair smoothed over a bald spot. "Someone trying to kill you I could see—there's plenty of espionage going on, and you're doing important work here. But your boy!" The chief of the Barrier Base Security shook his head. "You must have been mistaken."

"But I *wasn't* mistaken!" Roger Strang sat forward in his chair, his hands gripping the arms until his knuckles were white. "I told you exactly what happened. They got him as he came off the elevator, and shot at him. Not at me, Morrel, at my son. They just clubbed me in the face to get me out of the way—"

"What sort of men?" Morrel's eyes were sharp.

Roger scowled, running his hand through his hair. "It was too dark to see. They wore hats and field jackets. The gun could be identified by ballistics. But they were *fast*, Morrel. They knew who they were looking for."

Morrel rose suddenly, his face impatient. "Strang," he said. "You've been here at the Base for quite awhile. Ever since a month after the war, isn't that right? August, 2078? Somewhere around there, I know. But you've been working hard. I think maybe a rest would do you some good—"

"Rest!" Roger exploded. "Look, man—I'm not joking. This isn't the first time. The boy had a monowheel accident three weeks ago, and he swore he was riding in a safe lane where he belonged. It looked like an accident then—now it looks like a murder attempt. The slugs from the gun *must* be in the building—embedded in the plasterwork somewhere. Surely you could try to trace the gun." He glared at the man's impassive face bitterly, "Or maybe you don't want to trace the gun—"

Morrel scowled. "I've already checked on it. The gun wasn't registered in the Base. Security has a check on every firearm within a fifty-mile range. The attackers must have been outsiders."

Roger's face flushed. "That's not true, Morrel," he said softly, "and you know it's not true."

Morrel shrugged. "Have it your own way," he said, indifferently. "Take a rest, Strang. Go home. Get some rest. And don't bother me with any more of your fairy tales." He turned suddenly on Roger. "And be careful what *you* do with guns, Strang. The only thing about this that I *do* know is that somebody shot a pistol off and scared hell out of your son. You were the only one around, as far as I know. I don't know your game, but you'd better be careful—"

Strang left Security Headquarters, and crossed across to the Labs, frustrated and angry. His mind spun over the accident—incredulous, but more incredulous that Morrel would practically laugh at him. He stopped by the Labs building to watch the workmen putting up a large electronic projector in one of the test yards. Work was going ahead. But so slowly.

Roger was aware of the tall thin man who had joined him before he looked around. Martin Drengo put a hand on his shoulder. "Been avoiding me lately?"

"Martin!" Roger Strang turned, his face lighting up. "No, not avoiding you—I've been so busy my own wife hasn't seen me in four days. How are things in Maintenance?"

The thin man smiled sadly. "How are things ever in Maintenance? First a railroad breaks down, then there's a steel strike, then some paymaster doesn't make a payroll—the war knocked things for a loop, Roger. Even now things are still loopy. And how are things in Production?"

Roger scowled. "Let's have some coffee," he said.

They sat in a back corner booth of the Base Dispensary as Roger told about David. Martin Drengo listened without interruption. He was a thin man from top to bottom, a shock of unruly black hair topping an almost cadaverous face, blue eyes large behind thick lenses. His whole body was like a skeleton, his fingers long and bony as he lit a cigarette. But

the blue eyes were quick, and the nods warm and understanding. He listened, and then he said, "It couldn't have been an outsider?"

Roger shrugged. "Anything is possible. But why? Why go after a kid?"

Drengo hunched his shoulders forward. "I don't get it," he said. "David has done nothing to give him enemies." He drew on his cigarette. "What did Morrel have to say?"

"He laughed at me! Wouldn't even listen to me. Told me to go home and go to bed, that I was all wet. I tell you, Martin, I *saw* it! You know I wouldn't lie, you know I don't see things that don't happen."

"Yes," said Martin, glumly. "I believe you, all right. But I can't see why your son should be the target. You'd be more likely." He stood up, stretching his long legs. "Look, old boy. Take Morrel's advice, at least temporarily. Go home and get some sleep now; you're all worked up. I'll go in and talk to Morrel. Maybe I can handle that old buzzard better than you can."

Roger watched his friend amble down the aisle and out of the store. He felt better now that he had talked to Drengo. Smiling to himself, he finished off his coffee. Many a scrape he and Martin had seen through together. He remembered that night of horror when the bomb fell on the city, his miraculous rescue, the tall thin figure, reflecting the red glare from his glasses, forcing his way through the burning timbers of the building, tearing Roger's leg loose from the rubble covering it; the frightful struggle through the rubbish, fighting off fear-crazed mobs that sought to stop them, rob them, kill them. They had made the long trek together, Martin and he, the Evacuation Road down to Maryland, the Road of Horrors, lined with the rotting corpses of the dead

and the soon-dead, the dreadful refuse of that horrible night. Martin Drengo had been a stout friend to Roger; he'd been with Martin the night he'd met Ann; took the ring from Martin's finger when they stood at the altar on their wedding day; shared with Martin his closest confidence.

Roger sighed and paid for the coffee. What to do? The boy was home now, recovering from the shock of the attack. Roger caught an out-bound tri-wheel, and sped down the busy thoroughfare toward his home. If Martin could talk to Morrel, and get something done, perhaps they could get a line. Somehow, perhaps they could trace the attackers. In the morning he'd see Martin again, and they could figure out a scheme.

But he didn't have a chance to see Martin again. For at 11:30 that night, the marauders struck again. For the third time.

Through his sleep he heard a door close down below, and sat bolt upright in bed, his heart pounding wildly. Only a tiny sound, the click of a closing door—

Ann was sitting up beside him, brown hair close around her head, her body tense. "Roger!" she whispered. "Did you hear something?"

Roger was out of bed, bounding across the room, into the hall. Blood pounded in his ears as he rushed to David's room, stopped short before the open door.

The shots rang out like whip cracks, and he saw the yellow flame from the guns. There were two men in the dark room, standing at the bed where the boy lay rolled into a terrified knot. The guns cracked again and again, ripping the bedding, bursting the pillow into a shower of feathers, tearing the boy's pajamas from his thin body, a dozen blazing shots—

Roger let out a strangled cry, grabbed one of the men by the throat, in a savage effort to stop the murderous pistols. The other man caught him a coarse blow behind the ear, and he staggered hard against the wall. Dully he heard the door slam, heavy footsteps down the corridor, running down the stairs.

He struggled feebly to his feet, glancing at the still form on the bed. Choking back a sob he staggered down the hall, shouting to Ann as he went down the stairs, redoubling his speed as he heard the purr of autojets in the driveway. In a moment he was in his own car, frantically stamping on the starter. It started immediately, the motor booming, and the powerful jet engines forced the heavy car ahead dangerously, taking the corner on two of its three wheels. He knew that Ann would call Security, and he raced to gain on the tail lights that were disappearing down the winding residential road to the main highway. Throwing caution to the winds, Roger swerved the car across a front lawn, down between two houses, into an alley, and through another driveway, gaining three blocks. Ahead, at the junction with the main Base highway he saw the long black autojet turn right.

Roger snaked into traffic on the highway and bore down on the black car. Traffic was light because of the late hour, but the patrol was on the road and might stop him instead of the killers. The other car was traveling at top speed, swerving around the slower cars. Roger gained slowly. He fingered the spotlight, preparing to snap it in the driver's eyes. Taking a curve at 90, he crept up alongside the black car as he heard the siren of a patrol car behind him. Cursing, he edged over on the black car, snapped the spotlight full in the face of the driver—

The screaming siren forced him off the road, and he braked hard, his hands trembling. A patrolman came over to the

car, gun drawn. He took a quick look at Roger, and his face tightened. "Mr. Strang," he said sharply. "We've been looking for you. You're wanted at Security."

"That car," Roger started weakly. "You've got to stop that car I was chasing—"

"Never mind that car," the patrolman snarled. "It's you they want. Hop out. We'll go in the patrol car."

"You've got to stop them—"

The patrolman fingered his gun. "Security wants to talk to you, Mr. Strang. Hop out."

Roger moved dazedly from his car. He didn't question the patrolman; he hardly even heard him. His mind raced in a welter of confusion, trying desperately to refute the brilliant picture in his mind from that split-second that the spotlight had rested on the driver of the black car, trying to fit the impossible pieces into their places. For the second man in the black autojet had been John Morrel, chief of Barrier Base Security, and the driver had been Martin Drengo—

The man at the desk was a stranger to Roger Strang. He was an elderly man, stooped, with graying hair and a small clipped mustache that seemed to stick out like antennae. He watched Roger impassively with steel gray eyes, motioning him to a chair.

"You led us a merry chase," he said flatly, his voice brittle. "A very merry chase. The alarm went out for you almost an hour ago."

Strang's cheeks were red with anger. "My son was shot tonight. I was trying to follow the killers—"

"Killers?" The man raised his eyebrows.

"Yes, killers!" Roger snapped. "Do I have to draw you a picture? They shot my son down in his bed."

The gray-haired man stared at him for a long time. "Well," he said finally in a baffled tone. "Now I've heard everything."

It was Roger's turn to stare. "Can't you understand what I've said? *My son was murdered.*"

The gray-haired man flipped a pencil down on the desk impatiently. "Mr. Strang," he said elaborately. "My name is Whitman. I flew down here from Washington tonight, after being called from my bed by the commanding officer of this base. I am the National Chief of the Federal Bureau of Security, Mr. Strang, and I am not interested in fairy tales. I would like you to come off it now, and answer some questions for me. And I don't want double-talk. I want answers. Do I make myself quite clear?"

Roger stared at him, finally nodded his head. "Quite," he said sourly.

Whitman hunched forward in his chair. "Mr. Strang, how long have you been working in the Barrier Base?"

"Five years. Ever since the bombing of New York."

Whitman nodded. "Oh, yes. The bombing of New York." He looked sharply at Roger. "And how old are you, Mr. Strang?"

Roger looked up, surprised. "Thirty-two, of course. You have my records. Why are you asking?"

The gray-haired man lit a cigarette. "Yes, we have your records," he said offhandedly. "Very interesting records, quite normal, quite in order. Nothing out of the ordinary." He stood up and looked out on the dark street. "Just one thing wrong with your records, Mr. Strang. They aren't true."

Roger stared. "This is ridiculous," he blurted. "What do you mean, they aren't true?"

Whitman took a deep breath, and pulled a sheet of paper out of a sheaf on his desk. "It says here," he said, "that you are Roger Strang, and that you were born in Indianola, Iowa, on the fourteenth of June, 2051. That your father was Jason Strang, born 11 August, 2023, in Chicago, Illinois. That you lived in Indianola until you were twelve, when your father moved to New York City, and was employed with the North American Electronics Laboratories. That you entered International Polytechnic Institute at the age of 21, studying physics and electronics, and graduated in June 2075 with the degree of Bachelor of Electronics. That you did further work, taking a Masters and Doctorate in Electronics at Polytech in 2077."

Whitman took a deep breath. "That's what it says here. A very ordinary record. But there is no record there of your birth in Indianola, Iowa, in 2051 or any other time. There is no record there of your father, the alleged Jason Strang, nor in Chicago. No one by the name of Jason Strang was ever employed by North American Electronics. No one by the name of Roger Strang ever attended Polytech." Whitman watched him with cold eyes. "To the best of our knowledge, and according to all available records, *there never was anyone named Roger Strang until after the bombing of New York.*"

Roger sat stock still, his mind racing. "This is silly," he said finally. "Perfectly idiotic. Those schools *must* have records—"

Whitman's face was tight. "They do have records. Complete records. But the name of Roger Strang is curiously missing from the roster of graduates in 2075. Or any other year." He snubbed his cigarette angrily. "I wish you would tell me, and

save us both much unpleasantness. *Just who are you, Mr. Strang, and where do you come from?*"

Strang stared at the man, his pulse pounding in his head. Filtering into his mind was a vast confusion, some phrase, some word, some nebulous doubt that frightened him, made him almost believe that gray-haired man in the chair before him. He took a deep breath, clearing his mind of the nagging doubt. "Look here," he said, exasperated. "When I was drafted for the Barrier Base, they checked for my origin, for my education and credentials. If they had been false, I'd have been snapped up right then. Probably shot—they were shooting people for chewing their fingernails in those days. I wouldn't have stood a chance."

Whitman nodded his head vigorously. "Exactly!" he snapped. "You *should* have been picked up. But you weren't even suspected until we did a little checking after that accident in the Labs building yesterday. Somehow, false credentials got through for you. Security does not like false credentials. I don't know how you did it, but you did. I want to know how."

"But, I tell you—" Roger stood up, fear suddenly growing in his mind. He lit a cigarette, took two nervous puffs, and set it down, forgotten, on the ash-tray. "I have a wife," he said shakily. "I married her in New York City. We had a son, born in a hospital in New York City. He went to school there. Surely there must be some kind of record—"

Whitman smiled grimly, almost mockingly. "Good old New York City," he snarled. "Married there, you say? Wonderful! Son born there? In the one city in the country where that information *can never be checked*. That's very convenient, Mr. Strang. Or whoever you are. I think you'd better talk."

Roger snubbed out the cigarette viciously. "My son," he said after a long pause. "He was murdered tonight. Shot down in his bed—"

The Security Chief's face went white. "Garbage!" he snapped. "What kind of a fool do you think I am, Strang? Your son murdered—bah! When the alarm went out for you I personally drove to your home. Oddly enough this wife of yours wasn't at home, but your son was. Nice little chap. He made us some coffee, and explained that he didn't know where his parents were, because he'd been asleep all night. Quietly asleep in his bed—"

The words were clipped out, and rang in Roger's ears, incredibly. His hand shook violently as he puffed his cigarette, burning his fingers on the short butt. "I don't believe it," he muttered hollowly. "I saw it happen—"

Whitman sneered. "Are you going to talk or not?"

Roger looked up helplessly. "I don't—know—" he said, weakly. "I don't know."

The Security Chief threw up his hands in disgust. "Then we'll do it the hard way," he grated. Flipping an intercom switch, his voice snapped out cold in the still room. "Send in Psych squad," he growled. "We've got a job to do—"

Roger Strang lay back on the small bunk, his nerves yammering from the steady barrage, lights still flickering green and red in his eyes. His body was limp, his mind functioning slowly, sluggishly. His eyelids were still heavy from the drugs, his wrists and forehead burning and sore where the electrodes had been attached. His muscles hardly responded when he tried to move, his strength completely gone—washed out. He simply lay there, his shallow breathing returning to him from the dark stone walls.

The inquisition had been savage. The hot lights, the smooth-faced men firing questions, over and over, the drugs, the curious sensation of mouthing nonsense, of hearing his voice rambling on crazily, yet being unable in any way to control it; the hypnotic effect of Whitman's soft voice, the glitter in his steel-gray eyes, and the questions, questions, questions. The lie detector had been going by his side, jerking insanely at his answers, every time the same answers, every time setting the needle into wild gyrations. And finally the foggy, indistinct memory of Whitman mopping his forehead and stamping savagely on a cigarette, and muttering desperately, "It's no use! Lies! Nothing but lies, lies, lies! He *couldn't* be lying under this treatment, but he is. *And he knows he is!*"

Lies? Roger stretched his heavy limbs, his mind struggling up into a tardy rejection. Not lies! He hadn't lied—he had been answering the truth to the questions. He couldn't have been lying, for the answers were there, clear in his memory. And yet—the same nagging doubt crept through, the same feeling that had plagued him throughout the inquisition, the nagging, haunting, horrible conviction, somewhere in the depths of his numb brain that he *was* lying! Something was missing somewhere, some vast gap in his knowledge, something of which he simply was not aware. The incredible turnabout of Martin Drengo, the attack on David, who was killed, but somehow was not dead. He *had* to be lying—

But how could he lie, and still know that he was not lying? His sluggish mind wrestled, trying to choke back the incredible doubt. Somewhere in the morass, the picture of Martin Drengo came through—Drengo, the traitor, who was trying to kill his son—but the conviction swept through again, overpowering, the certain knowledge that Drengo was *not* a traitor, that he must trust Drengo. Drengo was his friend, his stalwart—