

at the entrance. The soldier was properly armed, but hatless, and his uniform seemed too sloppy. "Where are you going, bud?" he asked.

"Let me in!" Dr. Stadler ordered contemptuously.

"What's your business here?"

"I'm Dr. Robert Stadler."

"I'm Joe Blow. I said, What's your business? Are you one of the new or one of the old?"

"Let me in, you idiot! I'm Dr. Robert Stadler!"

It was not the name, but the tone of the voice and the form of address that seemed to convince the soldier "One of the new," he said and, opening the door, shouted to somebody inside, "Hey, Mac, take care of Grandpaw here, see what he wants!"

In the bare, dim hall of reinforced concrete, he was met by a man who might have been an officer, except that his tunic was open at the throat and a cigarette hung insolently in the corner of his mouth.

"Who are you?" he snapped, his hands jerking too swiftly to the holster on his hip.

"I'm Dr. Robert Stadler."

The name had no effect. "Who gave you permission to come here?"

"I need no permission."

This seemed to have an effect; the man removed the cigarette from his mouth. "Who sent for you?" he asked, a shade uncertainly.

"Will you please let me speak to the commandant?" Dr. Stadler demanded impatiently.

"The commandant? You're too late, brother."

"The chief engineer, then!"

"The chief-who? Oh, Willie? Willie's okay, he's one of us, but he's out on an errand just now."

There were other figures in the hall listening with an apprehensive curiosity. The officer's hand summoned one of them to approach—an unshaved civilian with a shabby overcoat thrown over his shoulders. "What do you want?" he snapped at Stadler.

"Would someone please tell me where are the gentlemen of the scientific staff?" Dr. Stadler asked in the courteously peremptory tone of an order.

The two men glanced at each other, as if such a question were irrelevant in this place. "Do you come from Washington?" the civilian asked suspiciously.

"I do not. I will have you understand that I'm through with that Washington gang."

"Oh?" The man seemed pleased. "Are you a Friend of the People, then?"

"I would say that I'm the best friend the people ever had. I'm the man who gave them all this." He pointed around him.

"You did?" said the man, impressed. "Are you one of those who made a deal with the Boss?"

"I'm the boss here, from now on."

The men looked at each other, retreating a few steps. The officer asked, "Did you say the name was Stadler?"

"Robert Stadler. And if you don't know what that means, you'll find out!"

"Will you please follow me, sir?" said the officer, with shaky politeness.

What happened next was not clear to Dr. Stadler, because his mind refused to admit the reality of the things he was seeing. There were shifting figures in half-lighted, disordered offices, there were too many firearms on everybody's hips, there were senseless questions asked of him by jerky voices that alternated between impertinence and fear. He did not know whether any of them tried to give him an explanation; he would not listen; he could not permit this to be true. He kept stating in the tone of a feudal sovereign, "I'm the boss here, from now on . . . I give the orders . . . I came to take over . . . I own this place. . . . I am Dr. Robert Stadler—and if you don't know *that* name in *this* place, you have no business being here, you infernal idiots! You'll blow yourselves to pieces, if that's the state of your knowledge! Have you had a high-school course in physics? You don't look to me as if you've ever been allowed inside a high school, any of you! What are you doing here? Who are you?"

It took him a long time to grasp—when his mind could not block it any longer—that somebody had beaten him to his plan: somebody had held the same view of existence as his own and had set out to achieve the same future. He grasped that these men, who called themselves the Friends of the People, had seized possession of Project X, tonight, a few hours ago, intending to establish a reign of their own. He laughed in their faces, with bitterly incredulous contempt.

"You don't now what you're doing, you miserable juvenile delinquents! Do you think that you—*you!*—can handle a high-precision instrument of science? Who is your leader? I demand to see your leader!"

It was his tone of overbearing authority, his contempt and their own panic—the blind panic of men of unbridled violence, who have no standards of safety or danger—that made them waver and wonder whether he was, perhaps, some secret top-level member of their leadership; they were equally ready to defy or obey any authority. After being shunted from one jittery commander to another, he found himself at last being led down iron stairways and down long, echoing, underground corridors of reinforced concrete to an audience with "The Boss" in person.

The Boss had taken refuge in the underground control room. Among the complex spirals of the delicate scientific machinery that produced the sound ray, against the wall panel of glittering levers, dials and gauges, known as the Xylophone, Robert Stadler faced the new ruler of Project X. It was Cuffy Meigs.

He wore a tight, semi-military tunic and leather leggings; the flesh of his neck bulged over the edge of his collar; his black curls were matted with sweat. He was pacing restlessly, unsteadily in front of the Xylophone, shouting orders to men who kept rushing in and out of the room:

"Send couriers to every county seat within our reach! Tell 'em that the Friends of the People have won! Tell 'em they're not to

take orders from Washington any longer! The new capital of the People's Commonwealth is Harmony City, henceforth to be known as Meigsville! Tell 'em that I'll expect five hundred thousand dollars per every five thousand heads of population, by tomorrow morning—or else!”

It took some time before Cuffy Meigs' attention and bleary brown eyes could be drawn to focus on the person of Dr. Stadler. “Well, what is it? What is it?” he snapped.

“I am Dr. Robert Stadler.”

“Huh?—Oh, yeah! Yeah! You're the big guy from outer spaces, aren't you? You're the fellow who catches atoms or something. Well, what on earth are you doing here?”

“It is I who should ask you that question.”

“Huh? Look, Professor, I'm in no mood for jokes.”

“I have come here to take control.”

“Control? Of what?”

“Of this equipment. Of this place. Of the countryside within its radius of operation.”

Meigs stared at him blankly for a moment, then asked softly, “How did you get here?”

“By car.”

“I mean, whom did you bring with you?”

“Nobody.”

“What weapons did you bring?”

“None. My name is sufficient.”

“You came here alone, with your name and your car?”

“I did.”

Cuffy Meigs burst out laughing in his face.

“Do you think,” asked Dr. Stadler, “that *you* can operate an installation of this kind?”

“Run along, Professor, run along! Beat it, before I have you shot! We've got no use for intellectuals around here!”

“How much do you know about *this*?” Dr. Stadler pointed at the Xylophone.

“Who cares? Technicians are a dime a dozen these days! Beat it! This ain't Washington! I'm through with those impractical dreamers in Washington! They won't get anywhere, bargaining with that radio ghost and making speeches! Action—that's what's needed! Direct action! Beat it, Doc! Your day is over!” He was weaving unsteadily back and forth, catching at a lever of the Xylophone once in a while. Dr. Stadler realized that Meigs was drunk.

“Don't touch those levers, you fool!”

Meigs jerked his hand back involuntarily, then waved it defiantly at the panel. “I'll touch anything I please! Don't *you* tell me what to do!”

“Get away from that panel! Get out of here! This is mine! Do you understand? It's *my* property!”

“Property? Huh!” Meigs gave a brief bark that was a chuckle.

“I invented it! I created it! I made it possible!”

“You did? Well, many thanks, Doc. Many thanks, but we don't need you any longer. We've got our own mechanics.”