

its shape," Pascal said. His voice was slurred and indistinct, barely intelligible. "Why shouldn't it look like a man—"

Lowry stepped back involuntarily, and at the same instant Pascal fired.

Accident saved Lowry, the split-second chance of treading upon the particular shadow in which the alien had chosen to hide. It had spread itself inches thick on the floor, assuming the shape and shade of the shadow that contained it—under Lowry's weight it convulsed and shot away with galvanic suddenness, throwing him heavily.

The blue-white lance of the electrobolt raved over his head, crisping his hair by its nearness.

He had a dizzy glimpse of the alien scuttling away into the maze of alleys, its body flowing and changing shape as it fled. Pascal's obsession took on a certain fearful logic that left Lowry amazed and uneasy—the perfect mimic, it could take any shape it chose. Perhaps even his own?

The clatter of Pascal's empty charge-hull on the floor roused him. He got to his feet and ran at top speed into the canyoned shadows of the storeroom, knowing that Pascal followed with the electrobolt gun freshly charged.

IV

HE MIGHT have known that Gail and the others would not wait indefinitely on the upper level. Lowry saw them before he was halfway to the stairwell, the three of them sharply outlined against the stairway lights while they peered about for him.

"Get back upstairs!" Lowry shouted. He halted and hugged the shadow of a frost-rimed plankton tank, searching the maze for a sight of Pascal. "Pascal's gone mad—he's shooting at anything that moves!"

He was too late. Walt Griswold had already started for the sound of his voice, Gail and Nadine at his heels.

"Marvin!" Nadine called. Her voice echoed through the big room, ringing

back in hollow volleys from the metal walls. "Marvin, it's Nadine! Please—"

Pascal appeared from the last direction Lowry had anticipated, creeping between a peripheral row of plankton tanks and the stairwell. The weapon in his hands moved jerkily, following the shift of his eyes from one to the other while he chose his target. There was no slightest spark of reason behind the wild shine of his eyes.

Without hesitation Lowry sprang out of his concealment into the full glare of light, shouting to attract Pascal's attention.

Pascal turned on him, and Lowry threw himself flat. The blue lightning of the electrobolt shattered a crate over his head, spilling an unrecognizable jumble of debris. Lowry lay half stunned by the dispersion shock, a pungent stink of charred leather burning his throat. *Swamp boots*, he thought with a sort of detached irritation. *A whole year's stock; shot to hell. . . .*

He shook off the giddiness of near electrocution and shouted at the three frozen by the stairwell: "Upstairs—run, for God's sake, before he reloads!"

They ran, the storeroom echoing to the rush of their feet. Walt reached the stairwell first, half dragging Nadine Pascal with him, and vanished upward. At the bottom tread Gail turned to look for Lowry in the darkness, stumbled and fell headlong.

Lowry burst out of his shelter and caught her up.

The click of Pascal's reloading cut him off from the stair as effectively as a barbed wall. He could not go up; the seconds needed to climb to the upper level would give Pascal time to fire and to spare.

The inner doorway to the vehicle garage yawned invitingly. Lowry turned without pausing and lunged through it into a darkness dominated by the shadowy hulks of the three crawlers. If he could shut the doors in time behind him—